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Remaking the Universe
Shabbat Masei 5774

Back when I was in high school, my freshman year English teacher was quite cruel to us students and assigned as our first book of the year Charles Dickens' Great Expectations. Despite the title, I had very low expectations for this novel. Nonetheless, we plowed through this long and dense novel, set in Dickens' usual bleak, depressing post-Industrial England. It follows the life of a young orphan, Pip, who suffers in abject poverty. All this starts to change when an old spinster, Mrs. Havisham, who wants to take revenge on the male gender because she was left at the altar by her fiancé, asks Pip to socialize with her adopted daughter Estella. Pip promptly falls in love with Estella, which Mrs. Havisham cruelly encouraged as part of her hateful scheme, because she had made Estella incapable of loving by poisoning her heart. Throughout the entire novel, through Pip's rise to fortune and his eventual fall back into poverty, the reader desperately wants to know whether Pip is going to win the girl, whether Estella's heart of ice will ever melt. Of course Dickens concluded the novel with an ending that fits his usual dark dispossession—Estella's heart never opens—she never loves Pip, and Pip never achieves happiness in life.¹ Now this depressing ending absolutely outraged Dickens' editor. After such a long and emotionally fraught story, his choice to be true to the characters was just so cruel to the readers. It was basically the 19th century equivalent of Voldemort winning. So in the end, Dickens was forced to change the ending, allowing the boy to get the girl. The true ending became little more than a footnote in the revised edition.²

¹ Dickens, Charles. Great Expectations, 1861.

² Norton Critical Edition.

As I got to the end of the novel, it seemed strange to me that there would be two endings, and it was so unsatisfying to be left with that ambiguity. But this taught me something very important. The need for a redemptive ending to the stories that we tell is a common feature in our culture. Consider this. In Pretty Woman, Julia Roberts and Richard Gere end up together, even though the original play Pretty Woman had a different ending. In the play, Vivian sinks into a drug addiction and is dumped back onto Hollywood Boulevard by Edward.³ Of course what Hollywood executive is going to produce a tragic cautionary tale about drugs and prostitution over a romantic comedy? Even the Holocaust movies produced in America almost universally have redemptive endings. Most notably Spielberg's magnum opus Schindler's List concludes by showing us the survivors and their families visiting Oscar Schindler's grave, leaving us with a message of hope that they survived that overshadows the cataclysmic destruction of European Jewry.⁴

All of this points to one fact about our culture: we don't deal very well with tragedy. We can't cope with unresolved stories, and we are very bad at bearing witness to meaningless pain. We need Pip to end up with Estella. We can't face the horrors of the Holocaust without finding the silver lining. But this is not just true about literature or Hollywood or history; it is also true about our personal relationships.

Many who have gone through a significant loss will tell you that their friends and family are not particularly good at dealing with their grieving. C.S. Lewis, the Christian theologian who wrote the Chronicles of Narnia, wrote about this phenomenon in A Grief Observed. In

³ Lawton, Jonathon. \$3000.

⁴ <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/85945/listless>

this work, Lewis recorded his journey through the grieving process for his wife who died very young from cancer. This loss absolutely devastated C.S. Lewis. His relationship with God changed significantly, and the whole process nearly unmade him. C.S. Lewis wrote that for the first month or so after his wife died, his friends and supporters were very helpful. But after that, their support waned. They would tell him to buck up, or move on with his life. And to be sure, these sentiments came from a place of wanting to help or to fix the situation. But for Lewis, the situation could not be fixed. These sentiments just signaled to him that his friends were no longer willing to carry his pain with them. **They** had decided that it was time for him to get over his loss, regardless of where he was emotionally. And other friends avoided him entirely, because they did not want to be around his pain. It was just too awkward. In the end, Lewis was all alone with his grief.⁵ The harsh reality is that other people's pain makes us uncomfortable; it is threatening to our sense of security.

Admittedly being around pain is scary, but I believe that when we have such a strong aversion to being around pain—even our own—we create deep alienation between us and our loved ones and even within our souls. Pain demands to be expressed, because pain that is bottled up is incredibly destructive. The cultural critic Elaine Scarry in her book The Body in Pain asserts that **“pain unmakes the universe.”**⁶ What does she mean by that? Pain unmakes the universe, because a person experiencing the worst kind of pain cannot think of anything other than that pain. This person's world of relationships is completely destroyed because her soul sinks into a black hole she can't escape. Intolerable pain is all consuming. It eliminates thought and feelings, and in extreme cases, a person in pain loses

⁵ Clerk, N.W. (pseudonym for C.S. Lewis). A Grief Observed, 1961.

⁶ Scarry, Elaine. The Body in Pain, 30.

her sense of self. When a person is not able to ground herself in her identity, her universe actually does dissolve into chaos.

Not only does pain demand to be expressed, but it is something we are commanded to deal with in this season, because it is an important aspect of our liturgical calendar. Last week the Jewish people observed *Tzom Tamuz*, the fast that commemorates the day that the Babylonians breached the wall of Jerusalem. Two days from now is Rosh Chodesh Av, and with the coming of the month of Av our hearts grow heavier with sadness. And in just a week and a half, we will observe our community's day of mourning, Tisha B'Av—the fast day that marks the final destruction of the Temple. We are in the midst of a season of lament, the time when we recall all the tragedies that have befallen our people, the time when we remember when our people saw no meaning and no redemption in their oppression. In commemoration of our mourning, we read the book of Lamentations, the words that Jeremiah supposedly wrote as the Jewish people were being forced to leave their homeland and go into exile.

Despite this trauma that our people have suffered, many of us in the liberal movements don't do much to observe Tisha B'Av. After all, what significance do the Temples hold for us? We don't want our religious practice to go back to animal sacrifice and holy bar-be-cue. We connect to God through prayer and acts of lovingkindness. So, ultimately, mourning for the Temple and longing to go back to Judaism's ancient roots seems disingenuous.

However, I suspect our disinclination to observe this day of mourning has less to do with theology and more to do with our discomfort as a culture with dealing with pain. Just as we cannot cope with Pip not ending up with Estella, so do we not want our Judaism to be a mournful religion. Reform Jews have mostly eliminated lament from our liturgy, because

we don't want to acknowledge the brokenness and the darkness in our souls. It's scary to go to a place where we feel abandoned and unloved by God.

However, I believe that downplaying Tisha B'Av and the process of lament does us a disservice as Jews. Many people find meaning in having a day to mourn the long parade of violences that others have committed against the Jews, from the Exile to Babylon, the destruction of the 2nd Temple to the Romans, the Spanish Inquisition, and most of all, the Holocaust. Our communal day of mourning will take on added significance this year as we lament for our beloved homeland engulfed in violent armed conflict against terrorists. Others find tremendous meaning in reading our sacred texts of lament and find the experience both moving and deeply personal.

In the book Chapters of the Heart, Rabbi Dr. Rachel Adler illustrates how reading the book of Lamentations helped her find meaning in the midst of a horrible tragedy in her life. Dr. Adler's mother suffered through dementia for almost decade before her death. A woman of tremendous intellect and education, she lost all of her memory and for the last several years of her life, all capacity to use language. Dr. Adler, in caring for her mother, had to cope with the devastating knowledge that while she was trying to give her care, her mother did not know who she was. She writes: "My mother can no longer speak, but something is very wrong. My mother is rocking back and forth. She claps her hands. She cries [in agony] She does not respond to requests to show us where it hurts. It occurs to me that maybe there is no physical locus for her pain... [That she is simply lamenting her devastated life.] The words of the biblical book of Lamentations rise in my mind: O Mother, 'how can I express your devastation? Your ruin is as vast as the sea: who can heal you?'"⁷ It

⁷ Lamentations 2:13

is the first time words to God have fit the horror I am witnessing. The analogy is powerful for me: My mother is a ruined city. The lights are blinking out; the streets are empty. ‘Lonely sits the city once great with people!’⁸ Like despoiled Jerusalem, my mother is all alone.”⁹

It is hard and painful to read these words of lamentation, but I believe lamenting is the first, and perhaps most important, step in the process of encountering pain, dealing with it, and ultimately transcending it. How is that so?

Dr. Rachel Adler has written extensively on this subject. First of all, she points out that the book of Lamentations is structured as an acrostic in four of its five chapters, with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet starting the first word of one verse. By giving every letter a line, Lamentations symbolically encapsulates the entirety of language—from A to Z and *alef* to *tav*.¹⁰ Language, after all, is the way that God creates the universe in Genesis. God spoke, and then the world came into being.¹¹ Similarly, the book of Lamentations begins with a gasp of agony—*Eicha*—Alas!¹² This cry is not language at all, but a primordial, chaotic expression of pure emotion. But Lamentations then transitions from this chaos into language—into creation, into the process of rebuilding. When pain and loss destroys our universe, it is through the language of lament that we can begin the process of rebuilding

8 Lamentations 1:1

9 Adler, Rachel. “My Mother as a Ruined City: Insights from the Book of Lamentations,” Chapters of the Heart, 2013.

10 Adler, Rachel. “For These I Weep: A Theology of Lament,” The Chronicle, 2006, Issue 68, 19.

11 Gen 1

12 Lamentations 1:1

the universe. By putting language around our pain, we can begin to master it and take control back from it, because when we articulate what the all-consuming black hole feels like, we can overcome the loneliness of pain. It is for this reason that Elaine Scarry writes that witnessing someone in pain regain their capacity for speech is like witnessing a rebirth.¹³

Secondly, lament helps a person in pain because lament does not follow a coherent linear path. Lament meanders through an array of emotions, oftentimes contradictory. The book of Lamentations alternates between a cry at the devastation of the city of Jerusalem, an agonized declaration that it is our fault that this happened, and an outraged accusation that God would do such a thing to us. Similarly, when someone experiences the loss of a loved one, that person rarely goes through the well-known five-step process of grief. They often meander through feelings of guilt, disbelief, sadness, anger, and loneliness. People who go through loss will often repeat the exact same story fifty times, because they are stuck in a repeating cycle of emotions they don't know how to break. So we can see that lament helps a person in pain make sense of it, because it is the only literary genre that through its non-linearity and repetitions expresses what's really going on inside the soul of someone in pain.¹⁴

Lament is also helpful because it enables us to express our feelings that are not decent to say in polite conversation. The Book of Lamentations does not always afford God the reverence that we would normally display. In fact, it says some rather shocking things. For

¹³ Scarry, Elaine. The Body in Pain, 172.

¹⁴ Adler, Rachel. "For These I Weep: A Theology of Lament," The Chronicle, 2006, Issue 68, 19-20.

example, it accuses God of acting like a lion: lurking, waiting to pounce and devour us.¹⁵ In the book of Job, the lamenter even expresses the desire that he had never been born.¹⁶ If we are not suffering, we may not believe in a God so cruel and so unloving, but it is still important to acknowledge that feeling stalked and devoured might be the reality a person in pain is dealing with. Allowing the lamenter to say these indecent things empowers him to feel the justified anger that he has towards God. Our society often tells us that anger is something to repress, but oftentimes, allowing for catharsis is profoundly healing.

Paradoxically, in allowing ourselves to express the agony of our suffering, we can begin to find the ray of light at the end of the tunnel. The process of lamenting itself is the key to returning to life and to hope. When people express their pain, they often just feel gratitude that someone would listen to them. Some people even find that through the process of lament that their emotional intelligence increases, because their pain helps them connect to others through empathy. Either way, something important happens inside ourselves when we go through the process of lament, because expressing our pain is the first step to understanding it and the first step to transcending it.

Now, for some of us, the best way of dealing with loss is to find our resilience and strength and continue with our lives, as best we can. There is certainly merit to that position, because it is not always helpful to wallow in misery or go to pieces. But sometimes, we have to allow ourselves to feel the reality of what we are experiencing. So I'm going to be honest with you and say that on this Tisha B'Av, I won't be mourning the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. But there are metaphorical Temples within my

¹⁵ Lam 3:10-11.

¹⁶ Job 3.

heart and within all of your hearts that do need to be lamented. Temples that were destroyed by the heartbreak of a lover or the betrayal of a friend. Temples that were destroyed by the loss of a loved one. Temples that were destroyed when we lost our job or failed to find work. Temples that are destroyed when bombs fall on our beloved Israel and Israeli soldiers die protecting the Jewish state as well as innocent Palestinians. Temples that were destroyed by depression and other mental illnesses. Temples that were destroyed when our bodies felt broken from injury or illness. Temples that were destroyed by despair. None of us have come to this point unscathed. So I believe it's important for us to be emotionally honest with ourselves. Acknowledge that things don't always turn out the way we want, and sometimes in the tales of our lives, the depressing Dickens ending, and not the idealized Hollywood ending, is the one that rings more true for us. But even when we experience that pain and our universe falls to pieces, there is always hope that through expressing our feelings, reaching out to each other, and yes, sometimes, even calling out to God that we can find the resilience in our souls to rebuild our universe. And just maybe when we rebuild our universe, we will find that in our hearts just a little bit of our brokenness has been transformed into wholeness.

Shabbat Shalom.