

## **Yom Kippur Yizkor 5781: A Time to Tear and a Time to Sew Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom**

“Some time during my first six months,” Dr. Kathryn Mannix recalls,

I had to tell an elderly man that his wife had died. She had died suddenly, [and...] her husband had been telephoned and asked to come as soon as he could, no further details given. I found him standing on the ward, outside her room... ‘Are you Irene’s husband?’ I asked. He moved his head to say yes, but no sound came out of his mouth. ‘Come with me, and let me explain,’ I said...

I don’t remember the detail of the conversation, but I remember becoming aware that, with the death of his wife, this man now had no remaining family. He seemed frail and lost...

I assured him that I would be happy to talk to him again if he found that he had further questions as time went by. Although I always said this, and I truly meant it, families never did come back for more information. And then I acted on impulse: I gave Irene’s fragile-looking husband my name and telephone number on a piece of paper. I had never given out written contact details like this before, and his apparent indifference as he screwed the scrap of paper into a ball and pocketed it seemed to indicate that this might not be a helpful contribution.

Three months later I was working at a different hospital... when I received a phone call. [Irene’s husband was trying to reach me]... I called him. ‘Oh, thank you for calling me back, doctor. It’s so nice to hear your voice...’ He paused, and I waited, wondering what question might have occurred to him, hoping I would know enough to answer it. ‘The thing is...’ he paused again. ‘Well, you were so kind to say I could phone you... and I didn’t know who else I could tell... but, well... the thing is, I finally threw Irene’s toothbrush out yesterday. And today it isn’t in the bathroom, and I really feel she is never coming back...’

I could hear his voice breaking with emotion, and I remembered his bewildered face, back on the ward the morning she died. The lesson was coming home to me. Those bereavement conversations are just the beginning,

the start of a process that is going to take a lifetime for people to live alongside in a new way.<sup>i</sup>

“To everything there is a season,” Ecclesiastes writes, “a time for every experience under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die...”<sup>ii</sup>

We have, in our lives, a time of birth and a time of death. “There are only two days with fewer than twenty-four hours in each lifetime,” Dr. Mannix observes, “sitting like bookends astride our lives: one is celebrated every year, yet it is the other that makes us see living as precious.”<sup>iii</sup>

And it is the other that sets mourners on a path that takes a lifetime to live. We have a map, in Judaism, for mourning: the first week of shiva is meant to be different than the first, raw day of loss; the first month is another milestone; the unveiling yet another; the yahrzeits as well. This year, how we experience funerals and shiva has been terribly disrupted. For some of you, this Yizkor service may be the first time you share your mourning with others. Still, our traditions guide us through the passage of time, with moments set aside for memory, each season of every year.

And yet, even in easier times, we know the map is only a sketch, to help us navigate as we go. Jan Richardson’s husband went into the hospital one autumn day for surgery, and never came out. “Far from being a progressive process,” she quickly comes to discover, “grief moves by turns and spirals... Grief is the least linear thing I know.” In that chaos, she suggests, there is freedom:

...If sorrow gives us no straightforward or prescribed road, no standard manual for its healing, then we are not bound to travel it by a way that does not fit for us.

What we are bound to is love: the love that gives rise to our grief but finally goes deeper than it, the love that undergirds and carries us through every turning. As we learn to navigate our sorrow, love gives us the tools we need—the language, the images, the remedies, the particular forms of solace by which our particular hearts will find repair.

I have found the most compelling repairs are the ones that make themselves visible, that leave evidence of the breakage... Such repairs are always provisional, imperfect, and ongoing... they involve continual mending.<sup>iv</sup>

Back to Ecclesiastes: “A time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to discard. A time to tear and a time to sew, a time to keep silence and a time to speak.”<sup>v</sup>

*A time to tear and a time to sew.* In Jewish practice, the first act which a mourner does is *kriya*, tearing their clothes by the heart. Something which distinguishes our Jewish community here in Montreal is that, unlike many places where a symbolic black ribbon is used, here we actually tear our clothes. Usually, mourners use a black tie or scarf provided by the funeral home, but sometimes people will come with their own clothing ready to be torn.

However, people didn't always have clothes to spare. And so, the Talmud asks: Can you stitch up the tear, when your days of mourning are done? Can you mend it? Is there room for repair?<sup>vi</sup>

What starts off as a practical question ends up with a profound answer. My friend, Rabbi David Schuck, explains:

One is permitted to sew the tear up, as long as one uses a stitch that is irregular... It is forbidden to use what was known as the Alexandria stitch, which is so precise that it eliminates evidence of the tear. It's as if the halacha is saying, “Your loss, your broken heart will heal, in time, but it will never fully disappear. You will carry that loss with you always. Just like you can run your finger across the stitched-up tear and feel its jagged edges, the same jagged edges will heal into your heart.” Here, today, on this day of remembering, we run our fingers across those jagged edges of our hearts, over every stitch that we carry, some of which have faded, and others which we have not even started to sew because the tear is raw.<sup>vii</sup>

*Kriya* takes place on the day of the funeral. But the tear endures. Three months after, when you throw out the toothbrush of the person with whom you went to bed, and with whom you started each morning. A year after, when you realize that all the holidays and birthdays and anniversaries have passed, and you will never

share them again. Decades after, when you still feel the roughness of that jagged edge, healing into your heart.

And yet, these poorly-sewn tears – these scars that never quite heal – they bear witness to our love, to the good things we choose to remember, to the life lessons we choose to learn. “I have come to believe,” Rabbi David Stern teaches,

...that part of what stays woven together is our relationship with [our dead]... When we say we remember their eyes, we don't just mean their eyes, we mean the spirit that animated them, the joy that danced in them. When we say we remember the sound of their footsteps, we don't just mean the rhythm of their gait, we mean the comfort of their presence, the strength of their companionship. And when we say we remember their seder table, we don't just mean the table, we meant every story and every great-aunt and every matzah ball...<sup>viii</sup>

They remind us that what we had was precious – and that what we have now is precious as well, so long as we are still living between the bookends of our lives. “We are not the same as we were,” Rabbi Stern says:

But one stitch at a time, we do some mending. Because the loss is real, and the enduring gifts are real, and the desire to go on is real. Both the tear and the woven together are true – and to deny either one would be to live as less than we are...

[I]n time even the rough stitch feels good to the touch, because it has the texture of reality to it – of longing and sorrow and resilience and strength.

“*There is a time to tear and a time to sew,*” he concludes. “At Yizkor, we begin to find our healing way in the reality of it all - one tear at a time, one mending stitch at a time, one step at a time - toward a new year of life.”

And so, in these moments, we remember those we loved, and still love. Their toothbrush on the counter. The spirit animating their eyes; the rhythm of their gait. Everything that led us to tear our clothes when they left us, exposing our vulnerable hearts – and everything that led us to sew that tear roughly, carrying them with us still.

May the memory of our loved ones be a blessing. *Yizkor*.

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<sup>i</sup> Kathryn Mannix, *With the End in Mind: Dying, Death, and Wisdom in an Age of Denial* (New York, 2018), pp.14-16.

<sup>ii</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1.

<sup>iii</sup> Mannix, p.18.

<sup>iv</sup> Jan Richardson, *Sparrow: A Book of Life and Death and Life* (Orlando, FL: 2020).

<sup>v</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:6-7.

<sup>vi</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 26b. The discussion continues in Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Avel 9:3. Both these texts are beautifully explicated by Rabbi David Schuck in his Yom Kippur sermon this year.

<sup>vii</sup> Rabbi Schuck, Yom Kippur sermon, 5781.

<sup>viii</sup> Rabbi David Stern, "To Tear and to Sew," in Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, ed., *May God Remember* (Woodstock, VT: 2013).