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Learning to Grieve, Learning to Praise: Jeremiah and the Poetry of Yom Kippur

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Hi, everybody. Of all the blessings that we have in Judaism covering our response to the full range of human experience, I've always thought that the most stunning is that we have a blessing for bad news. And it's distinguished from the blessing for good news, which is its own different thing. The Talmud says, we get this from the well-known quote in Deuteronomy, the well-known verse, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might." And it says "with all your might" means to give thanks for any experience, troublesome, offer praise.

In our daily lives, though, as they are actually being lived, being told to give thanks for bad news as we are taking in, or even mourning that bad news, it seems like the worst form of spiritual bypass, of denying our feelings. But perhaps that's because we imagine giving thanks and mourning to be mutually exclusive experiences. In other words, we think of grieving and praising as opposites.

A few years ago, there was a very gifted Mayan teacher from Guatemala who came through Ashland, Oregon, where we live, Martin Prechtel, and he came and gave a talk about grief and praise that has really stayed with me these years since. He had some reflections that I think would be familiar to many of us. In effect, he pointed out that many contemporary people in the West don't know how to grieve. He talked about depression often being the result of unexpressed grief. And he talked about the legacy of generations within families and communities who didn't know how to grieve, but Prechtel tell took it further. He said in his observing of this country: "I noticed that people who couldn't grieve couldn't praise."

Now, it's important to say here that when we talk about praise, we're not talking about giving a compliment, praising someone's new shirt. We're talking about praise as a primal way of giving thanks, a voice in joy. So Prechtel says, "I noticed that people who couldn't grieve, couldn't praise." Then what grief is, in effect, is praise of life. He said, "When we're praising the person or thing we have lost, it's called grief."

I think we know this interconnection intuitively between grief and praise when we cry out of happiness or when after expressing grief, we feel more awake or alive than we've felt in a long time.

I've been thinking a lot about grief and praise, at this time in our shared lives, in this time in our preparing for the High Holy days. I've been thinking about grief and praise and the relationship between the two in Judaism, especially in this High Holy Day season. Not from grief to praise, as we might usually structure this journey, like beginning with grief on Tisha B'Av, and slowly arriving at a kind of pure praise on Yom Kippur, but rather grief and praise unfolding simultaneously, inextricably related and intertwined. Each one allowing the other. And I've been thinking about how this might be felt right now in our shared lives, how it might be particularly resonant on Yom Kippur, where the wall between grief and praise feels especially thin and perhaps even nonexistent.

Here is a fragment of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke as translated by Joanna Macy from the Book of Hours:

> God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
> then walks with us silently out of the night.
>
> These are the words we dimly hear:
>
> You, sent out beyond your recall,
> go to the limits of your longing.
> Embody me.
>
> Flare up like a flame
> and make big shadows I can move in.
>
> Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
> Just keep going. No feeling is final.
> Don't let yourself lose me.

"Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror." As if "losing God," for Rilke, is when we don't allow everything to happen to us. When instead we manage it. When we allow some things through that fit our narrative of who we imagine we are, but not others. When we don't want to relinquish control. When we associate God with the beauty, but not the terror.

This extraordinary, heartbreaking time that we are living through right now has brought so much forward out of the shadows. We are, of course, grieving the litany of losses, seen and unseen, of the pandemic. And the experience of quarantine has brought to the fore, at least for some of us, grief that we've been carrying around unexpressed, unarticulated, even unknown. Maybe it is because we are not as able to readily distract ourselves these days, that when we are forced to stop, the grief comes up, not unlike a meditation retreat or some like experience where in the silence, we might find ourselves shocked by something coming up and emerging from our inner world, from the past that interrupts our lives. That has been my experience, at least. Quarantine, for me, has often felt like being eyeball-to-eyeball with myself, sometimes in really uncomfortable ways. And I felt more emotion, whether it comes in the form of dark regret over past choices, or whether it is weeping uncontrollably after dropping our daughter off at her first sleepover, or whether it's missing my parents with a new kind of tenderness, that feels almost excruciating. When there is self-judgment that accompanies any of those feelings, it's painful. But when there is compassion and softening, I can touch something in the grief that could only be described as praise. It's like it's the same tenderness.

It's an understatement to say, now that in our shared lives, there's an opportunity to collectively grieve. The seemingly rapid disintegration of our democratic society, that horrific racial injustice from within and from without, climate change, the shadow of authoritarianism, it goes on and on. I resonate with what Rabbi Rachel Weiss said to her congregation on Tisha B'Av when she invited them to just sit on the floor and cry. Because often we rush right past what we are sad about to what we feel we need to do in response. There's an urgency. Plus, we have an association with grief that goes something like this: If we allow the grief, grieving something means throwing in the towel or surrendering.

However, this is not what actually happens, as we learn. If we don't allow the grief, our actions and response may feel flat and disembodied, and that is a kind of bypass, too. If we don't allow the grief, we miss our depth altogether. If we don't allow the grief, we won't allow the praise. And maybe oddly, learning to praise is as important as anything right now. There's a well-known poem that Adam Zagajewski wrote called, "Try To Praise The Mutilated World." Not only love it as we imagine it could be, but love it as it is right now, and praise it in all of its imperfection.

And as much as it has been clear to me in moments in my life that I don't know how to grieve of late, it has occurred to me even more that I don't know how to praise. I'm so used to trying to have self-control, trying to comport myself and ritual in a certain way. But true praise, just like true grief, is not calculating. We let go of the reins. There's something about praise that feels funny when we say thank you to this, but not for that, when we compartmentalize.

Let's turn to Jeremiah, the prophet of Tisha B'Av, the "weeping prophet," as he is called. Prechtel speaks about the professional weepers in his village. Those who come in to a situation of loss, and whose job it is to come and feel the pain in a situation that those directly impacted by it can't feel. And those professional weepers begin praising, say the person who has been lost, praising and praising them until everybody starts crying. "If you're able to grieve", says Prechtel, "It will bring you back to life." And we know about this in Judaism, too, or at least we used to, these professional mourners.

Jeremiah says, "Thus says the Lord of Hosts: Consider, and call for the mourning women to come; let them make haste and raise a wailing over us, that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids gush with water." This weeping is seen as a necessity by Jeremiah. It's almost as if our tears feed God.

We don't read Jeremiah on Yom Kippur, but we begin the season with him on Tisha B'Av. We read him on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, and in some way, I think some deeper thematic way, we return to him on Yom Kippur. I've come to think of Jeremiah as the through line for this season.

We associate Jeremiah with grief and for good reason - he is witnessing the lead-up and then the destruction of an entire world, not just the destruction of the temple, but everything that we can imagine coming with that. He mourns and he harangues others to mourn. He is like the professional weepers in Prechtel's village, but maybe even more forceful. You can't grieve? I'm going to come in and speak until grief pours out of you, and there's no more blockage. "You don't need coffee "when you wake up every morning to Jeremiah," said Kathleen Norris of her experience in a Benedictine monastery, where the monks would listen to Jeremiah being read every morning. There's a brutality to Jeremiah's wounds, and he won't stop expressing them, won't stop weeping and moaning and crying with his whole body. He is empathic. He is grieving for God and he is grieving for the people. (And we learned from Heschel, right, that a true prophet can't grieve just for one or the other, but has to really be empathic in that way and feel the pain of each.). He is also grieving for the city of Jerusalem. He's grieving for himself. All of these at once. “Oh my suffering,” says Jeremiah. “My suffering! How I writhe! Oh, the walls of my heart, my heart moans within me. I cannot be silent.” At a minimum, we could say that Jeremiah is teaching us how to grieve. And Prechtel says that grief and praise are actually skills that we have to practice, to model for our children.

It's hard to find the praise in Jeremiah at first. On one level, the praise is there within the grief. How could Jeremiah not love with his whole being that which he is grieving so intensely and is losing? We're just not used to listening for it in that way. We're just not conditioned. We can easily say, "Here how much he is praising God, praising the people. He must love them so much." With our own grief, also, by the way, at this time where it feels like we are losing so much, could it be heard as praise? “Oh my goodness,” if others overheard us, “How they love the world that they are losing.”

And there are also verses in Jeremiah that seem to come up out of nowhere and dissolve the distinct separation between grief and praise. In the midst of all these admonitions, the prophet will suddenly speak of God, gorgeously: “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.” There is no shortage of Jeremiah carrying on about God's justice, righteousness, God's steadfast love. The grief doesn't cancel the praise, in other words. It is itself praise and it seems to make deeper praise possible.

It's as if Jeremiah is saying to the people, to get to that joy, you have to grieve. Don't just bargain with God. Feel what has happened. Feel it press upon you. "And then," Jeremiah promises, “but with compassion will I guide them." When Jeremiah speaks to the community of exiles who survive, he says, "You will search for me and find me, if only you seek me wholeheartedly." To come into the presence of God we have to bring our whole selves forward, undefended.

God, speaking through Jeremiah, says over and over again, some variant of what we could think about as Jeremiah's first commandment, informally: Don't turn away. I'm reminded of what contemporary poet Jane Hirshfield has written: "I began to believe the only sin is distance, refusal. / All of those stemming from this." Or as C.D. Wright, another contemporary poet says, "Place yourself inside the damage. Fight the impulse to look away."

Poetry, as usual, can get at this in a way that prose can't. It can hold multiple truths at once, or if you like, one truth expressed in many variant forms. Jeremiah's prophecy, I think, is best expressed and understood as poetry. And if we follow the advice of the poets and the prophets, we arrive at some place akin to Sylvia Boorstein's meditation advice, where she advises her students, "Don't duck."

Maybe the two most common lyric modes of poetry are the ode and the elegy. An elegy is a poem of grief, mourning, and consolation. And ode is a poem that praises, glorifies, and venerates. The elegy is really old, pre-Greek. "David's Lament for Jonathan" could be seen as an elegy, I think. The ode we can see among other places in song after song that venerate God. The poet Joseph Millar says, "An ode praises what keeps us alive. An elegy talks about what is trying to kill us." But, a really good ode is also an elegy, and vice versa.

I want to introduce a *hevrutah* for Jeremiah, a study partner across time and space. Osip Mandelstam was a Russian Jewish poet killed by Stalin in 1937. It makes sense, actually in multiple ways, to be reading Mandelstam at this time, as it's a different kind of poetry of resistance to tyranny. And on the surface, it's nothing like Jeremiah at all. But I think both write a poetry of upending the imagined separation between grief and praise.

Mandelstam was born in Warsaw in 1891. Soon after that, his parents moved the family to St. Petersburg. He lived through the tumultuous time of the Russian revolution. He was in prison many times. Suffered his best friend being shot. By the mid 1930s, he was on Stalin's radar, as with many poets in all of this. Then Mandelstam reads a poem that mocked Stalin to someone who turned out to be an informer, and things begin to unravel with more finality from then. Here are two. I want to read two of his last poems from 1937, really most likely from the last days before he was taken to the labor camp from which he would never return. Are these tragic poems laced with joy, as they have sometimes been described? Or are these joyful poems laced with pain, or what? That's a Christian Wyman quote. Wyman is his translator and Wyman also says, "How, I wondered, could one voice contain such extremes of serenity and wildness, humor and horror? How can one man be so alive in the midst of so much death, including his always impending own?"

> Mounds of human heads and mine
> Among them, unseen, unmarked, unmourned.
>
> But look: in lines as cherished as a lover's scars,
> In screams of children who play at wars,

I rise with my hands of wind, my tongue of sun.

And this last one is likely his last one. At least, the last one that was written down. Shortly after writing this Mandelstam was sent off to Siberia where he died, buried in an unmarked grave. When it was written, the poet was fully aware of the fate awaiting him:

And I was alive in the blizzard of the blossoming pear,
Myself I stood in the storm of the bird-cherry tree.
It was all leaflife and starshower, unerring, self-
Shattering power,
And it was all aimed at me.

What is this dire delight flowering fleeing always earth?
What is being? What is truth?

Blossoms rupture and rapture the air,
All hover and hammer,
Time intensified and time intolerable, sweetness
Raveling rot.
It is now. It is not.

Again, Christian Wyman says, "What does it mean to understand abundance and destitution as two facets of the one face of God, to experience one always in the context of the other? This poem," says Wyman, "is as good an answer as I can think of."

In this respect, I connect Jeremiah and Mandelstam as ones who witnessed colossal destruction, whose own lives constantly hung in the balance. And they're bringing forth something that could only be called "griefpraise."

On Yom Kippur the liturgy is all "griefpraise." It is simultaneously ode and elegy. Each part of the service depends on the next, indeed makes the next possible. The *al hets*, being real with our missteps, all the awareness of how we've hurt and been hurt. The *Avinu Malkenu* is the tenderness, the softening. *Unetaneh Tokef*, the fragility, the lack of control, the relinquishing of control, spilling into the *avodah* service, the longing to offer ourselves fully to this life, wholeheartedly. And the martyrology, historic losses designed to get us weeping like the professional weepers, if we're not there already. Spilling into *yizkor*, when the grief is made personal, spilling into Jonah and looking at all the ways that we try to hide from grief and praise. Spilling into *ne'ilah*. The gates are closing, but tears, we're told, will always keep them open. Have you been grieving or praising? Anyone who comes out of Yom Kippur would say, I've been doing both, all at once.

Maybe this, how to allow the "griefpraise," is as much something to learn in these Days of Awe, as other skills like asking forgiveness, and forgiving. Like deepening our commitment to love those most vital and close to us, to how to get arrested, to how to speak truth, to power, to how to be a conscious and truly helpful ally.

We have to learn how to express "griefpraise," because it is also our responsibility in this time, in any time, to model as adults not being flat. A colleague once said when she was a rabbinical student, that the best modeling she received from a rabbinic mentor was that after her mentor had lost his mother and she paid a *shivah* call, she and his other students witnessed him just on his knees on his carpet, just sobbing, not trying to explain or regain control, or have some modicum of distance between those usually he usually taught and how he taught them. Of course, this was probably the deepest teaching that he could offer.

Having a blessing for bad news is radical enough, in the spirit of allowing grief to come through unedited and unimpeded and to connect it to our capacity to praise. And the Talmud takes it further and teaches that in the world to come, there will be only one blessing said over any news. We will no longer bless according to personal preference, and what we imagine is good or bad what brings us pleasure or pain. This, I think, is an acknowledgment that not only that everything comes from the same source. I think it's also an acknowledgment that in the world to come, which I would translate as, "not describing a place elsewhere," right, but as a way of describing moments in this world, when we're able to see things truly as they are and not how we want them to be. That in the world to come, our normal definition of grief is made larger to include praise. And our normal definition of praise is made larger to include grief. Indeed, to include whatever is pouring forth from the heart. Yom Kippur is a day spent in the world to come. A day when we are able to see truly, to see beyond the duality and seeming separateness of all things.

I want to thank Rabbi Benjamin Barnett. We co-taught some of this material in Shavuot out a few months ago. I also want to just send love and greetings to all our colleagues and all our congregations in these Days of Awe.