

Many of us remember the day we went into lockdown.
I certainly do.
For me, it was Wednesday March 11th, 2020.
I was at Hebrew College, my Rabbinical School,
when I received an email from the President of the institution.
A community member who had attended a recent class had tested positive for COVID-19.
Because of this, the school would shut its doors at the end of the day.
All in person classes would go online.
We were also told to leave our work spaces and cubbies uncluttered
because the building would be getting thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.
So moments later, I joined a group of my fellow students
who were frantically packing up their belongings.
We did our best to balance books and papers and pens in our arms,
as we tried to get out of the building as soon as we could.
I loaded up my car, and in a flash I began the drive home.
This would be the last time I would be in this building as a student,
This building that had been my house of learning, spiritual growth,
and personal transformation.
And this would also be the last time
I would be in person with my teachers and fellow students before becoming a Rabbi.
Even for our Rabbinic Ordination, we would not be together.
This was a heartbreaking goodbye.

Many of us have stories like these.
Stories of realizing how significant COVID-19 really was.
Stories of work, school, and regular life turned upside down in an instant.
Stories of having to scramble to restructure our entire lives
Without knowing what to expect even the next day.
It was an uncertain time for so many of us,
And it began one of the most difficult, precarious, and unpredictable times of many of our lives.

As a Jewish people, we have been here before.
While our present community may have never experienced anything like COVID-19 before,
Our ancestors have.
The experience of calamity, of seismic suffering, of loss and uncertainty about the future,
is in our historic memory
and in our spiritual DNA.
We have experienced tragic expulsions from many parts of the world.
We have experienced discriminatory laws and corrupt taxation.
We have experienced forced conversion, ghettoization, and economic exclusion.
And of course, we have experienced death and devastation on a grand scale.

What I find so remarkable about these moments in our people's history
Is that our ancestors figured out how to continue on.

The losses we experienced could have broken us,
But we persisted with strength through the generations.

This capacity to persist, to endure,
Was a spiritual muscle that our ancestors worked hard to cultivate within themselves.
And in this process, they generated incredible wisdom and practice
That has become a gift to us
as the world once again calls upon us to persist and endure.
During these High Holidays, I want to talk about two of these gifts.
First, I want to talk about what our ancestors taught us about grief.
That is what I would like to discuss this morning.
Second, I want to talk about what our ancestors taught us
about cultivating hope within ourselves in the face of enduring challenges.
I will discuss this second topic during my sermon at the Kol Nidre service on Yom Kippur.

So we turn our attention this morning to grief.
The fundamental spiritual teaching that our ancestors gave us
Is that it is imperative to honor our grief.
They have taught us that allowing ourselves to feel what we have lost
creates the possibility of inner repair and wholeness.

Now, this is a different message about grief and loss
than we receive from the wider culture in which we live.
As a society we find it very difficult to allow ourselves to feel grief and loss.
Our society is much more comfortable with the message of staying positive and moving on.
I also imagine that some of us here this morning would rather not focus on grief.
This is very understandable.
This year has been incredibly difficult, and it is hard to sit with what we have lost.
Yet despite this, I ask you to stick with me this morning.
Because the hard-earned lessons of our ancestors teach us that we need this.
Through their experiences of devastation,
They learned and taught us
That we will struggle to move forward into the future
without tending to our grief and feelings of loss.
We allow ourselves to heal and live our lives fully
when we allow our hearts to break first.

Our ancestors give us this very important guidance
through the story of the shattering of the first tablets of the Ten Commandments.
After escaping slavery in Egypt, the People of Israel reach Mount Sinai,
and Moses ascends the mountain to receive the Torah.
Because Moses is up on the mountain for a long time,
The People of Israel become anxious that he will not return,
and they construct a Golden Calf to replace him as their leader and protector.

When Moses comes down from the mountain with the tablets of the Ten Commandments and he sees what had happened,
He takes the tablets and smashes them to the ground.
On the surface, this may seem like an expression of anger.
But on a deeper level, Moses was expressing grief.
The Golden Calf shattered everything he and God were trying to create with the People of Israel.
It shattered the relationship between God and Israel.
It shattered the vision of a new world that they would create together,
A world of freedom and compassion that is ultimately the Torah's greatest hope for us.
It shattered the promise of a land of their own, with God always there by their side.
The project of the Jewish people was in shards.

But the story continues.
God, Moses, and the People of Israel attempt to reconcile and start a new chapter in their shared lives.
And to move this forward, the People of Israel choose to do something spiritually profound.
According to the Talmud (Bava Batra 14a),
The People of Israel keep the shards of the first tablets with them.
As they journeyed through the desert, they carried an ark that contained both the whole second set of tablets of the Ten Commandments,
And the broken shards of the first set.
For God, Moses and the People of Israel to move forward from their grief and heartbreak,
They knew that they could not simply leave the first tablets behind.
They had to be with that brokenness, had to sit with that experience of grief,
so that it would eventually give way to the reality of the whole tablets,
To the reality of repair, wholeness, and possibility.
Rather than ignoring this pain in the hope that it would go away on its own,
God, Moses and the People of Israel all knew
that they had to feel it, express it, and integrate it into their lives
If they were to fully return to themselves, to one another, and to the project of Torah.

Later generations took this wisdom to heart
as they developed our traditional rituals of grief and mourning.
Understanding the importance being with our grief
when we lose someone we love,
Our ancestors created the practice of *shiva*.
With this practice, our tradition invites us to stop for seven days.
We stop working.
We stop taking care of others.
We stop being concerned with how we look.
And in this pause, we are invited to sit with our grief.
We are invited to sit on low chairs to embody how low we feel.
We are invited to wear a piece of ripped clothing or ribbon

to embody the fact that we feel ripped apart.
We are invited to gather our family, friends, and community around us to help us hold our loss.
And we are invited to say the Mourner's Kaddish,
both to honor our loved one and for us to receive God's comfort.
In their wisdom, our ancestors gave us the practice of *shiva*
to help us sit with the broken tablets of our heart.

Each of us has our own unique grief from this past year and a half.

Some of us lost the ones we love most.
We may not have been able to be with them in their final hours because we could not visit them.
We may not have been able to honor them through a funeral with all of their loved ones.
And we may not have had the comfort of an in-person shiva
when what we needed most was our family, friends, and community by our side.

Some of us were lonely during this pandemic.
Some of us live alone, and rarely got to be in the physical presence of family and friends.
Some of us did not get to hug our kids, our grandkids, our parents, our best friends.
And even if we did get to see others, it was behind a mask.
Our faces, the place of our holiest connections with each other, were concealed.
Some of us could also not visit our loved ones who lived in nursing homes or assisted living
facilities.
They too spent so much of this pandemic alone.

Some of us lost some of the most important milestones of our lives.
We missed the birth of our first grandchild, or the funeral of a dear friend.
Graduations, baby namings, weddings, and bnai mitzvahs were postponed or reimagined.
We struggled to bridge our picture of what these joyful events were supposed to look like
with what was possible during COVID.

And some of us are sitting with a more existential grief.
We are sitting with the reality
That the world of before is no longer
And the world of the future is unknown.
We are coming to terms with the fact that COVID will be with us for the foreseeable future.
We are wrestling with what this will mean, and what our lives will look like because of it.
We grieve the instability of the present.

I imagine that some of us are thinking that we would rather put all this behind us.
We would prefer to focus on the positive,
Would prefer to look forward rather than back.
Yet I am speaking about grief this morning precisely because I want that for us too.
I want all of us to feel immense joy and gratitude
for having reached this Rosh Hashanah in a better place than where we were last year.

I want all of us to be able to look forward to a better year.
And as your Rabbi,
I see that the path towards that celebration, towards that sense of possibility,
is the path of holding the shattered tablets,
Is the path of open hearted connection with our grief.
We will come to feel the joy and fullness of life
through allowing ourselves to mourn.
The only way out is through.

Now for many of us, this is a path we fear.
In her book “Healing Through the Dark Emotions”,
Psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan notes
that many of us fear that if we engage with our grief,
We will fall into an inner darkness and never return.
But the truth is otherwise:
It will not be easy, but we are unlikely to get stuck.
In her words, if we can learn to be with our dark emotions,
We will instead discover “an unexpected gateway to healing and transformation”.
And with grief in particular, she writes that our healing and transformation
can lead us to a newfound sense of gratitude.
Our grief gives way to gratitude for the gift of each precious moment,
for the gift of love, for the gift of life.
Through feeling our grief, we become people who embrace life in new and deeper ways.

This morning,
I want to invite us to start the new year walking on this path of grief and gratitude.
I want to invite all of us to look back at what we have lost
as a way to begin the path forward.
We will take a quiet moment to do this shortly.
I also want to share that during Yizkor on Yom Kippur, we will mark these losses together.
Because of that, between now and Yom Kippur,
I ask that you share with me by email what you are grieving
and what you lost during COVID-19.
What you share with me will be kept anonymous,
but I will use it to shape a section of our Yizkor service during which we will mark these losses.
We will do this as a way to move through our grief and move forward into the future.

So we begin together now, with a question that I want to invite us to sit with for a quiet moment:
What tablets were shattered for you during this year of COVID-19?
What were your losses, large or small?
[PAUSE for 15 seconds].

As we begin to connect to our grief and losses from this year,

I pray that our paths of grief
give way to the joy we seek
And to a future healed.