Adjacent Mourning: Yizkor 5785

“I want to manage all the war rooms

To mobilize all the supply chains

I want to take care of all the children

of all the single mothers

and those who are gone.

I want to turn myself into a protective vest

for all the fighters

Turn myself into iron domes over the heads

of all the girls…

To sustain all the families

That were evacuated

That were broken

That were crushed…

I want to collect all the donations…

To pass all the messages.

To make all the sandwiches.

To oversee all the efforts.

But on a good day

I manage

Sometimes

To breathe

To drink

Sometimes

To call loved ones.

On a good day

I manage

Sometimes

To cry."[1]

This gutting poem, composed by Israeli writer and peace activist Tal Shavit, is one of the truest descriptions of communal grief I've ever encountered. In the aftermath of a loss, not a personal one, God forbid, but one that takes place in our community or extended family or to one of our close friends, there are so many details that need attention: arranging the shiva, signing up for the meal train, reminding the mourners to eat and sleep. And then there are the larger things, too, we yearn to do when touched by tragedy: cure all the cancers, prevent all the traffic accidents, look after all the widows, heal all the children's broken hearts. Usually, in normal times, we find ourselves in this mourning-adjacent space only occasionally which leaves us with the strength to show up and pitch in and be strong for those who are in need. But from time to time, far too many times lately in the period since Covid and October 7th, we find ourselves in an extended period of adjacent mourning and it can bring us to our knees. On a good day I manage sometimes to cry. How many of us have felt that way over these last many agonizing months and years?

[1] https://theicenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Good-Day.pdf

In her book, *The Amen Effect*, Rabbi Sharon Brous, spiritual leader of the IKAR community in Los Angeles, describes a pilgrimage ritual that took place hundreds of years ago during the time of the Second Temple, a rite that is depicted in Mishna Middot 2:2. As our ancestors traveled to Jerusalem multiple times a year for the festivals, they would enter the Temple Mount, the focal point of Jewish religious life, on the righthand side where the majority of them would immediately begin circling the Temple's vast courtyard in a counter-clockwise direction. At the same time, a small subset of the community would do exactly the opposite, entering and then turning left upon arriving at the courtyard, thus circling in a clockwise direction directly against the grain. Who were these *makifim lismol* – these leftward circlers, walking against the current? The Mishna describes them as *mi shero davar*, one to whom something has happened, and the inverse pattern of their steps was intended to designate them as different, precisely so that passersby might ask "*Mah l'cha* – What has happened to you?" As the ailing or bereaved or otherwise afflicted individuals shared the source of their pain, their fellow pilgrims would respond with a short blessing. In this way, those suffering were held in love and friendship.

What do we do, however, when an entire community, when our whole Jewish world perhaps, suddenly becomes a band of leftward circlers? Exactly "what has happened" to each of us has surely been different over the last year; still, I'm not sure that a single one amongst us is really walking counter-clockwise these days, carrying forward in the normal way of things. For some of us, the trauma of this past year has been direct and personal – we have children or grand-children serving in the IDF, we have loved ones in Israel about whom we worry every single day, members of our families have been killed. For others, the trauma is a few steps more removed, leaving us to sometimes feel guilty for even feeling such pain when there are others who have it far worse. And for many, the anxiety and grief we carry this Yom Kippur sits over and above the terrible tragedy of October 7th – we've received devastating diagnoses, we've become estranged from our children, we've suffered from job loss, we've battled

addiction or depression, we've seen our marriages crumble, we've lost those that we love. On a good day I manage sometimes to cry. It's a miracle we're still standing here after all that we've absorbed.

In another poem that I've turned to often since October 7th, clinical psychologist Lital Kaplan reminds us what we should and should no longer be saying to one another during these difficult times in her wrenching piece, "Homefront Command's New Regulations for Small Talk." She writes:

"'What's up?' Cancelled. Instead use:

'What's shaken up?'

'What's beaten up?'

'What's blown up?'

'What's going on?' Banned. Alternatives:

What's breaking down?

What's forever gone?

…And instead of the standard response,

Forbidden by strict veto power:

'I'm fine, in fact.'

It is required to say –

'Everything's cracked.'

And the truthful ones will answer –

'Everything is shattered. Everything is shattered.'"[2]

[2] https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israel-remains-in-deep-grief/

What do we do when everyone is walking to the left? We continue to ask "*Mah l'cha?"* - not the flippant "What's up" whose answer we may not even really care to hear but the empathic, curious, deeply authentic: "What's happened to you this past year? And how are you managing to still stand despite it all?"

The Yizkor service that we are about to recite consists of prayers said to honor the deceased but these prayers also, I believe, are meant to support and strengthen the living. Like many of the Jewish mourning rituals, Yizkor is designed to provide structure at a time that feels chaotic and overwhelming, provide community at a time that feels isolating and lonely, provide language at a time when we couldn't possibly find the words. It is there to remind us it's okay if on a good day we're only managing to cry, okay if everything is not fine but shattered, okay if we need to walk to the left for a good long time. Yizkor is also there to remind us that we will get through this, as generations of mourners have done before us, and that we are supported in this painful journey by friends and sacred community.

Avital Litman, a kindergarten teacher who traveled last October to the Dead Sea hotels to help with children who had been evacuated there, in her poem "Nowadays One Has to Check," describes a little girl gathering her doll's hair with ribbon and sparkly pipe-cleaner when she suddenly turns around and asks: "*Tagidi, ani chaya?* – Tell me, am I alive? And how would they know if I were dead?" Writes Litman:

"What would you say to a four-year old girl?
'Only the living can hug.
Come, let's hug and see if
We're alive.'
Later [the girl] says:

'Tomorrow morning, let's check again.'"[3]

On a good day we may manage sometimes to cry but we also, incredibly, manage to hug one another, affirming our humanity and the incredible truth that love is stronger than death, stronger than fear, stronger than grief, stronger than hate. Adjacent mourning takes its toll, and we may not, in fact, be able to organize all the war rooms and mobilize all the supply chains, cure all the cancers and heal all the children's broken hearts. But most days we can pause to reach out to a friend, to look into the face of someone in pain is and ask "*Mah L'cha*?," to breathe and to drink and to call a loved one. What do we do when everyone is circling to the left? We hold one another in love and friendship even more strongly.

Y'hi zichram baruch – May the memoires of those we remember this day, our personal and adjacent losses both, be for a blessing. We now rise for Yizkor on page ___.

[3] Litman, Avital. "Nowadays One Has to Check." Shiva: Poems of October 7. Ed: Rachel Korazim, Michael Bohnen, Heather Silverman. The Institute for Jewish Research and Publications, 2024.