

Shavuot 5778 - Yizkor
Congregation Rodeph Sholom
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“Illness is the night-side of life,” wrote Susan Sontag, “a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”¹

A cancer patient herself, Sontag composed her essay “Illness as Metaphor” to protest worn linguistic tropes that exploited disease, linking it to emotional or moral failure. She wrote, “As once tuberculosis was thought to come from too much passion, afflicting the reckless and sensual, today many people believe that cancer is a disease of insufficient passion, afflicting those who are...repressed.”² It is hard enough to contend with sickness, Sontag insisted; patients need not the additional burden of stigma that isolates and wounds them.

Sontag was equally lauded and lambasted for this work. Some found liberation in her aggressive defense of the ill while others disparaged her prooftexts as outdated and unreflective of contemporary sentiments. One moving critique controverted her condemnation of metaphor, explaining that such thinking helps human beings discover meaning, and is therefore a desirable tool in confronting serious illness, “an important event in a life narrative.”³

Sontag did not ultimately succeed at excising metaphor from our rhetoric around illness, but she did foment lasting change by drawing our attention to the *way* we speak about the things that scare us. Disease treads awfully close to death, and death, a landscape beyond the horizon of our knowledge, is an arena that scuttles our thoughts and our tongues. Sontag pointed a finger at uncertainty weaving itself into language, shaping images and motifs that become rafts in the turbulent waters of loss, and she demanded nothing less than tenderness in the deployment of our words.

We know well that there are neighboring kingdoms among the well and the sick; the kingdom of security and the kingdom of fear, the kingdom of prosperity and the kingdom of loss, the kingdom of grief and the kingdom of relief. When we gather together for Yizkor, even amidst the joy of festivals, we present ourselves as citizens of those more tenebrous lands, and seek through remembrance and community, to find passage to the kingdoms of comfort and hope.

On Shavuot we read the Book of Ruth, the story of a woman who was not born into but chose to receive the blessings and obligations of Torah. Ruth the Moabite is a model for Jews and seekers of Judaism in her assertive loyalty to the Jewish people. Ruth is considered the paradigmatic convert because of her pledge to her mother-in-law Naomi:

כִּי אֶל-אֱשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֵלֶּךְ וּבְאִשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֵלֶּיךָ עִמָּךְ עָמִי וְאִלְהֵיךָ אֵלֵהֶי:

¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York: 1977), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³ Jack Coulehan, “Illness as Metaphor,” *Litmed: Literature Arts Medicine Database*, 29 Aug 2006. <http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/view/782>.

“For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). We read the book of Ruth on Shavuot because she reminds us that we, too, must choose Torah over and over again, re-committing ourselves with fervency to our people, to our God, and to Torah’s pursuit of wholeness for the world.

What we might overlook in lionizing Ruth’s covenantal promise to Naomi is the very context of loss in which she seeks to form this deeper bond. Ruth is a young widow. Eleventh century commentator, Rashi, explains that Ruth’s husband, Mahlon, and his brother Chilion died after a prolonged punishment from God, suffering financial ruin and the death of their cattle, before dying themselves. We sense, therefore, that Ruth and Naomi were connected through their protracted experience of loss – widowhood, economic privation, the death of Naomi’s children and Ruth’s prospects for motherhood. Was it the appeal of Judaism, its rituals and commandments, that drove Ruth to ally herself with Naomi? Was it the depth of her isolation that prompted her to attach herself to the only living relative of her deceased husband? We can only guess at the psychology of our matriarch, but I would contend that both strands of longing permeated her *brit* with Naomi.

Judaism mourns well. Cultural anthropologist, Gila Silverman, asserts that Jewish traditions around death map harmoniously onto the psychological experience of mourning, recognizing that grief is a normal lifecycle transition that involves a process of accommodation. It is not linear through fixed stages, but an ongoing renegotiation of a relationship, a “continuing bond,” with someone who is no longer physically present, and involves the reconstruction of a meaningful world, and our place in it, following a loss.⁴ The relationship between Ruth and Naomi is one of profoundly balanced mutuality. Ruth needed Naomi to know her place in the world as a beloved and needed member of a family. She knew Naomi, an elderly widow, would be defenseless without her. But just as Naomi could know physical vulnerability, Ruth was spiritually bereft without Naomi’s faith traditions to reconstitute meaning in her world.

“For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). When widowhood disoriented her, Ruth needed Naomi to be her compass and her comfort, guiding her forward and providing a sense of the familiar, of home. And as Ruth faithfully clung to her mother-in-law, promising never to abandon her, she consecrated herself to a people and to a God that would nurture the communal and theological framework for building their lives anew.

Ruth affirmed her allegiance to Naomi in the context of grave fear. Naomi, robbed of her husband, Elimelech, and two sons, urged her daughters-in-law to turn away from her, *ki mar li meod mikem ki yatzah vi yad Adonai*, “My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of Adonai has struck out against me” (Ruth 1:13). Naomi’s words to her daughters-in-law reflect some of the sentiments that Susan Sontag so passionately excoriated: the idea that illness and loss are somehow contagious, that we should distance ourselves from the afflicted at their time of most acute need. Ruth did not succumb to such benighted notions of suffering, and in her commitment to Naomi, she set the very precedent Sontag sought to promote.

⁴ Gila Silverman, “What Judaism Teachers Us About Grief and Loss,” *Forward*, May 30, 2017.

The day before my rabbinical ordination two weeks ago, a shocking loss ripped through the Jewish world. Rabbi Dr. Aaron Panken, z'l, “fell out of the Sabbath sky”⁵ in a plane crash that devastated and disoriented my seminary community and beyond. The magnitude of the loss was enormous; he was the person to lay hands on each of us, to bestow our blessing, to serve as a proxy for the faculty and the larger Reform Movement conferring leadership upon us. What could be done in the wake of this tragedy? Ruth modeled the way forward.

The next morning, not twenty-four hours after Rabbi Panken died, we processed into Congregation Emanu El to proclaim our commitment to our people, to our God, and to ourselves, that we would step forward side by side, hand in hand, like Ruth and Naomi, out of the depths of loss into the promise of fellowship. Twenty-five thousand people livestreamed our ordination ceremony. Adrift in loss, words and rituals are our rafts, ferrying us in seas we cannot navigate alone.

Rabbi David Adelson, Dean of the Hebrew Union College in New York, told us something that has found a sacred place in my soul, “Here is the thing about the human heart. Through our practice, and our lives, we learn to feel more and more. But we don’t control what the heart feels. We don’t get to choose. The heart that feels pain can feel joy in equal measure.”⁶ Grief is seldom felt in isolation. Mingled with relief or gratitude, fear or anger, we mourn in many colors and adjectives and metaphors. The day of my ordination was the first time I held gratitude and grief in such close emotional proximity, unsure of tears that fell over loss or pride, shock or awe. I beheld the rain and the rainbow at once and I knew with deep certainty that the ritual of ordination itself, the words of prayer and blessing, and their concomitant choreography, bolstered my first trembling steps into the rabbinate.

The way we talk about the things that scare us. The words we say in the face of fear. The rituals we conduct to move us through the touchstones of our lives. These are our passports to the kingdoms of comfort and hope. With honest recognition that lament is not linear, and that death strikes life with kaleidoscopic emotional impact, leaving each mourner with a unique experience of loss, we can seek out the words and rituals to guide us forward from death. The Jerusalem Talmud proclaims that “One does not erect monuments for the righteous. Their words and deeds constitute their memorial” (Shekalim 5:2). I would add as well that *our* words and *our* rituals constitute memorials, to the lives of those we lost, to the dreams they entrusted to us, and to the future we will build as inheritors of their greatest gift: life.

⁵ Rabbi David Stern, Eulogy for Rabbi Aaron Panken, May 8, 2018.

⁶ Rabbi David Adelson, “Ordination 2018: Opening Remarks,” May 6, 2018.