

Yizkor Sermon 2021

Both Sides Now

Sherri Mandell remembers the time before her son's death. As a boy, Koby delighted in the fair of youth; games and dreams and the stories of bravery and visions of fantasy. Together they would explore the Judean hills, scrambling over rocks, and letting the world grow their sense of life. Just the night before her world shattered and changed, Koby showed Sherri how much he had grown, lifting her up in the air just after his 14th birthday. Sherri noticed that she only dwarfed him by a single inch, even as her hopes for his future had no measure.

This season marks 20 years since Koby's death. In the anguish and heartbreak of two decades of grief, Sherri still recalls how she saw the world before it all came apart. She recalls back to those hills, to the fallen rock and skies. In her words, "Sometimes, if the weather is crisp and clear or there's been a rainfall, you can look out over the Judean Hills and see the tongue of the Dead Sea, gray-blue, visible through a cleft in the mountain. If you didn't know, you'd think it was a cloud. Instead, it's a glimpse of the lowest point on earth. My view has been irreparably changed, damaged."¹ A space of dream and wonder would become a grave, and those hills, that sea-become-cloud, will never be the same.

Every sorrow is a summons. Each heartbreak the call to a new awareness. We gather together, united in grief and the lived-understanding of a world changed through death. We look back to the "before times," to the ways we looked at life and love, future and self. And now, on the other side of loss, we see how much has changed. We cannot go back to those times before our grief, and yet we still remember - the touch of a hand, the smell of skin, the timbre of voice. We recall the way we once experienced the world with our loved ones, and in the same breath feel the pain not only of their absence, but also how our very senses changed.

Those who have walked with us through grief may have tried to bring solace and comfort, try to give justice to loss or hope to heartbreak. But, on the other side of death, there are times when too much has been lost, and when tears may be the only response.

Our sages imagine God, too, weeps in grief. Seeing the suffering of humanity, witnessing sacred space in defilement, God wails at the broken visions, the shattered hope. The archangel Metatron attempts to comfort God, hoping to take away the tears. And God responds that such weeping is necessary.² On the other side of death, we sit together. We

¹ The Blessing of a Broken Heart, Chapter 3 by Sherri Mandell

² Lamentations Rabbah, Petichta 24 - At that time God was crying and saying: "Woe unto Me! What have I done? I brought My presence down for the sake of Israel and now that they have sinned, I have returned to My original place. God Forbid, I will become a source of laughter for the nations and a source of mockery for people." At that time Metatron (the archangel) came and fell on his face. He said to Him: "Master of the Universe—I will cry, and You should not cry." He said to him, "If you do not leave me to cry now I will enter the place where you cannot enter and I will cry." As it says: "But if you will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and my eye shall weep bitterly, and run down with tears, because God's flock is carried away captive" (Jeremiah 13:17).

may feel God beside us in tears, recalling back to the time before, and all that has come apart since.

In his book *On the Other Side of Sadness*, Dr. George Bonanno elevates modern research on grief. He notes that in mourning, the sadness we experience has a purpose. It pushes us to reflect on the times before our grief, and feel the weight of the emotional pendulum swing far in grief. But the sadness then creates motion to our emotion. Through sadness, we actually grow our capacity to cycle into a broader range of feeling. At times relief, and then back to sadness. Then hope, perhaps laughter, and back again. As he summarizes, "We are not accustomed to thinking of grief as a process of finding comfort...but this is precisely what resilient people tend to do."³ Our sadness flexes our hearts, opening wider our capacity to feel. In moving our perspective back to the before times, it amplifies our sense of change and loss, but also expands our sense of self and ability to see forwards as well. For Dr. Bonanno, grief is the conduit for hope as it expands our capacity to grow.

So powerful are our tools of grief, our sages imagine that God sits at the feet of humanity and learns how to live with heartbreak from us.⁴

12 years ago, Kelly Buckley received a phone call informing her of the death of her child Stephen. Devastated, she felt the bottom of her world had come apart. Through her tears, she tried each day to let the pendulum of her heart swing between grief and all the way to gratitude. As she said, "I told myself that if I could find just one little thing to be thankful for, I would make it through the day. With each passing day, I was able to see that even though my heart was breaking," there was still more on the other side of heartbreak. Kelly started a Facebook group called Just One Little Thing, inviting those in mourning to practice gratitude alongside their grief, sharing photos or reflections and knitting people together through both sides of the heart. More than 120,000 people join together through Just One Little thing.

Two millennia ago, our early rabbis offered this teaching: When you come to the ruins of a synagogue, if you find grass growing there, you are not allowed to mow the grass, on account of the grief of the soul. For centuries, sages debated why such a teaching exists. Some suggest it is because the sanctity of the synagogue extends to the grass, others posit that the growth itself gives honor to the ruins. But our favorite reading is that of Rashi, who believes we should deliberately place grass in the remnants, for the sight of the grass will both break open the heart in remembering all that is lost, even as we witness all that now grows that did not before.⁵

³ p. 72

⁴ Lamentations Rabbah 1:1 - [God asked:] "A king of flesh and blood who mourns, what does he do?" [The angels replied:] "He sits and cries." "I shall do so as well" [God replied], as it says: "And God, Lord of Hosts, called on that day, for weeping and lamenting and balding (Isaiah 22:12)

⁵ Megillah 28a:22-24 - MISHNA: And another thing Rabbi Yehuda said about a ruined synagogue: one may not eulogize in it. And one may not stretch out ropes in it, nor may one spread traps within it, nor may one spread out produce upon its roof, nor may one make it a shortcut. As it is stated: "And I will bring desolation to your sanctuaries" (Leviticus 26:31). Their sanctity remains even when they are desolate.

In Yizkor, in remembrance, we sit together in our grief. We let our hearts return to the times before, to feel the presence of our loved ones, and let the waves of their absence return. As we walk through the remnants of who we were in the ruins of the world that was, we note too that which now grows between broken stone and ruptured feeling. And we honor this sacred space, the holding of two worlds, of two perspectives. Absence and presence, ruin and growth.

Roberta Anderson was born in November of 1943 in Alberta, Canada. At age 9, she contracted polio and had to spend weeks in a hospital bed, never to catch up in her studies. It was in the confines of her bed that Roberta took to writing poetry and making art and music of all kinds. A time of constraint and grief opened the very path her life would follow. But Roberta's path would also lead to other trials. In 1964, as she was scrapping by on money from dive-bar gigs, Roberta discovered that she was pregnant by a boyfriend who immediately left her at learning this news. "He left me three months pregnant in an attic room with no money and winter coming and only a fireplace for heat." Seeing no other option, Roberta gave her baby up for adoption at birth. This decision felt as if it were the only possible pathway forward, and yet it was a life-changing loss that shaped her early life and would settle as an eternal grief in Roberta's heart. After some years of intense grieving, which suspended her ability to create poetry, art, or music, Roberta picked herself up and began to write songs. Once, while flying to a gig, Roberta remembers how grief swelled up in her and gave her clarity. As she flew and grieved, Roberta happened to read a passage in a book about the experience of flying. The passage moved and inspired her as she flew through the air. She read,

*"And at a height of three miles, sitting above the clouds, I felt like an airborne seed. From the cracks in the earth the rivers pinched back at the sun. They shone out like smelters' puddles, and then they took a crust and were covered over. As for the vegetable kingdom, it hardly existed from the air; it looked to me no more than an inch in height. And I dreamed down at the clouds, and thought that when I was a kid I had dreamed up at them, and having dreamed at the clouds from both sides as no other generation of men has done, one should be able to accept his death very easily. However, we made safe landings every time."*⁶

With her heart in pieces, Roberta Joan "Joni" (Anderson) Mitchell looked out the window of her plane, seeing the top side of the clouds, and remembering what the underside looked like from down on the ground. Her most famous song came from the swell of grief, and the power of opening our eyes to see the other side of grief as well.

If grass sprang up there, one should not mow it, on account of the grief of the soul.

⁶ Henderson the Rain King, Saul Bellows, p. 41

We who walk this path of grief together, we see the world from both sides now. From the time before, and the time after. We reflect on the innocence before our world came apart, the ruin that came after, and the growth that emerges from the remnants. In this space of both sides, we hold the absence alongside the presence. We recall the illusions of what was, and the reality of what is, and hold both in honor. We see a love devastated by loss, even as we hold a heart expanded by its own break. On the other side of sadness, we may notice even the foundations of our world from a new perspective. And our loved ones call us to life.

*"Tears and fears and feeling proud
To say, "I love you" right out loud
Dreams and schemes and circus crowds
I've looked at life that way."*