GRIEF-WORK AND THE EXPERIENCE OF JEWISH MOURNING

Grieving is the way we mend broken hearts. When we sustain a bad wound, the body heals in stages: Initially, we feel shock and numbness, then the sharp pain of the injury, and slowly the hurt subsides. Even so, we are often left with a scar, reminding us of the seriousness of the trauma. "Grief-work," the process of mourning, is the way the psyche, bruised and battered by the pain of loss, heals itself.

Responses to loss cannot be accurately predicted nor explained in neatly defined phases. Just as in the process of dying, bereavement involves a number of responses that come in and out of the mind and body at different times. In unexpected moments, just when we think the acute pain is over, a wave of sorrow or a deep ache of loss can overcome us.

Moreover, there is no time-line for the healing of grief. For some, the intensity of pain subsides within months; for others, it is years before the adjustment to the loss is in place. It is critically important for mourners to realize that there is no "right" way to grieve, nor is there any "limit" on how long the "phases" of grief will last. Each of us will experience bereavement in a unique way.

Yet most experts on grief-work identify three broad experiences in this healing process: 1) shock, 2) experiencing the pain, and 3) resolution and adjustment.

Shock

The first response to news of a loss is profound shock. It feels as if you've been hit by a truck. You cry out and, just as with a serious physical injury, the body and mind go into shock.

With the shock comes a feeling of numbness. You cannot even feel yourself physically. This numbness is a protective device, a way to allow the harsh reality to sink in gradually. It enables you to cope with the feelings bit by bit, raising the pain threshold and initially muting the full emotional impact of the loss.

This numbness, this shield against the emotions, allows you to do what must be done in the immediate moments after a death occurs. How else could you get through the tasks of making burial arrangements, planning a funeral, setting up a *shiva* home without the shield of numbness? For some, the numbness is so effective that these things are accomplished with stunning efficiency. This type of bereaved individual seems relatively unaffected and accepting of the loss. But, often, the roller coaster of emotions that is the singular characteristic of grief replaces this initial feeling of numbness, sometimes very suddenly.

Of course, Jewish tradition recognized this experience of grief. *Aninut*, the time between the moment of death and the funeral, is defined by the numbness brought on by the initial shock of loss. The rabbis knew through vast experience that it is nearly impossi-

ble to comfort the bereaved during this time. The shock and numbness will simply not allow it. Even when we try, the words fall empty, unheard.

Instead, the rabbis instruct the *onen/onennet* to keep occupied with the details of burying the dead, while consolers bide their time or attend to the preparations for the *shiva* period to come. With amazing psychological insight, the tradition teaches that those who wish to comfort must wait until the bereaved are ready to be comforted. Even though our first inclination is to try to comfort, the shock and numbness experienced by the bereaved prevents our most sincere efforts.

Experiencing the pain

The second experience of mourning is the most difficult to endure. When the numbness and shock wear off, the reality of the loss hits. Intense emotions often boil over in fits of sadness, anger, melancholy and anguish. When grief reaches the heart, the real pain begins.

In the Jewish tradition, grief reaches the heart at the funeral. Everything about the funeral is designed to confront the bereaved with the reality of death. The eulogy stimulates our memories and our emotions, the prayers talk not just of the demise of the deceased, but of the mortality of all human beings, and the confrontation with the grave. The thud of the earth on the casket shakes the bereaved out of shock and disbelief, clearing the way for the difficult work of mourning.

Aveilut, mourning, begins at this moment of raw emotion. The *shiva* time that lies ahead will be filled with the symptoms of grief-work. Among them are:

1. **Sadness.** The sadness that the bereaved experience is overwhelming. It is an ache felt in the deepest part of the soul. It is a feeling of complete emptiness, hollowness. Its most predominant expression is tears—tears of sadness, tears of loss. While there are predictable times when the tears flow, there are also unexpected moments that trigger them. Suddenly, a memory pops into your head and you begin sobbing. Seeing someone with whom you and the deceased shared wonderful times will bring on uncontrollable weeping. You open a closet door after the funeral and, at the first glance of a row of suits, you break down. Eventually, you cry yourself out, exhausted. Of course, it is impossible to enjoy yourself with amusements, parties, television. It is even difficult to enjoy the company of those who give you the most pleasure—children, grandchildren, friends. Sometimes a feeling of despair comes with the tears. But, often, the tears ultimately bring a kind of comfort, the lubricating fluid of the healing process.

   The Bible is filled with accounts of the wailing that accompanies loss. Jewish tradition allows for the sadness of bereavement, encouraging its expression throughout the funeral and *shiva* period.

2. **Anger.** A natural response to loss is anger—anger born of frustration and helplessness. This anger is directed at many—doctors, hospitals, drunken drivers, rabbis,

employers, family, friends—even God. It is not uncommon to find yourself lashing out at those you love the most.

Why my son? Why my wife? Why has this bad thing happened to this good person? From Abraham to Job to Wiesel to Kushner, the questioning of God is well within the mainstream of the Jewish response to loss.

3. **Guilt.** Guilt is one of the most common responses to loss. It appears in a variety of ways:

   Guilt born of survival. "I should have gone first."

   Guilt born of anger. "Why did you die and leave me?"

   Guilt born of the inability to cope with loss. "I shouldn't be so distraught. Why can't I get ahold of myself?"

   Guilt born of feeling relief that the deceased is gone. "How dare I feel happy again!"

   Guilt born of regret. "If only I had taken her to another doctor..." "I should never have driven him so hard..." "I'll never forgive myself for the fight we had..."

   Pangs of guilt are natural and, according to some experts, necessary. In a twist of irony, guilt feelings, when overcome, enable the mourner to consider the positive ways s/he acted. "Yes, I could have done more for Mom, but now that I think about it, I really was a pretty good son." Of course, overwhelming guilt can be disabling and should be dealt with appropriately. Ultimately, whatever guilt feelings exist should be forgiven. Forgiving oneself is an important step on the road to healing grief.

   Jewish tradition knew this. In a practice that unfortunately is no longer in vogue, it suggested that each person at a funeral ask the deceased for forgiveness. Surely the rabbis knew that it was unlikely the deceased would hear this plea (although many of them had a vivid imagination of the afterlife). Rather, the psychological wisdom of asking forgiveness lies in the expiation of guilt that accompanies the plea. We ask not that the deceased forgive us; we ask ourselves for forgiveness—a task that is far more difficult. Judaism wants us not to be too hard on ourselves.

4. **Physical complaints.** Mourners often complain of physical ailments, including shortness of breath, tightness in the throat, feelings of emptiness in the stomach, overwhelming weakness, headaches. Most bereaved have very little appetite, experience difficulty sleeping, and feel totally exhausted.

   Judaism insists that the bereaved eat immediately after the funeral as a sign of the slow return to normalcy, yet most mourners report difficulty in consuming this meal. During the course of the *shiva*, this feeling subsides and appetite returns.

However, the intensity of the *shiva* often leads to a lack of sleep and a profound sense of exhaustion. In fact, the feeling of exhaustion is the most frequently cited response to the *shiva* experience.

5 **Fear.** Having stared death in the face, the bereaved often express their own fear of dying or of other loved ones dying. Or, widows fear being alone, children fear losing the other parent, and adult children fear the future once both parents are gone.

Jewish tradition attempts to smother these fears by surrounding the bereaved with community. The message is clear: "You are not alone." That is why the community comes to the mourner for the *shiva*, that is why the community welcomes the bereaved back to its fold on the Shabbat during *shiva*, that is why each experience of Jewish mourning is celebrated not alone, but within the context of a supportive community.

6. **Pining and searching.** Pining is the soulful longing for the deceased that leads to searching, the powerful urge to find a "lost" love. Often, this phenomenon is uncanny and disconcerting. You begin to "see" your loved one in the faces of others. You "hear" his or her voice. You sense the presence of the deceased in a room, at a table, during a prayer.

Judaism wants us never to forget the memory of the departed. The *shiva* is not the end of mourning—it is just the beginning. We mourn the loss of loved ones four times a year during the *Yizkor* memorial service and on every anniversary of a death for the rest of our lives. Jewish tradition teaches us that we can never get them back physically but we can have them with us in our memories forever.

7. **Lapses in clear thinking.** The bereaved may experience enormous emotional swings that sometimes result in such a mental tumult that normally clear-thinking people can become confused, use poor judgment, and even experience temporary memory loss. The days immediately following the funeral are not a good time to make important decisions and choices.

Again, the wisdom of the seven-day *shiva* period allows the bereaved time to gather themselves for the inevitable decision-making that follows a loss. "Where shall Mom live?" "What about the will?" "How do we divide up the personal items in the household?" When a family sits *shiva* for seven days, there is time for the initial grief to subside so these decisions can be made.

8. **Falling apart.** Mourners often evidence changes of behavior in both relationships with others and in daily activities. For those who grieve, the simplest of chores—paying bills, shopping for groceries—often feel like major burdens. Sometimes, you wander around the house, aimlessly picking up things, putting them down, rearranging photos on mantles, or simply staring into space. You lose control of your

eating or drinking, take foolish risks, give away precious possessions. You feel like you're falling apart.

Judaism suggests you spend thirty days slowly returning to regular routines, to work and to the daily challenges of living. For thirty days after the funeral, your activities are restricted somewhat, allowing a gradual return to the complexities of living. During this time, friends and family can provide tremendous comfort in reassuring the bereaved that these feelings of being out of control are perfectly normal for those who have experienced profound loss. For some, a support group can be helpful in smoothing the transition back to normalcy. The important message is that these feelings will subside in time. Grief-work is not over quickly.

Resolution and adjustment

Many mourners and comforters expect that the process of grief will be over in a matter of days or weeks. But there is no timetable for the healing of the human heart. Each person is unique; each person heals differently and at different rates. Even when the healing process seems to be well on its way, something as routine as finding a much-loved photo, a birthday, an anniversary, a favorite shared ritual, can throw the timetable off track.

Part of the problem inherent in any grief time-line is the issue of expectations.

"By this time, you should be (fill in the blank)..."

"By this time, you should have control of yourself."

"By this time, you should be able to get back to work."

"By this time, you should be dating again."

Mourners have expectations for themselves about when grief will subside and these expectations are fueled by others' expectations. If these expectations are not met, if the time-line is not followed, somehow we think something is wrong.

This is simply not true. Grief has no clock. In fact, there will be ups and downs, even when it appears that an adjustment has been made and the most intense grief seems resolved. Especially when the deceased is remembered at birthdays, anniversaries, the *Yizkor* and *yahrtzeit* memorials, there will likely be some pain involved. This is normal and healthy.

Most experts believe that the bereaved can return to relatively normal functioning within a few months, yet life may be strongly influenced by the loss for up to a year or even as long as three years later. These experts point out that the duration of the bereavement depends in large measure on how successfully the bereaved has done the "grief-work" itself, how well the person has allowed the suffering and pain to happen and work itself out.

The resolution of grief is characterized by five achievements on the part of the bereaved:

1. **Adjusting to the pain that comes with mourning.** Allowing the suffering, giving expression to the pain, enduring the waves of sadness all hasten the healing.

2. **Adjusting to the finality of the loss.** J. William Worden explains in his book *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy:* "Part of the acceptance of reality is to come to the belief that reunion is impossible, at least in this life".

3. **Crystallizing memories of the deceased.** The bereaved experience what can only be called a "life review" as they recall the memories of life with the deceased loved one. Gradually, a mental "photo album" of the person emerges. Eventually, the most meaningful memories become integrated into the bereaved one's own life, reuniting with the loved one in death in a way rarely possible in life.

4. **Letting go.** Judith Viorst, in her popular book *Necessary Losses,* argues that, ironically, one way to let go of the dead is to take them in. We can establish internally a presence of the deceased, by identifying with some aspect of their lives, by creating within our hearts and minds a small corner for the fond memories.

   The ultimate test of whether or not the bereaved have "let go" is their ability to establish new relationships, even feel affection for someone new. The greatest honor to themselves and to their loved ones is when the bereaved can live life fully once again.

5. **Fully, but never the same.** For many bereavements, particularly the death of a child, it is nearly impossible to accept the loss. Adjust to the loss, get "used to" the loss, yes, but never accept.

Excellent resources that further explore grief-work include *After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges* by Diane Cole; *Grieving: How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Theresa Rando; and *How To Survive the Loss of a Love* by Melba Colgrove, Harold H. Bloomfield and Peter McWilliams.