



GOOD grief

Navigating the process of mourning

BY LEONARD CARR

JUDAISM IS ABOUT FAITH, HOPE, AND OPTIMISM.

While we hold onto our confidence in the future redemption of our people and the world, we are also constantly mindful of our losses. We are a displaced and dislocated people. We hold on white-knuckled to our own homeland, which is constantly under threat. At the peak of joy during a chuppah, we remember the destruction of the Temple. There is a recurring motif in the psalms of weeping and joyous song juxtaposed. The month of Av is the time we actively recall our collective sense of loss, passed down through generations of ancestral implicit and conscious memory.

It is a good time to pause and contemplate the experience of loss, which we feel as a people but relate to more immediately when it's described from the point of view of a personal experience.

The loss of a loved one makes you feel as if the moorings that held your familiar world in place have been ripped away, leaving you lost and bewildered. Like the tsunami of 2004, you feel that your entire world has been temporarily shifted on its axis. The familiar landscape of relationships, traditions, and interactions is altered inexorably. While there is an implicit promise of rebuilt lives and renewal, the immediate effects are catastrophic. There is the shocking realisation that life as you knew it will never be the same



again and you have no power to change the new and unwelcome reality.

While your geographical location remains intact, emotionally you feel dislocated and forced to migrate to a new existential, social, emotional, and spiritual territory. Just like in an emigration, you may be disorientated and confused at finding yourself in a completely new and unfa-

miliar place. The feeling of being different and in your own isolated world is heightened by the people around you, like locals in a new country, carrying on with life as usual and being indifferent, dismissive, irritated, or even aggressive when you want to do things differently from the prevailing local customs. For example, you may wish to withdraw and become silent, or talk all the time about your loss. You may wish to avoid social events or ask for help from others with basic tasks that makes you appear like someone lost in what to them is a normal familiar circumstance.

It is often intensely lonely and alienating when the people around you carry on

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with life as if nothing has changed. Even the family members mourning with you express their grief in their own unique ways and remember their relationship in their own personal ways. Grief can, therefore, create a deep sense of separation between people who, under normal circumstances, offer each other mutual support. In the face of great loss you feel as if the world should pause for a while, stand with head bowed in silent honour as the world becomes poorer through this shattering event.

In the midst of a catastrophic event you would expect to be overwhelmed and at times to feel so unhinged that you fear that you are losing your mind. It's difficult to explain this to people who have always known you in a particular context and now find you to be acting like someone living in a different reality. In our society, grief and mourning are often regarded as illnesses that need to be treated. In order to qualify as normal, we have to keep our feelings hidden and mourn as if it is something to feel ashamed of, because normal people are brave and just get on with life.

Part of the change you undergo when you lose a close relative is that the identity and the role conferred upon you by the relationship, for example a parent, child, partner, spouse, sibling, and best friend, is rendered no longer viable. The expectation that you held with regards to your lost love and that role that the person played in your life are similarly redundant. For a parent who loses a child, the experience is, in addition to the emotional devastation, also like losing a limb, because looking after a child is like an extension of taking care of yourself, and they are no longer able to fulfil the uniquely practical role that parenting entails.

If you are suddenly on your own because of the loss of a partner, you might feel that others are trying to control you by, for example, coercing you to move house or exploit your vulnerability. People are often encouraged by the totally misguided, to pack their loved ones away with the photographs, move to a new home, and simply forget. It is a vital part

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of grieving to remember and return your loved ones to their rightful place in your heart, memory, and life story by honouring them with your grief, displaying their photos, telling their stories, and, most importantly, continuing their legacy by keeping their values and ideals alive.

Festivals and family milestones highlight all these issues, and, at times, the entire celebration seems filled with the absence of your loved one. Part of the re-learning of your life is reformulating how you celebrate in the absence of loved ones who might previously have been an integral part of the celebrations and your memories of the past.

No person is an island complete unto themselves. We depend upon each other, not only for our physical, material, and psychological sustenance and well-being, but to feel real, to experience our own existence, and to feel that our existence has worth, significance, and meaning. The human need to be seen, heard, felt, and understood by others finds expression in the most intense and dramatic way following a person's loss of a loved one. So intense is the pain, so confusing and disorienting are the feelings, that we need rituals in order to organise our experience and to give us a channel and methodology for emotional expression.

Ritual also organises the behaviour of others around the mourner so as to be able to give the most appropriate and effective support. The rituals of mourning and of comforting mourners help those who have suffered loss to navigate through the vast and powerful storm of feelings and sometimes crazy-making experience. The task of mourning requires that bereft persons relearn their lives in order to accommodate the new reality and adjust to life without their loved one. This is why mourning almost takes you at least a year.

After going through a mourning process supported by others, you move into being the new version of your former self. This

new version is the person that you become after the loss of a significant other, who was, until that loss, a part of your very being, and, with that loss, becomes incorporated into your new identity. These new identities are given names, like widow or orphan, that give the identity a legitimate and recognised status, and thus acceptable emotional expression. What, however, of the losses that have no status, that are known only to the mourner, despite the enormity of the pain? The many people who fall into this category of disenfranchised mourners are, for example, people who have miscarriages, immigrants, divorced, people who lose beloved pets, in-laws, domestic workers, and nurses who cared for the loved one while well or through illness, grandchildren, those who lost loved ones to imprisonment, people who have no cultural rituals of mourning or whose family or friends actively or passively forbid or denigrate grieving.

Disenfranchised mourners have no one to validate and legitimise the reality of their experience. Because of their experience being rendered invisible or illegitimate, these people almost get stuck with the pain with no process by which to work it through. These victims of the ignorance, helplessness, selfishness, or cruel indifference of others often become persistently frozen in the pain, suffering from chronic sadness and alienation from others.

Grief is such an overwhelming and complex process. The pain that you experience is a tribute to the person, the subscription fees that you pay on love. Tears are the tribute to the relationship and to the important role your loved one played in your life. Tears, if shed enough, also wash away pain. When you mourn, you are also mourning the future without your loved one. The challenge is to find a balance between honouring the enormity of the present loss, taking leave of what is now past, and starting to embrace the new future. ■