

Grieving Personal Loss Amidst a Grieving Community

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Rabbi Sharon Brous writes about an obscure passage in the Talmud,ⁱ describing “an ancient pilgrimage ritual, when hundreds of thousands of people would ascend to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the focal point of Jewish ... life in the ancient world. The crowd would enter the Courtyard in a mass of humanity, turning and circling—counterclockwise—around the enormous complex...

“But someone suffering, the text tells us, the grieving, the lonely, the sick—*someone to whom something awful had happened*—that person would walk through the same entrance and circle in the opposite direction. Just as we do when we’re hurting: every step, against the current. And every person who passed the broken-hearted would stop and ask, ‘What happened to you?’ ‘I lost my mother,’ the bereaved would answer. ‘I miss her so much.’ Or perhaps, ‘My husband left.’ Or, ‘I found a lump.’ ‘Our son is sick.’ ‘I just feel so lost.’

“And those who walked from right to left—each one of them—would look into the eyes of the ill, the bereft, and the bereaved. ‘May God comfort you,’ they would say, one by one. ‘May you be wrapped in the embrace of the community.’”ⁱⁱ

Rabbi Brous is inspired by this example of communal caring for individuals who are bereaved and suffering, sad and alone. She has galvanized her community to be present for people facing all kinds of loss, much as “caring and sharing” is infinitely more than the name of a committee at Congregation B’nai Israel.

This year, though, we may wonder about the larger circle, the one circling counterclockwise, the people who **aren’t** suffering. Is **anyone** in that circle now? At a time of collective grief and sadness—when we are all mourning the dead of October 7, fearing for Israel and the Jewish people, and despairing about America and its democracy—is **anybody** available to offer comfort?

Rabbi Lauren Ben-Shoshan and psychologist Betsy Stone teach about “disenfranchised grief” in the wake of October 7. “Sometimes,” they write, “this grief occurs over a stereotypically less recognized relationship, like the death of an ex-spouse, a good friend, or a pet. Sometimes, this grief derives from [being] heartbroken over the loss of an idea.”ⁱⁱⁱ This year, the entire Jewish world is a grieving family this year, albeit experiencing a grief that is “disenfranchised,” because society doesn’t recognize us as mourners, as people who have experienced a significant loss.

Judaism treats only first-degree relatives—the spouse, child, parent, or sibling of the deceased—as “official” mourners. Often, as a funeral is beginning,

we will “cut *kriah*,” tearing those little black mourners’ ribbons. Those symbols of grief are generally distributed only to those our tradition has identified as mourners. When I’ve been the one handing out those ribbons, though, I try to be attentive to the faces in the family room. Are the grandchildren immediate mourners? The daughters- and sons-in-law? Nieces and nephews, perhaps? Then, I ask myself: Will the children of the deceased, for example, feel less centered in their parent’s death if their cousins and stepsiblings are given ribbons, counted as immediate mourners?

Perhaps you have heard about circles of bereavement. The person in crisis or grief is at the center, with concentric circles radiating outward: close family next, then intimate friends, other friends and extended family, colleagues, and finally, acquaintances. The general rule is “comfort in, dump out,” meaning that people more distant from the bereavement are responsible for offering solace, for walking counterclockwise in the outer circle that Rabbi Brous described from the ancient Temple; while those closest to the loss are entitled to have their needs fulfilled by those more peripherally impacted.^{iv}

Recently, for example, I traveled to attend the funeral of a close friend’s mother. Two days after I got home, my friend contacted me to ask if a belt they found in their house might be mine. The monogrammed buckle gave it away. My friend offered to return the belt, and of course I wanted it back, the belt buckle being a gift from my father, matching his own. Still, I felt terrible. I had “dumped” my need inward, to my friend who was grieving.

I offer this example because, at times, those of us offering comfort also have needs, even if we don’t leave a treasured possession at a house of mourning a thousand miles away. At a funeral, I try to pay particular attention to attendees who have recently experienced their own bereavement, as their grief may be reignited by a return to the cemetery or by the prayers they recently heard when burying their own. Sometimes, the entire community is grieving, a need that does not supersede those of the immediate mourners but may negatively impact the congregation’s ability to provide comfort. The community’s loss must be framed in a way that honors the person who has died, with the hope that the grieving family is comforted to know that they aren’t mourning alone.

At these High Holy Days, we all lament the collective losses of the Jewish people in 5784. At this service, though, those whose dear ones have died take precedence. The rest of us are obligated to push ourselves to the outer circle, to “walk counterclockwise,” to see the more immediate pain and to offer comfort. Privately acknowledging our disenfranchised grief, we may give ourselves permission to feel sad, too. Then, we turn to those on the inner circle, walking

clockwise, “look into the eyes of the ill, the bereft, and the bereaved. ‘May God comfort you,’ [we] say, one by one. ‘May you be wrapped in the embrace of the community.’”^v

Amen.

ⁱ Mishnah Middot 2:2.

ⁱⁱ Sharon Brous, *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*, New York: Avery, 2024, Kindle edition, p. 3 of 218. Emphasis original.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Lauren Ben-Shoshah, MARE, and Betsy Stone, PhD, “Pervasive Sorry: Disenfranchised Grief, October 7th, and the Power of Jewish Ritual, *CCAR Journal*, Spring/Summer 2024, pp. 36-7.

^{iv} Annie Reneau, “Psychologist’s ‘Ring Theory’ can help you not say the wrong thing to people in grief,” *Upworthy*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.upworthy.com/ring-theory-of-crisis-and-grief>.

^v Brous.