

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon **By Rabbi Brad Bloom – 5779 September 19, 2018**

While serving as a faculty rabbi at Camp Coleman this summer, I was charged with the task to teach a seminar to incoming tenth graders on the topic; “Elections Matter: The future of the Supreme Court.” Inside the large Dining Hall, 25 tenth graders entered and sat down around the table. I asked them to introduce themselves and where they came from. As they went around the table, Five students identified themselves as being from the Marjorie Stone Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Needless to say that I felt a chill and a dose of anxiety just to be in their presence. Here I was teaching teens who had been directly impacted by the tragedy that shocked the nation.

These kids survived the recent carnage of 17 people murdered in the classrooms of the Marjory Stone Douglas High School. As a congregational rabbi, I am rarely at a loss for words. This time was different because I felt so uncomfortable with the anxiety I was experiencing that day. I initially succumbed to the temptations to gently ask those students if they had discussed this event between themselves while being at camp? The looks in their eyes to my question was enough of an answer without saying a word. Honestly it was a strange and awkward 30 seconds that I stood silently before them without having the right words at my finger tips. I acknowledged to them that I respected their unspoken wishes and that I would move on to teaching the session I had planned.

The next day at the lunch table with the dining hall packed with hundreds of kids and staff two of the teens in that class came up behind me while I was eating. They tapped me on the shoulder and I stood up pleasantly surprised at their presence. They introduced themselves again and began to tell me that they knew I was in an uncomfortable moment but that they appreciated me just moving on with the class and not pursuing my initial question with them. They understood where I was coming from in those moments the day before in our class and affirmed that I had done the right thing. We talked for a few minutes and then they left to join their cabin for the next activity for the day.

I thought to myself, ‘What an adult thing to do?’ Here were two teenagers basically showing me support and understanding. Actually it was a humbling experience to have these young ladies, in the subtext of our conversation, actually kind of forgive me. It was also insightful because I realized that clearly they were in no way capable or ready to talk about those events that terrorized them and the nation a short time ago. I would not be surprised that they really have not yet mourned the loss of their friends. It may be too soon for them. They simply may not yet have the emotional capacity to face these deep-seated emotions.

The ways people cope with a sudden death particularly traumatic death of a loved one, especially a child, varies from person to person. Who can tell how long it will take those students in Parkland or in any other of a number of public school shootings, nightclub attacks and casino killings to talk about their feelings let alone to heal. How can any of us judge them and their capacity to deal with the events let alone with the emotions?

There is a brief story in the Torah about grieving that highlights the idea that everyone grieves differently. In the book of Leviticus, God's directs the priests on the rules and prohibitions of making unauthorized sacrifices in the Tabernacle. God then spotted the two rebellious sons of Aaron the head priest, Nadav and Abihu, offering up illegal sacrifices. Suddenly God sends a bolt of fire which kills Nadav and Abihu. How does Aaron cope? How should he react to such a horrid event? What should their father Aaron, the brother of Moses, do? Then the Torah says, "And Aaron was silent."

Silence? That was how he handled what must have been the unbridled shock, anger and confusion pervading through Aaron's emotions? I wish the Torah had given us more information to demonstrate how Aaron dealt with the deaths of his two sons in the long run as compared to his immediate reactions. One of the major lessons we can take from this short but powerful story is that people do cope differently with death. Second there is no automatic pathway as to how human beings deal with loss. I can think of a number of responses which I have witnessed when people faced the loss of their loved ones in completely different ways. I have seen silence in the eyes of a bereaved parent upon hearing of the death of a child.

I am going to share a story from the Talmud about a man and a woman who lost their daughter. His way of mourning is very hard to understand. The difference between how he and his wife react to the death of their child illustrates the point that there is no one way we mourn or grieve.

Taken from the Tractate Shabbat (151b-151a), this is the story of Rabbi Hanina whose daughter died. And he did not cry over her.

His wife berates him and shouts, "Is it a chicken you have taken out of your house?" He responds to her, "Two, bereavement and blindness."

He remembered a teaching from his mentor Rabbi Yohanan.

"There are six kinds of tears, three are good and three are bad. Of crying, smoke and stomach pain are bad.

Of laughter and perfume and of fruit are good."

Clearly his wife is admonishing him with the image of the chicken to get a reaction out of him for what appears to be a lack of an emotional response to his daughter's death. She is angry with him and understandably so.

Rabbi Hanina does not become angry. In fact, he under responds to his wife's reaction. How do we explain his not crying? Does this rabbi not cry because he accepts God's judgment? Or is his pain so great that he cannot cry? We know nothing about the circumstances of the daughter's death or their relationship or her age.

His wife makes a cruel comparison of the daughter to that of a chicken as a way of accusing him of not caring about her and of accepting her death as if it was a desirable outcome. It is as if she

is saying that he took her out of the house in a routine way to have her slaughtered like he would a chicken.

He responds mildly to her as if he understands her pain and does not become angry with her. Instead he uses the imagery of blindness to explain to her that he sees crying as a way of leading to blindness and because of his responsibility for the family and how he might become self-destructive and bring another tragedy to the family he chooses not to cry.

Maybe the real reason for this difficult response to a child's death is that he is trying to cope with the tragedy and crying is an emotion that would lead him to total breakdown rather than a healthy release of the pent up emotions? Is it possible that the same kind of reason is behind the silence in the reaction of Aaron to the death of his two sons Nadav and Abihu?

Clearly Rabbi Hanina and his wife have two completely different ways of handling the grief and mourning of their daughter. Even though they appear to be opposite of each other and that his wife is furious with him for the way he mourns the story tries to tell us that there is legitimacy in both ways. Thus everyone mourns in their own way and the style of one cannot be forced upon the other. Also the outward expressions of grief, whether it be crying or silence cannot adequately capture what is going on inside each of them. This story is not about how to comfort the bereaved, rather, it is about how we understand the different ways people mourn. I believe that Rabbi Hanina cannot cry because he cannot free himself from his pain. Rabbi Hanina sees crying as indicative of receiving comfort and he is not ready for comfort. That is tragic and the story is tragic because nothing seems resolved at the end. I wonder if the physical blindness motif represents the spiritual blindness of a man unable to grasp the need to grieve? Or is it a man who simply grieves differently than his wife?

The situations of Parkland kids grieving the loss of life in a murderous attack at their high school is completely different from the story from the Talmud. Yet what they share in common, even with the story of Aaron's silence in the Torah, is that we all cope in different ways to death and to trauma. Tomorrow we shall enter the time of Yizkor and the names of the beloved ones are on the page of the Yizkor book. Whether that grieving is fresh or from years ago, can we be understanding of each other's ways to cope with loss? Can we refrain from being judgmental to the others who share our loss? Can we find our own pathway to acceptance even if it never leads us to healing? Is there a way that each of us can find the support in our own way from God to face the struggles and the pain we all experience when we lose someone near and dear to us?

From the Psalmist, "I the Lord search the heart. I test the inward parts (of man's thoughts) even to give every person according to his or her ways and according to the fruit of his or her own doing." (Jeremiah 17:10)