Modern Trauma and Ancient Wisdom

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Whether on a personal level or shared by a community, how trauma is dealt with is deeply rooted in the time and culture in which it occurs. Though to this day, and most acutely on Tisha B'Av, we mark the loss of the Beit Hamikdash in our lives, can we imagine the demonstrative response Josephus describes at the destruction of the First Temple where besieged Jews "found strength once more to lament and wail" and during the loss of the second Temple, when "the continual lamentations of those who mourned were even more dreadful?"[1] How do we approach traumatic events in our era, and is there guidance from psychological findings and Jewish practices to aide in facing the challenge?

Perhaps the most critical factor in understanding trauma in our modern age is its universality. Losses and tragedies, even when specific to a community or region, are now shared by the world at large. Technology fosters such rapid transmission of trauma by live-streaming, moment by moment vivid imagery of destruction, that mental health experts and public health officials recognize the potential for its impact on those with even secondary, or distant exposure. For modern Americans, no example is more salient than the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9-11. New York, Washington, D. C. and rural Pennsylvania directly experienced the attacks, but the entire country, and perhaps the world, watched and grieved. The breadth of the trauma, and its shared impact on the psyches of bereaved relatives, first responders, New Yorkers walking dazed past the make-shift photo galleries that sprung up all over the city with posters asking after loved ones, and citizens watching the tragedy unfold on their televisions, engaged extensive public health efforts to determine how best to manage in the face of unmanageable pain.

Psychological research on trauma and mourning dates back to Freud's early writings. His distinction between mourning and melancholia[2] recognized the universal response to loss, and its normative nature, discouraging pathologizing a healthy response to an inevitable life challenge:

> *… although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and refer to it medical treatment. We rely on it being*

[1] Cornfield, Gaalya ed., *Josephus, The Jewish War* (1982).

[2] Freud, S. (1917). "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, 237-258.

overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful.

Decades later, noted psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's[3] highly popular book, *On Death and Dying*, led to prescriptions for sequenced stages of grief, although that was never her intention. More recently, grief and mourning have been subjected to neuroanatomical study with functional imaging research revealing multiple neural structures that mediate grief, including brain structures that address processing of feelings and familiar faces, memory retrieval, visual imagery and regulation of autonomic body functions.[4]

Consideration of responses to trauma has shifted somewhat, from a focus on the difficulties trauma causes, to careful study of those factors that contribute to recovery and build resilience in individuals and groups. This has yielded recommendations remarkably consistent with Jewish practices in mourning and response to trauma and tragedy. We have engaged in these practices in the weeks leading to our commemoration of the tragedy of the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, and we become, in essence, true mourners on Tisha B'Av. Core elements of accepted psychological approaches to grief and trauma are offered below, along with those elements of Jewish rituals and beliefs that, with Torah wisdom, provide for recovery and resilience.

Normalize the response

Physically, emotionally, intellectually, or in combination, mourners and victims of trauma feel out of sorts in a way that is often distressful. In cultures that deny grief and require a stiff upper lip, such feelings are doubly challenging, making the sufferer feel "abnormal." Judaism evidences, in its approach to the *levaya* and *shiva,* its endorsement of the normalcy and even urgency of expressing sadness. Rabbi Maurice Lamm, in his classic work *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning,* reviews the two purposes of the eulogy, *hesped*—or praising of the deceased, and *bechi*—expressing grief and loss.[5] The Gemara in *Berachot* (6b) expounds that "The merit of eulogy lies in the *dilevai,"* which Rashi explains as "to raise one's voice in lamentation and anguish, so that the listeners will weep."[6] These practices, in encouraging public, communal expressions of grief, communicate to mourners that as uncomfortable as their feelings are, they are completely normal.

Address basic needs, provide safety and material comforts

The Red Cross, and other relief agencies, well know that providing food, shelter, and fulfilling the primary needs of the mourner/victim is at least as important as providing psychological comfort. This is concretized in the mitzvah of neighbors providing the *seudat havra'ah,* the meal of condolence that mourners eat upon return from the burial. While this may follow from the Jerusalem Talmud's caution that "A curse will come upon the neighbors (of a mourner) if they put him in the situation of having to eat his own food"[7], the *Levush*[8] suggests it is part of the

[3] *On Death and Dying,* 1969.

[4] Gundel H, O'Connor MF, Littrell L, Fort C, Lane RD. Functional neuroanatomy of grief: an fMRI study. *Am J Psychiatry* 2003;160:1946-53.

[5] Lamm, 1969, p. 50.

[6] Talmud Bavli, *Berachot* 6b.

[7] Talmud Yerushalmi, *Mo'ed Kattan* 3:5.

process of consolation, showing the mourner that people are concerned for him. In seeing to the physical needs of victims and mourners, the bereaved are free to invest psychic energy in the grieving process, and move toward recovery.

Maintain/create social connection and sense of belonging

Tragedy and loss can foster isolation, yet spending time with people who are supportive is critical to recovery.[9] The week of *shiva* formalizes this process, with the mourner surrounded by visitors who are there to listen and comfort. Rabbi Lamm writes, "The sum effect of the visitation of many friends and relatives … is the softening of loneliness, the relief of the heavy burden of internalized despair…"[10] The custom of all mourners sitting *shiva* together in one home promotes healing, as collective trauma and a unified sense of grief can support adaptive coping. [11] Many Jewish communities go well beyond the mitzvah of providing the *seudat havra'ah,* and coordinate all meals for the family for the week of *shiva*. The flow of food, the steady comfort of visitors, and the arrival of the minyan all serve to emphasize that the mourner is connected, is part of a community.

Re-establish routine and control

Trauma and loss upset life's patterns, and erode one's sense of predictability and control. After natural or man-made disasters, government agents and mental health experts encourage a return to regular patterns of behavior as soon as possible. Judaism recognizes both the importance of time to express grief openly, and the need to return to ritual and routine. During *shiva*, when the loss is fresh, the mourner is insulated from daily routines of work, shopping and cooking. The bereaved can focus on how his or her life is forever changed. Once the week passes, although grief is far from eliminated, mourners emerge from the protective cocoon of *shiva* and return to their routine. Resuming mundane activities, though certainly challenging, actually promotes a sense of control and is recognized in trauma recovery research as active coping,[12] a process that helps achieve or re-establish a sense of control over stressful situations.

Finding purpose/meaning

There is no doubt that how individuals understand tragic events, and the meaning they assign them, impacts coping and recovery.[13] While early psychological approaches to coping eschewed spirituality, modern conceptualizations of resilience and recovery put faith at the forefront. The practice of communal recitation of Tehillim in times of trauma, as well as internet discussion boards that encourage private prayers for the ill, underscore the importance of faith in facing

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[8] *Ateret Zahav* 378:1.

[9] American Psychological Association—Recovering from Disasters. www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx

[10] Lamm, 1969, p.137.

[11] Abel, R. M. & Friedman, H. A., 2009. Israeli school and community response to war trauma: A review of selected literature. *School Psychology International,* Volume 30.

[12] Baum, N., 2005 Building resilience: A school based intervention for children exposed to ongoing trauma and stress. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, Volume 10.

[13] Abel & Friedman, 2009.

challenge. The recognition of God's agency in the world, and the celebration of Divine goodness in our lives, can be extremely curative. But Jewish concepts of purpose and meaning extend beyond *bein adam l'Makom*, to include *bein adam l'chavero*. When, in the aftermath of devastation, communities and individuals come forward to help, and organize to provide for others, they are also contributing to the healing process.

As inhabitants of the modern world, we may struggle to imagine the devastation our ancestors felt as they watched the First Temple burn. Today's traumas, no matter how distant, make their way into our homes and our knowledge, within moments, wanted or not. Traumas that happen worlds away, and are months apart, can be constantly refreshed in our minds. When I began writing this article, I thought of my drive through the neighboring town, a week after Superstorm Sandy, to teach an Azrieli Graduate School class for Long Island educators. Entire contents of homes were on the lawns on almost every block. My "students," who taught in the hardest hit areas, had asked to devote class to a discussion of how to best help traumatized students. A week later, the same class met, many of us without power, many teaching in makeshift buildings and classrooms, and many unable to move back to their homes, but we had, in one week, developed some sense that the worst danger was behind us. That sense eroded on the Friday before this class when a gunman at Sandy Hook Elementary School reminded us that tragedy can strike anywhere. In recent weeks, as we perhaps proceeded to heal and recover, we were riveted to the Boston Marathon finish line, where once again, terror, tragedy and trauma entered our lives. The seemingly constant cycle of tragedies, and the feeling that we share in even geographically distant trauma, contributes to the illusion that the world is more dangerous, more terrible, than ever. Extensive media coverage can certainly escalate our sense of danger and increase traumatization,[14] but connecting us to the trauma and loss of our neighbors, brothers in Israel and around the world, can also engage us in acts of *chesed* and community building. Modern realities may make us party to more trauma, but in allowing us to be party to more compassionate connection to those in need, they may contribute to our resilience. As Jews in the modern era, we do well to harness the wisdom and power of ancient approaches to trauma. Listening to Eichah and *Kinot*, feeling the ancient losses, even in the context of our modern challenges, we will become mourners. We will resonate with the pain of the *payetanim* who authored the haunting verses and remember what we have lost. Modern psychologists would acknowledge the importance of this expression of grief. The loss of the Beit Hamikdash stays with us always, in our liturgy, our rituals, and our thoughts, just as most loss leaves permanent marks. But Jewish tradition makes certain that we recognize that our health and our redemption comes in looking and moving forward. Tisha B'Av is closely followed by the fifteenth of Av, a celebration that parallels the festival of the Lord referenced in *Sefer Shofetim* (21:19), and considered a preface to Elul,[15] a time for review of one's actions. We confront trauma today assisted by these rich traditions and understandings, knowing that we can, should, and must look both backwards and forwards. In this way, we weave into our lives both sadness at what we have lost and hope for what will, with God's help, be forthcoming.

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[14] Hravouri, H. Suomalainen, L. Berg, N., Kiviruusu, O., & Marttunen, M., 2011. Effects of media exposure on adolescents traumatized in a school shooting. *Journal of Traumatic Stress,* Volume 24, 70-77.

[15] See *Bnei Yissachar, Ma'amarei Chodshei Tamuz* and *Av* no. 4.