

Living with the Blessing of Memory

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What was the greatest calamity in Jewish history? For you and me, the Holocaust is the obvious answer, without parallel. However, in Orthodox Judaism, the answer is different: The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple—not once, but twice. Those events, and the circumstances surrounding them, give rise to days of fasting, weeks of mourning, and prayers for messianic redemption.

From its inception, Reform Judaism turned away from the Jerusalem Temple, editing prayers mourning its destruction, ignoring ceremonies commemorating its loss, and certainly not seeking its reestablishment. To the contrary, early Reform Jews viewed the destruction of the Second Temple as a blessing, setting the stage for a diaspora in which Jews could bring our message of God's oneness to all the world. I would never have imagined that they got that idea from our sages of old.

I was surprised, then, when Dr. David Zvi Kalman, shared a passage from the Talmud, in which Rabbi Oshaya says: “God performed a righteous act when God dispersed Israel among the nations.”ⁱ Dr. Kalman’s goal in teaching the text was not to take a position on whether the destruction of the Temple was a blessing or a calamity. Certainly, every Talmudic sage thought the Temple’s demolition to be a disaster—as should we: Countless lives were lost, as was a way of life that our ancestors had cherished for centuries, and the suffering continued for millennia.

Instead, Dr. Kalman’s point was that, having grieved our losses, as we should, we must all find ways to go on living. If we wish to pursue a future for ourselves and our families, we must find blessing in the wake of even our most devastating bereavements.

At this hour, on the holiest day of the year, we have gathered to grieve. Tears fill our eyes. We miss the people who once graced our lives. We are acutely aware of their absence. Even after a death we call “a blessing,” by which we mean that we are grateful that their suffering came to an end, we are bereft. I cannot count the number of times a congregant has said to me, “I thought I was ready. I knew death was coming. But the reality is much harder than I expected.”

And then, time passes. We do not stop missing our deceased loved ones. And yet, as the years progress, their memories are more apt to bring a smile to our lips than a tear to our eyes.

We recall a loved one’s unparalleled leadership and generosity, enhancing our family name and making us proud to be part of their legacy.

We surprise ourselves by laughing as we share an endearing story, perhaps even about a person with whom our relationship was complicated.

We impart a piece of wisdom taken from the treasure-trove of insight once bestowed upon us by a departed loved one.

We realize that our capacity to love unconditionally is a gift that did not die with the end of the life of one who enveloped us in loving embrace.

We marvel at the unexpected ways that a child, named in memory of our beloved, reflects that life in their own personality or mannerisms.

God has indeed blessed our lives with the people we grieve today. Even as we grieve, and we do, let us give thanks: Neither their wisdom nor their generosity, nor their uniqueness died with them; and above all, their love remains alive. In the wake of their death, God empowered us to live with the blessing of memory. “For they are now a part of us, as we remember them.”ⁱⁱ

Amen.

ⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 87b. Text taught by David Zvi Kalman, “Climate Change in Jewish Thought: What to Do Once It’s Too Late,” Virtual Summer Symposium, The Shalom Hartman Institute, July 7, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Sylvan Kamens and Rabbi Jack Riemer, “We Remember Them.”