

How a Missing Piece Can Make us Whole

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In the early 90's, when I had much less gray hair, I was a congregational rabbi in Herndon, VA, just outside DC. Every year before the High Holy days, the Washington Board of Rabbis would invite an acclaimed sermonizer to share their pearls of wisdom. When the living legend, Harold Kushner, came into the room you could hear a pin drop, as we were all waiting for him to share his painfully accumulated wisdom since the death of his son. Instead he retold the famous 1976 book by Shel Silverstein, called *The Missing Piece*, about an incomplete circle's journey to find its missing wedge, only to realize that sometimes having a "missing piece" is an essential element of being whole.

Today, I want to offer you some of my thoughts on how different people respond to tragedy and death.

When I was almost 4, and my brother, Steven was 1 and ½, our younger sister, Amy, lost her life to Cystic Fibrosis, at only 4.5 months old. As you might imagine, the loss was devastating for my parents (and for Steven and I), and forever changed their outlook on life. My mother felt shunned by her peers for whom all of this was just too close for comfort, my father almost lost his job, and they had two young children who needed them. And perhaps, most painful of all, my parents wanted more children, but now

had a 25% chance of having another sick child. I wish I knew more about what my parents went through during those next 7 years..(pause)

When I was 10, my parents called the house and told me to hurry up and get my younger brother from his friend Mark's house because they were on their way home with their newly adopted 4 day old baby, my beloved sister, Ellyn.

Harold Kushner's remaining children never replaced their son who died of progeria. His awards, accolades, books and fame never filled the void, and he always had a missing piece. But he continued to live, produce, and love. Ellyn never replaced Amy, but my parents went on to live happy, productive and meaningful lives. My mother, Roz Ebstein, of blessed memory, eventually grew into Jewish Chicago's legendary music teacher and children's choir director...she helped me, and perhaps some of you, to enjoy and express their Jewish souls. Like most parents who lose a child, she never got over the loss, but she didn't give up.

When tragedy strikes, it can feel like an all consuming fire. This is exactly the conclusion that Abram comes to in one of my favorite midrashim, or legends that the Rabbis wrote to fill in the gaps of their understanding of an event in the Torah. In Genesis 12: verse 1 God said to Abram, "Go forth from your land" ([Gen. 12:1](#)), [some of you might recognize this as Lech Lecha, may'artz'cha etc ...](#)

God tells Abraham to leave his country, his homeland and his Father's home to a place that God will show him. Why?

First of all, his father just died, so now he is free to move on, but mainly because Abram has demonstrated that he believes in the one God, and God wishes to elevate Abram's status to the Father of Judaism. But because he is surrounded by a deeply entrenched pagan and idolatrous culture, he needs to have a radical separation from his familiar societal and familial roots.

So, the Midrash reads: The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land" . R. Isaac said: "To what may this be compared?" To a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace full of light, using the Hebrew word "doleket" which means burning. Maybe some of you recognize the word doleket as sounding similar to "**lhadlik ner**" in the Shabbat or Chanukah candle blessings.

To understand what prompted this "out of the blue imagery" of a burning palace, we have to look at the historical context of the rabbis who wrote this Midrash called (Bereshit Rabbah) and the philosophical questions that the Torah leaves unanswered.

First, the Historical Context: The Midrash was compiled in the Land of Israel around the 4th and 5th centuries, CE, the Common Era. During this era, the Jewish people were living under the heavy, often brutal hand of Roman and Byzantine rule. These rabbis were also living in the long shadow of the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. They witnessed the crushing of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE, the execution of great scholars (like Rabbi Akiva), and ongoing religious restrictions.

It is no wonder that they wrote a Midrash about a beautiful, civilized palace being burned to the ground by human cruelty. The rabbis specifically chose the image of a palace in flames (birah doleket) because they were grappling with a profound, real-world theological problem: the existence of evil, also known as Theodicy...when righteous people suffer for no apparent reason.

OK, back to the text of the Midrash: The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land" R. Isaac said: "To what may this be compared?" To a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace full of light. Abram saw a palace in flames. He witnessed destruction, murder and wanton killing.....he saw the world full of evil.

The Midrash continues: Abram asks, "Is it possible that this palace has no one who looks after it?" The owner of the palace looked out at him and said, "I am the owner of the palace." **Similarly**, because Abram our father wondered, "Is it possible that the WORLD has no one who looks after it?" the Blessed Holy One looked at him and said, "I am the owner of the **world**."

According to this story, Abram intuites a divine creator from the fact that the universe is "lit up." Abram is filled with awe and wonder, and as R. Shai Held, Dean of the Hadar Institute, suggests, "perhaps even sensing a pervasive meaningfulness in the cosmos." In his magnificent book, ***God in Search of Man***, Abraham Joshua Heschel reads this story and posits that religion BEGINS with "what man

does with his ultimate wonder, with the moments of awe, with the sense of mystery.”

However, this interpretation, that the palace/the world is ablaze with light, wonder and radical amazement, belies the actual Hebrew. If the midrash actually meant that the world is illuminated with light, it would not have used the word **doleket** (burning), it would have used the word **mueret** (lit up) from the word Or/light.

So, what IS the correct reading? Is it a burning building? Or an illuminated one? And which of these leads us to an awareness of God? Could it be that it is different for different people?

Rabbi Shai Held pushes the envelope even further, asking how does Abram seeing the palace on fire, then make the leap to the fact that there is an owner of the palace, the world, and it is God? What leads Abram to belief in God? In his moment of bewilderment and consternation, the midrash provides an answer to Abram, God is the owner, God is behind all of this.

Rabbi Held suggests that Abram's search for the palace owner does not arise from contemplation or wonder, but **RATHER It is more like an exclamation of horror**: "Is this really what the world is like?!" As soon as he asks that question, God appears to him and says—perhaps reassuringly, perhaps just matter-of-factly—"I am the owner of the world." Abram's doubt and agitation forces God to reveal himself...

There is one more thing to mention about Abram's search for the owner. While we do not know really why God chose specifically Abram to be his messenger, there are those that suggest that it is precisely BECAUSE of his refusal to look away from the flames. Like Moses, he feels the pain and suffering of the world. But there is more.

Not only does Abram refuse to turn away, he cares enough to ask: "Is it possible that this world has no one who looks after it?!" Whatever faith this Abram finds, it will not be easy: it will be the faith of a man who has considered the very real possibility that chaos and bloodshed are simply all there is."

Perhaps the takeaway from all of this is that some of us ask existential questions in moments of wonder and joy, while others pose the same ultimate questions in moments of horror and despair. And that there are rewards for those who do not run away from the fire.

Some people emerge from the flames scorched and scarred, but stronger.

Many years ago, I officiated at my cousin Michael's wedding to the love of his life, Margie. In due time their first child was born with CP, and they loved him fiercely, creating a world where Jonah could succeed. You all know parents like this, who rechannel all their efforts into their special child, becoming superhuman.(Pause) Just before Margie gave

birth to their second child, she had a pulmonary embolism, and tragically died, along with the baby. (Pause)

Brokenhearted and devastated, Michael was left to raise Jonah alone, which he did valiantly, trying to guess what Margie would have done at any given moment. Somehow, Michael was able to create a life of meaning, and eventually married a very special woman; they had two daughters together, and have a beautiful family and a full, meaningful life.

Last week on RH, we observed the 25th anniversary of 9/11. So much fire, but also so much light.

Howard Lutnick, the CEO of the firm Cantor Fitzgerald, miraculously survived the attacks because he was dropping his son off at kindergarten, but his brother Gary and 658 of his employees were killed. Just three days later on September 14, 2001, Howard and his sister Edie co-founded the Cantor Fitzgerald Relief Fund. They pledged 25% of the company's profits for five years and 10 years of healthcare coverage to the families of the victims. Over the years, Edie expanded the scope of the foundation, distributing over \$180 million to victims of terrorism, natural disasters, and military trauma worldwide.

And then there is Mark Barden and Nicole Hockley, the Parents of Daniel Barden and Dylan Hockley from Sandy Hook Elementary. Turning their tragedy into massive systemic change, these parents co-founded Sandy Hook Promise. They chose not to focus on the political polarization of gun control, but on widespread behavioral

intervention. Their evidence-based "Know the Signs" and "Say Something" programs have been implemented in thousands of schools nationwide. The foundation operates a 24/7 anonymous crisis hotline that has successfully intercepted and averted dozens of planned school shootings and thousands of suicides.

How do these people pick themselves up and perform these herculean tasks? Amazing!!

Closer to home, are the young war widows in the Israeli modern Orthodox community that has lost proportionally the largest amount of soldiers since October 7. These women, having lost the loves of their lives, are moving on, finding new love, and getting remarried. It takes our breath away, bringing each of us to tears as we read the headlines and see the clips of the weddings.

But what about the people who are never really able to move forward and are swallowed up by their grief? Sadly, not everyone escapes the flames with only burn scars. Families whose lives as they know it stop dead in their places after a tragic loss. Marriages that unravel, siblings who feel they are missing a limb. We have all seen this to varying degrees among our friends and relatives. Frankly, not everybody is able to build a park, establish an annual marathon, etc.

Jennifer Syme, who was Keanu Reeve's partner, gave birth to a baby who was stillborn. Two years later, Jennifer was

killed in a traffic accident. Reeves has been intensely private but highly candid about the permanence of his sorrow, once stating in a 2006 interview that grief never ends but simply changes shape.

One of the most renowned opera singers of the 20th century, Maria Callas, was utterly devastated when her long-time lover, Aristotle Onassis, left her in 1968 to marry Jacqueline Kennedy. After he died in 1975, Callas spent her final years isolated in her Paris apartment, losing her voice and retreating entirely from the world until her own death in 1977.

Finally, Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens): Among the most famous humorous authors of all time, his later years were completely stripped of their comedy by the deaths of his daughter, Susy, in 1896, his wife, Olivia, in 1904, and his youngest daughter, Jean, in 1909. The compounding losses over 13 years turned his writing deeply dark, bitter, and cynical until his death in 1910.

Grief comes in many ways and we as a community need to make room for all different types of responses to grief. As a Rabbi, I am proud to share with you that our Judaism has wisely understood this from the get-go. We are commanded to look after the widow and the orphan about 30 times in the Torah. Our tradition understood even then that the bereaved need extra care and that not everyone is Harold Kushner who was able to find a way to roll along, albeit a bit unevenly.

In conclusion, I want to share with you that at times, I look at the world and all I see is fire. The pain and destruction causes me to look for my God who hears my prayers, feels my pain, and weeps when I weep. When I ask God why me, God says....everyone has a missing piece. I am left with the challenge to find my way forward. But at times the world is filled with a penetrating, warm and bright light that banishes the darkness, that makes it easier for me to believe and trust in God. I find that if I embrace my God, my God embraces me. And then, the palace is not burning up, but rather, bathed in a healing light.

Let us all pray that in 5787 the lives of everyone we love are lit up with the luminescence of God's palace. I pray also that we will find room in our hearts to comfort our friends and family whose lives are burning. Let us be there for them, in ways that are meaningful to them, even if it means nothing more than sitting together quietly.

May you and everyone you love be inscribed well in the Book of Life for yet another year. Gmar Chatima Tova.

