



Torah Reflections on *Parshat Devarim* and *Shabbat Hazon*

Deuteronomy 1:1 – 3:22

8 Av 5768

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I recently had the honor of serving as a chaplain to Maggie in the last weeks of her life. In those long, painful days in the hospital Maggie was constantly surrounded by her three childhood best friends. I was impressed by their bond and one day I asked what kept them so connected. “Well,” sighed one of her friends, “we are so close now because she broke our hearts many years ago.”

I was stunned by this unusual answer. It turns out the friends had been inseparable since grade school. In their last year of high school Maggie had become pregnant and shortly thereafter suffered a painful miscarriage. Paralyzed by shame and sadness Maggie was unable to share her grief with her friends, or even tell them about the pregnancy. Instead she withdrew completely. Months past and Maggie refused to speak to them. The friends were deeply hurt. However, they refused to let her go. They kept calling and they kept demanding a relationship. Slowly Maggie began to share her pain with them and they rebuilt their shattered friendship.

“There is nothing as whole as a broken heart,” said the Kotsker Rebbe. It was healing the brokenness in their relationship that made the friends so close. And it was clinging to the heart-break within Maggie and insisting on sharing in her pain that allowed them to build a relationship that was so whole and strong it could last a lifetime and sustain Maggie in the last days of her life. This is *teshuva*, repentance or the return to wholeness.

This week we begin reading the Book of Deuteronomy. This Shabbat is traditionally known as *Shabbat Hazon*, literally the Sabbath of Vision. It is the Shabbat that falls directly before *Tisha b’Av*, the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av, the primary day of communal Jewish mourning. *Tisha b’Av* marks some of the most profound moments of loss in Jewish history such as the destruction the Temple in ancient Jerusalem and the subsequent violent displacement of our people.

It would be tempting to try to forget all the pain and grief that *Tisha b’Av* marks and obscure the moments of painful shattering within our Jewish past, just as Maggie as a young woman was drawn to hide her individual brokenness. However, when we create holy spaces where we can share our grief there is the possibility of healing. *Tisha b’Av* is followed by seven weeks of special Haftarah readings known as weeks of *nehemta*, comfort, when we draw closer to each other and to God to comfort one another. These weeks of comfort lead directly to the High Holidays when we draw nearer to one another through *teshuva* and repair our loving connections.

We live in a world where we are frequently told to keep our suffering hidden – mental and physical illnesses are still often surrounded by stigma; deaths are regularly only discussed in euphemisms and whispers. Jewish tradition speaks in a different voice. Marking and naming communal grief every year on *Tisha b’Av* as publicly as possible and embedding its observance within the Jewish calendar opens the possibility for

collective comfort and healing. The healing of the High Holidays is most possible, if we first mark the breaking of our hearts in grief on Tisha b'Av. Likewise, when we create space and time in our holiest times and places for our own grief and the suffering of our loved ones, we make individual healing possible.

The Torah itself refuses to shy away from stories of loss and human fragility. This week's parasha opens with the verse: "v'eileh ha'davarim asher diber Moshe el kol Yisrael." (Deut 1:1), these are the words that Moses spoke to the entire people of Israel. It is the beginning of Moses telling the narrative of their wanderings, the story of all the moments of heart-break in leaving Egypt, the deaths of his siblings, the illnesses that struck his people and his own moments of vulnerability. Moses offers these words on the lip of the Promised Land that he will never enter.

In Hebrew the word *devarim*, means both words and things. Our words, our stories, are tangible in Judaism. Moses offers his words, words of Torah, as a legacy, a concrete way to accompany the people in his absence and to comfort each of us as we continue on our own twisting journeys.

This week as we mark Shabbat Hazon, the Sabbath of Vision, may we turn our eyes without flinching towards our loved ones, members of our communities and the parts of ourselves that are struggling with the brokenness of grief, illness and loss. And may we offer each other *devarim*, words that tell the stories of our pain and sanctify our losses, so that our love might bring one another *refuah sheleimah*, a complete healing and the true wholeness of a broken heart.

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