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“Poets of Mourning”

One month ago, the accomplished American poet, Edward Hirsch, gave an interview on NPR about his newly published, seventy-eight-page elegy entitled, “Gabriel: A Poem.” Gabriel was Hirsch’s son, who had died tragically and unexpectedly in 2011 at the age of twenty-two. For the past three years, the poet has been trying somehow to regain his balance – to mourn his immeasurable loss while searching for some small sense of healing that could enable the next chapters of his own life to unfold.

At first, balance was impossible. There was room only for grief. “I tried to go back to work after a while,” Hirsch said, “and I couldn't really function... after four months, I still was overwhelmed by grief. I felt that a tsunami had hit me, and I had to try to stand up.”

So even while there remained no room to heal, Hirsch forced himself onto his feet – in the way that a poet does. He began to record the images of his beloved son, emblazoned in his memory, with words of poetry:

Like a spear hurdling through darkness
He was always in such a hurry
To find a target to stop him

Like a young lion trying out its roar
At the far edge of the den
The roar inside him was even louder

Like a bolt of lightning in the fog
Like a bolt of lightning over the sea
Like a bolt of lightning in our backyard

Like the time I opened the furnace
In the factory at night
And the flames came blasting out

I was unprepared for the intensity
Of the heat escaping
As if I'd unsheathed the sun

My guess is that none of us ever met Edward Hirsch's son during his far-too-short lifetime – but we have now. And we can feel the intensity of his heat blasting out of the backyard. And incredibly, we know something more of him than just what the words themselves can actually convey. His essence... his spirit... can almost be touched.

Hirsch found that this was what enabled him to begin to balance mourning with healing. He surrendered the oversimplified yearning – that healing could somehow replace mourning – once he knew that he was sustaining something more of Gabriel than just what words could describe. His essence remained. And the grieving father was responsible for it. He had a job to do. And so healing could coexist with grief. He could heal and miss at the same time.

This is exactly what our Jewish tradition teaches us to do. The ancient custom of *k'riah*, the tearing of our garment when a loved one dies, embodies the balancing of mourning and healing – for as you've likely seen or done, the custom is to tear into the ribbon or the article of clothing, not to tear any piece of it entirely off. After the tearing, all of the material is still there. It's just torn... imperfect... ruptured. But the rabbis of the Talmud taught that we are permitted to repair a garment we rend in a time of mourning. The only limitation? We're not permitted to sew it together in a way that makes it look as though there was never a tear in the first place. The evidence of the rupture has to remain – and yet the garment can be made whole.

And so here we are – we, with our torn souls, here at Yizkor, seeking to stitch ourselves together again, even while the evidence of the rupture remains. My friend and colleague, Rabbi David Stern, who shared this notion with me, teaches that we all do it much the way Edward Hirsch did, whether we are professional poets or not. In telling the stories and sustaining their essence – in using mere words and moments and images to make their spirits almost touchable again... and not just for ourselves, but for others – we are, all of us, poets of mourning. We use the technique known as synecdoche – it's a type of metaphor in which we use a part of something to represent the whole. "Hired hands" have whole bodies, not just hands. When Mark Antony says, "Lend me your ears," he's asking the men of Rome for their full attention, not just to hear him. And, says Rabbi Stern, "when we say we remember (our departed loved ones') eyes, we don't just mean their eyes – we mean the spirit that animated them, the joy that danced in them. And when we say we remember the sound of their footsteps in the hall, we don't just mean the rhythm of their gait – we mean the comfort of their presence, the strength in their companionship. And when we say we remember their seder table, we don't just mean the table – we mean every story and every great-aunt and every matzah ball. It's sacred synecdoche – the part for the whole – the visible, tangible dimensions of the souls that continue to bless our lives." And when we rediscover their ever-present spirits, almost touchable, we begin to stand up again after the tsunami. We learn to heal and miss at the same time.

Of course, we know that makes it sound easier than it is. Hirsch's new book includes a description of the road back from loss that I think most of us can recognize quite well. He wrote: "I did not know the work of mourning is like carrying a bag of cement up a mountain at night. The mountaintop is not in sight, because there is no mountaintop... I did not know the work of mourning is a laborer in the dark we carry inside ourselves. Though sometimes when I sleep, I'm with him again, and then I wake... Look closely and you will see almost everyone carrying bags of cement on their shoulders. That's why it takes courage to get out of bed in the morning and climb into the day."

We are here to look closely, to see that we are not alone in this sanctuary full of people carrying bags of cement on their shoulders. And yes, even powering ourselves through this hour of Yizkor requires a courage that is difficult to muster. But here we are. We have climbed into the day. And we will climb into tomorrow, we poets of mourning, giving new life to their legacies... healing and missing, healing and missing, all at the same time.

Eit likroa v'eit litpor – there is a time for tearing, and a time for sewing back together. This is what Ecclesiastes taught. And so do we teach it with our lives. For while the ruptures that brought us here today can never fully disappear, our torn souls can be mended. Restored as before? Never. But mended? Yes. For we are responsible for them. We have a job to do. Let us forever bring their spirits close, almost touchable, as we force ourselves to our feet and carry them with us into the next chapters of our lives.