



LeoBaeckTemple

Senior Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“Four, Three, Two... One”

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One... two... three... four. This is how we've been conditioned to mourn in the Jewish year now ended, the Jewish year of the coronavirus.

One was on February 29th. It was reported that an American had died from COVID-19... the first American victim of the virus, or so we thought at the time, at least. That news – of a single death, the first – got all of our attention. Surely you recall the report coming out of Seattle... wondering about the safety of your family or friends in Washington state... praying that this was just a Seattle problem. Do you remember?

One... two... three... four. The second American death was reported the next day, March 1st. Soon, we would learn that two earlier deaths in February were also attributed to the virus in northern California. And then we started the count. And each death instantly became much less memorable. By March 4th, there were more than a hundred COVID-19 cases in fourteen U.S. states. Our fear exploded around the question of whether there would be one, anywhere adjacent to us – at our place of work, at our child's school, within our temple community.

Very soon, hundreds were dead. And then thousands. And then tens of thousands. And now hundreds of thousands... 200,000. Nearly double the number of Americans who died in World War I. Nearly four times the number of Americans that died in Vietnam.

One... two... three... four. The more we counted, the less we felt. It's a phenomenon the social scientists call “psychic numbing.” We are more able to feel the agony of a single death than a million... than even six million. And we are much more likely to take action to save a single person than to save a million, as we are seeing very clearly in the behavior of our countrymen and women right now.

Take the death toll down to one – a particular one – and the pain, the commitment, the responsibility becomes inescapable.

Beth Salamensky, a 43-year-old attorney, moved from Chicago to LA and joined Beth Chayim Chadashim, our local LGBTQ synagogue. She usually sat at the back and kept mostly to herself, but she was a regular for almost a decade, until she moved back to Chicago when financial difficulties led her to return to her childhood home. Her mom got sick with dementia, the state sold the house to pay for her medical care, and Beth ended up living in her car. Yet her mom outlived her, because Beth died of COVID-19 on April 17th, and her family didn't even learn of her death until months later, as she hadn't told them she was sick, and she arrived at the hospital without a phone or ID.

Sharon Williams was a brave soul – a Black woman who served as an administrator for the New Orleans Police Department, in the district including the Lower Ninth Ward, the mostly Black neighborhood you likely remember being pummeled by Hurricane Katrina. There, she ran into countless troubled young women, many of whom were homeless. What did she do? She “adopted” them, literally inviting them to her kids’ birthday parties, her parents’ anniversary celebrations. “Be careful how you treat people,” she would tell her sister Jashawn, “because you could be entertaining an angel.” She was an angel, snuffed out by COVID-19 at the age of 54.

When James Powers was laid off from his job selling medical supplies, he went to work at a beloved Black-owned art gallery in Brooklyn – and not long after, he found a way to open a gallery of his own much like it. In the 80s and 90s, it became the place to be in Brooklyn, as he featured works of emerging Black artists. Even after the gallery closed, he continued to present bold new works at other galleries. But by the time he died of COVID-19 at the age of 80, he had sold most of his collection in order to pay for his health care.

Three singular stories. And there are more than 200,000 more like them, just in the U.S. alone. Nearly a million all over the world. But the tragedy doesn't own your heart until you're swimming inside the living story of just one.

Why is it this way? The renowned Jewish novelist, Jonathan Safran Foer, the grandson of Polish Holocaust survivors, once wrote that “Jews have six senses – touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing and memory... for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather’s fingers fell asleep while stroking his great-grandmother’s damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knifepoint to be sure that Isaac would feel no pain – that the Jew is able to know why it hurts. When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: ‘What does it remember like?’”

You are here at Yizkor because you’ve encountered a pin. A single pin – perhaps even several single pins. Perhaps the pin that brought you here was a loved one’s death during these past six months, such that you couldn’t even grieve in the company of family and cherished friends. Maybe you couldn’t even attend your own loved one’s funeral in person. Perhaps the pin you encountered was less recent, but no less capable of wounding, forever memorably. Maybe this crazy year drew new blood from a pinprick suffered long ago. Perhaps somebody you are here remembering was the one who would have known how to calm you during this disorienting time. Or maybe he would have quarantined with you, making these days less lonely. Perhaps her gift of optimism would be helping you rediscover your own, or her generosity might have enabled you to feel less deprived. All you know is that whenever another moment draws blood again – the blood of losing them or missing them or longing for them – your sixth sense of memory begins to rattle. You sometimes even wish you couldn’t feel what it remembers like. But you will never forget.

This is why 200,000 deaths are not changing us as they should, but one – your one, each of your ones, replete with its blood, the shape of its scar, the recollections of every time you caught the scab on something sharp and reopened it – one changes us. Forever.

It hurts, that prick of the pin. But oh, we would let nothing separate us from the power of how it remembers. For that is how the story – and all the ways it... they... lifted us, changed us, enriched us with love unsundered – that is how the story remains, how they remain. We

would love to stop the bleeding, but not if we had to dull our Jewish sixth sense of memory, which keeps them present, alive, in us.

Four... three... two... one. Just one. Each one. They are here, walking with us through every new drawing of blood, every new prick of the pin, reminding us how it remembers, so we will not be left alone, without them. Miss them, yes. Relinquish them, impossible. As our stomachs are rumbling, our memories are rattling. Let us all be with that one.