



LeoBaeckTemple

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“Bouncing Forward: Naomi, Orpah and Ruth... and You”

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A plague strikes without warning. Communities are broken apart as people seek safety. Close families are separated from one another. Whole workforces lose their jobs. Everything that had seemed secure and solid is suddenly thrown into question. And death. So much death.

I speak, of course, of a story that took place some 3000 years ago in the biblical book of Ruth. It tells of Ruth and Orpah, two Moabite sisters who marry brothers from Judea named Mahlon and Chilion. In the story, the brothers, along with their parents, Naomi and Elimelech, leave their home in Bethlehem, fleeing a terrible famine. They move fifty miles east to Moab, seeking greener pastures for their flocks. Sadly, though, shortly after their arrival, having experienced the trauma of leaving behind their ancestral home and everything they knew, Elimelech suddenly dies.

His sons, Machlon and Chilion, eventually marry those two local sisters from Moab, Ruth and Orpah, but then just a few years after that, both Machlon and Chilion die as well. So suddenly, in a patriarchal society where marriage is the only security a woman can rely on, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are all left as widows.

The book of Ruth only tells the story of one family fleeing the famine in the land of Canaan; no doubt there were hundreds of stories, though – thousands even – of loss and death and traumas beyond imagination. To study the book of Ruth is to wonder: How did they experience that trauma, and what did society look like on the other side, after the plague had ended? What did their lives look like after all they had been through?

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I speak, of course, of the trauma that the entire human race has been enduring for these last eighteen months – a trauma still taking new shapes and bringing new losses, even as we welcome the arrival of this new year. We have, individually and

collectively, been through so much in this last year and a half. We've all suffered a collective trauma that won't just disappear, even when our masks finally come off for good. Depression, anxiety, substance abuse and even suicide are up dramatically. Our first responders have experienced unthinkable layers of additional trauma; our essential workers, the ones who never stopped making our lives as secure and safe and as educated and well-fed as possible, are burned out. How will we respond in this time, individually and collectively? How will things look for us as we emerge from this crisis? How will we face the future?

Let us look back 3000 years – to Naomi, Orpah and Ruth – and witness a range of ways that human beings respond to trauma... and see a choice we might make about how to face our future.

Back in Moab, three wounded women, living the post-traumatic stress that thousands of people were no doubt going through at the time, each responded in their own distinct way.

Naomi, devastated by the loss of her husband and two sons, heads back to her native home in Bethlehem, which she surely wishes she had never left. The famine had cost her everything. So it is no surprise that she chooses to spend her final years grieving and perhaps, we pray, healing at home.

And who among us wouldn't want to just go home after such heartbreak? After all, when I first finally stepped onto a plane this past May, it was to return to my childhood home on the north shore of Chicago, where a young cousin of mine was celebrating becoming a Bat Mitzvah. Even with the unprecedented hardship of the pandemic, I hadn't lived through even a hint of the kind of ordeal that had stricken Naomi, but still I wasn't itching to fly for business or for a vacation. That first magnetic draw to re-enter the world was to go home. I needed to feel the love of those in whose lives my life has been rooted from the very start.

When Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem, she asks everyone to call her Marah – bitterness – instead of Naomi, which means pleasantness. And that's the last we know of her story. Given the near impossibility of the task before her – to carry on somehow in the aftermath of losing her entire family – not a one of us would question why she sees her very identity as bitterness.

Orpah, for her part, also chooses to go home... that's Moab for her. She seeks the comfort of the familiar, the safety of her own family and friends, the gods she had grown up with – for she, too, has to begin again following the loss of her young husband. Again, it's a choice that practically any one of us in her shoes would likely have made. But beyond her decision to start over where she had started before, we know nothing of the adventure that follows in Orpah's life. She still had so much living to do, even as a young widow – so much of her life ahead of her. We are left

to hope that returning to her roots enabled her to regain her balance, recover from her heartbreak, and resume her life with some modicum of peace.

So that leaves Ruth – the woman for whom the book is named... one of only two books out of the Hebrew Bible's thirty-nine, in fact, that is named for a woman. What becomes of Ruth?

Well, we know that Naomi, after the death of her two sons, encourages both of their widows, sisters Orpah and Ruth, to go home to Moab, to their family. But only Orpah follows her mother-in-law's urgings. Ruth, on the other hand, stays with Naomi, following her back to Bethlehem.

In one of the most memorable passages in the entire Hebrew bible, Ruth says to her grief-stricken mother-in-law, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."

Looking through the lens of the collective human trauma that we've all been through in the last year and a half, I read Ruth's words with new appreciation and inspiration. For in the face of unimaginable loss and uncertainty about what the future holds, Ruth dives deeper into relationship with her mother-in-law; she finds new strength through the experience of loss; she sees new possibilities in her future, and she undergoes a spiritual transformation. It is as if she gains a new appreciation of life even in the aftermath of loss and devastation – perhaps even because of it. Frankly, I don't know how she does it. And like so many others who have read the book of Ruth, I wonder – could I do what Ruth does? Could we?

It's a question we'll all have to answer in this new Jewish year 5782. This is why I've found myself reading an awful lot this past year about communal responses to trauma. Numerous psychologists have studied the ongoing life stories of people who have endured all kinds of trauma. What I've learned can be summarized as three basic human responses to the kind of experience we've been through in this last year and a half.

Some survivors of trauma struggle mightily and persistently: they develop what has come to be known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They face debilitating depression and anxiety. They have difficulty functioning. They descend, through no desire of their own, into the bitterness brought on by their trauma, as the biblical Naomi did, following her multiple bereavements.

Others experience what we might call resilience. They bounce back to the way they were before the trauma. This seems to be Orpah's hope in heading back home

to Moab – to her memories of her life before she had ever gotten married and widowed.

But the scientists describe a third possibility – another option beyond getting lost in the trauma and bouncing back from it. It appears that some people figure out how to bounce forward. Multiple studies show that more than half the people who experience a traumatic event report at least one positive change, compared to less than fifteen percent who develop PTSD. Two scientists in particular, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, coined a term to describe this phenomenon – they call it post-traumatic growth.

Of course, the notion that suffering and distress can potentially yield positive change is thousands of years old. Teachings from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bahai, Hinduism, Buddhism and other faiths speak to the transformative potential in suffering, as do the writings of novelists, dramatists and poets. But what Tedeschi, Calhoun, and others have noticed is that, during and after the most trying of times, some of us see growth in ourselves that we didn't expect. Some experience a change in priorities, or an intensifying of faith... an untapping of strength, or a developing of new capacities and interests. Sometimes, it is a trauma that unleashes our willingness to change those things we have long realized need changing. We discover a new closeness with others, a new compassion, a new readiness to accept help and support.

In short, scientists are now coming to codify what Ruth modeled 3000 years ago. She's the Bible's exemplar of post-traumatic growth. In and through these challenging times, have you experienced growth you didn't expect? Are you ready to pursue that kind of growth now?

I want to be clear about something. Every single one of us has experienced the uprooting brought by this pandemic differently – which means there are no "shoulds" or "shouldn'ts" when it comes to having survived it thus far. You're here, propelling yourself into this new year, bravely asking the questions that this Yom Kippur day places before you, after a year and a half like nothing you could ever have imagined. So you have no business feeling like you have to compare yourself to Ruth or to anyone. Yes, she provides some blessed inspiration on a day we count upon to inspire us – but the only standard by which our tradition calls us to be judged is ourselves. You are where you are with this – and perhaps you're closer to Naomi than to Ruth at the moment. After all, nobody chooses to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. This holy day is not for envying someone else's place of departure; it's for naming your own, with unstinting honesty, and for courageously setting a course for bouncing forward.

So wherever and however you find yourself this morning along the spectrum of suffering, resilience and growth – from Naomi to Orpah to Ruth... to you – you're

in exactly the right place. And maybe, just maybe, your commitment to this Yom Kippur day – this enterprise of staring at our souls and telling the truth about what we see – might just surprise you by catalyzing real growth.

It will not be easy. After all, how does a person seek post-traumatic growth when the trauma is still going on? We know we are never fully and completely “post-trauma” in our lives. When Ruth makes her choice to stay with Naomi in the land of Judah instead of returning home to Moab, she surely hopes that her days of trauma have ended with the death of her husband. But she is heading to a foreign land, with a language and religion and culture she doesn’t know – and she and Naomi arrive in dire poverty, exacerbating the powerlessness and disadvantage that came simply with being women in the Ancient Near East. In short, she was both post-trauma and mid-trauma... just as we are in this pandemic.

In one strange way, our predicament a year ago was actually simpler than our current one. That is to say, there was absolute clarity a year ago regarding what we needed to do to remain safe and healthy and contribute responsibly to public health. What’s more, our places of work and public gathering were for the most part closed, and our local and state government largely made the most difficult decisions for us.

We now face the added trauma of confusion. If you’re vaccinated, you’re a lot safer than you were one year ago – but you also know that you can still get infected and infect others. If you’re unvaccinated, things are actually considerably more dangerous now than they were one year ago. And nobody knows what the next variant will bring. But now, the choices are largely up to us, and they’re extremely hard choices to make. All the uncertainty leaves us paralyzed, afraid to risk, afraid to grow.

Dr. Tara Kirk Sell, a researcher on risk communication at Johns Hopkins, teaches that at this stage in our 18-month-old trauma, we need to develop a healthy sense of caution about the now-familiar phrase “an abundance of caution.” After all, when we allow a manageable risk to stop us from doing things that possess the power to make us healthier, happier, saner, we deny ourselves the very gifts that enable us to bounce forward.

Ruth faced incalculable risks by accompanying Naomi to Bethlehem instead heading home to Moab. And yet she took that leap of faith. And, we are taught, she found love again. She rose to prosperity again, from the depths of destitution. And she became a mother – then a grandmother, and then the great-grandmother of King David, from whose line we are taught the Messiah will one day come.

There is inestimable power in the determination to grow when we are at once post-trauma and mid-trauma, just like we are right now. Inestimable power when, as Rabbi Ross taught us last night, we go straight to the darkness, ask it what it has

come to tell us, and then prepare to do all that is in our power to answer with our lives.

What has the darkness come to tell you on this Yom Kippur day? What has it revealed during this past year – and how have you responded to those revelations?

What personal strengths have you discovered – and what new strengths are you ready to cultivate?

What new appreciation of life has emerged from all the trauma now behind you... and the trauma still within you? How will you honor that appreciation of life in this new year 5782?

What relationships were deepened when the need ran unusually high – and which still await your attention?

To what new possibilities were you awakened during this time of darkness – and what might you do in the light of that awakening?

How have you sustained your spirit during this endless ordeal – and how might you build spiritual meaning in this new year, as the ordeal continues?

We're not accustomed to hearing the shofar on this Day of Atonement until the day has come to its end... but this year – this one year, mid- and post-trauma – I want to invite its sound mid- and post-holy day. For like nothing else, it will call you to answer with your life.

Wrote my dear friend, poet Stacey Zisook Robinson, who died this past March from Covid-19:

I will answer the sound of the shofar...
That rang out
and tumbled the walls
that surrounded my heart;
that sang
in aching and awesome mystery
to announce
the presence of God.
I will hear
in this wilderness,
I will hear
in my longing
and I will turn
and turn again

and listen,
and I will
answer the shofar.

*(This sermon was written collaboratively with Rabbi Joel Mosbacher of Temple
Shaaray Tefila in New York, New York.)*