KADDISH IN A PANDEMIC
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May 29, 2020

Torah is given to the Israelites in the wilderness; at Mount Sinai, but we didn't know the significance of that place at the time. To quote Jacob, "God was in that place and we didn't even know it." It may have been Sinai, but it could have been anywhere – it was all desert to our wandering Jewish ancestors

We too are wandering in the wilderness. This pandemic is a desert. Its disorienting; we do not know what lies ahead, which way to turn, left or right, stay home, venture out. Expand the bubble, protect the bubble? We never imagined we would be in this place.

Every day seems like the day before, they are long, filled with both monotony and tremendous challenge – if something can be both boring and exhausting at the same time – this is it.

We are waiting for a sign, not unlike our biblical ancestors standing looking up at the crackling heavens, we look at our flickering screens; combing through the data and the reports, the curve is flattening, it may even be flat, but it could spike. The virus is out there lurking, searching for hosts. Will it find us before humanity finds a cure?

We are waiting for deliverance, salvation in the form of a treatment, a vaccine. They tell us it will take time. They always say that, "time will heal," all we have is time and yet a clock is ticking, and we feel time running out.

We want this anxiety to end, life to go back to normal.

But it's not in our control.

So little is in our control anymore; and we feel so alone.

We know this uncertainty and anxiety it is painfully familiar.

We felt it when we said kaddish for the first time (or every time); wandering in the uncertainty that is life without our husband, wife, parent, child, sibling or dear friend.

We have been, at moments, as lost as our ancestors standing at the base of what was then a nameless mountain in a nameless desert. We have been looking for signs of salvation, indications that our nightmare would be over, that we could emerge from this purgatory of the

soul and go back to life as we enjoyed it and remembered it before they, and life as we knew it was ripped from our hearts.

We had such plans and none of them involved life without them. Even when we knew it was possible, inevitable, no one lives for ever, we could not imagine what life without them would really be like. It's real, and we were utterly unprepared.

Is that so different from our experience of this pandemic, for our ancestors at the base of that mountain. How do you prepare for the unimaginable?

So, what can Jewish wanderings and mourning rituals teach us in a global pandemic?

In Judaism, answers come in threes.

Time in and of itself doesn't heal:
Time is just that, its time, a period for us to work through the stages of our grief.

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

They are not linear; we will go back and forth between them and we need time to journey in that wilderness of emotion. It's not time that heals, is the work we do with that gift of time, the *schlepping* through those valid, complicated, conflicting emotions that ultimately quiets our restless soul and heals our broken heart.

We feel the same way about the pandemic, our ancestors most certainly felt the same way about their suffering in slavery and those feelings were clearly present as they stood at the mountain waiting for a miracle; that seemed forever delayed, a sign from God that their suffering was over.

Miracles do happen
Counting on a miracle is no more a strategy for coping with the death of a loved one than it is in battling a pandemic.

But people can do miraculous things, unimaginable and unexplainable things. We have a well inside of each of us, it may seem empty right now, depleted but it is still there, it draws its waters from the wells of strength and support that surround us, our friends and loved ones.

When we ask for help, when we let another share their emotional resources with us, we are more than we imagined we could be in the moment. The well spring of others replenishes our spirit, gives us that extra bit we need to push through the tough parts.

When you do something you didn't think you were capable of doing isn't that miraculous? Is it any less a miracle that you could not do it without the help of others? Maybe that makes the miracle greater still?

There may be within some scientist somewhere with an insight from their "well of knowledge" that will lead us to a cure; but I think it will take many wells and many scientists, science is practiced in collaboration not isolation. Likewise, if we collaborate in our grief, we will be a source of miracles for each other. We know this, we have experienced it before.

We are standing at Sinai

This Pandemic is wilderness, it is the unknown, but it is also at times quite solitude, reflective and serene. The wilderness is the place where we hear that still small voice that speaks to us from the heavens. The world is on pause right now, the streets are quieter, the noise of life is softer. In our isolation we have been given the blessing of quietude. Look around you, see how easy it was to just stop all that you were doing, stay home and be present.

We must let life changing events be life changing.

In the Jewish rites and rituals of mourning, our tradition teaches that we have to stay home literally sit low to the ground and listen, listen to the voice of memory of our loved one before it becomes too distant, before the soul fully ascends to heaven.

In the place that we are right now, our home has been our shelter and maybe our confinement; but we have made it a holy place – because we live our life there, nearly every facet of our daily existence within these walls and sidewalks, we are at Sinai.

The thunder will dissipate, the lightening will recede, Moses will come down the mountain and just like at the end of Shiva it will be time to go, to leave the house and re-enter the world. But you leave Sinai, it doesn't leave you. You leave the Shiva house but what you learned while sitting there, you carry it with you.

Life doesn't go back to normal; you go back to life having been to the mountain, changed by the experience.

The oldest prayer in any tradition, is, "Please God, can I please just have what I once had before." We said it when our loved one died, and we will say it over parts of this pandemic when it ends. There are things about this experience, even the experience of being in acute

grief and sorrow that are gifts, that are blessings. Insights into our soul, glimpses of the miracle of friendship, the blessing of time to take the time to do the work. We will miss them when they are gone, but if we appreciate them now, then when it's time to leave we will carry them with us, and they will help us along our journey in the wilderness. Because, we are always just stepping away from entering the wilderness again.

But we have been here before and we know the way.