MAKING LOSS MATTER[1]

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My parents have a gardener whose name is Levi. I have known Levi most of my life. Levi is the oldest looking person I have ever seen. His face is the kind that photo journalists take pictures of, it has deep lines and weathered wrinkles, it looks as though it has seen a thousand years, all of them hard, and indelibly written on his face. Levi's hands are big and rough, they have held all manner of gardening tools for decades, and have formed hard calluses, which like merit badges are a testament to his labors, the work of his hands. Some times you look at some one, and just by their face, their hands, the way they walk, the way their body is bent, the line of their shoulders and you know they have had a hard life, they have struggled, they have lost, they have been beaten, maybe not out, but certainly down by the ordeal of living. Levi looks like that.

When the biblical Jacob was close to death he went before Pharoah one final time in the king's chamber. Pharaoh looked out at him and asks, "How old are you?" The commentators of the Torah assume that Pharaoh asks this questions because he is astonished at Jacob's appearance. The toll of Jacob's misadventures in life is so great that his extraordinary journey can be read in the lines of his face. Before Pharaoh stands not the youthful and cunning Jacob, the one who tricked his brother Esau, the one who was adorned in a coat of many colors, the dreamer whose imagination made him the envy of his brothers. That is not the Jacob that stands before Pharaoh, but instead it is an old and broken Jacob, with the pained and aged face of one whose wisdom has been gained on the harshness of life.

Jacob replies to Pharaoh's question, "The years of my journey on the earth are one hundred and thirty. Few and bitter have been the years of my life." Rabbi David Wolpe points out in his book, 'Making Loss Matter', that instead of answering about his age, Jacob complains about the course of his life. Jacob has suffered great loses, it is true –his beloved wife Rachel, and for a long while his treasured son Joseph. Yet he has also accumulated vast wealth, built a large and ultimately reunited family, and helped in the

[1] Rabbi David Wolpe's book 'Making Loss Matter' was consulted a great deal in constructing this sermon, public attribution was made prior to delivering the sermon.

birth of a great nation. Loses in life are inevitable, but few lives more than Jacob's are as rich with accomplishment.

And so what compels Jacob to make such a dour assessment of his life? Why can't he see the great success that he has enjoyed, the accomplishments he has achieved, the contributions he has made? Jacob is devastated not because he is measuring his life against the lives of others, but because he is measuring his life against the life of his dreams. In his view those first dreams the ones he had as a child or even as a young adult, of a life of ease, of vigor, of safety, a life filled with accomplishment and notoriety, a life of the kind of blessing remembers his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham enjoyed has resolved into a life of struggle and of loss. Jacob cannot forget what he had dreamed. And the burden of those failed dreams, the loss that he has endured in life is written in the lines of his face, he carries his entire past upon his shoulders, successes yes, but far more the failures and it is weighing him down.

A very thoughtful man once visited in my office, this man, whose life by any outward observer would be termed a success, was wealthy, successful in business, well known in the community, his life was rich and varied, yet when asked the man summed up his life this way, he said, "You know, I have had more failures than successes, and I've fulfilled fewer dreams than the dreams that I have lost." We live lives of successively shed hopes. Even the most accomplished person lives with the disappointment of unrealized dreams of hope born and then lost, of relationships that begin and ultimately end.

As children our dreams like our energy are boundless. We do not have the capacity to sort through our dreams to evaluate them as to their potential for success or failure. The world has not yet closed its doors to use, as children we believe anything is possible, even what adults tell us is impossible. We want to be baseball players, firefighters, policemen, ballet dancers, ice skaters, even presidents. And we see no reason why we could not be all of those things all at once. The baseball playing, firefighter, who goes on to become president of the United States. They are the dreams of childhood, and while for many of us one or two of them have been realized, none of our childhood dreams have been realized without the price of giving up other dreams that we could not fit into the picture, and we mourn that loss.

When I was in high school I played baseball on the school team. My entire life I had wanted to be a baseball player, I dreamt of a day that I would stand at home plate in the bottom of the ninth inning with base loaded and two out, the game on the line, and the announcer would declare to a packed stadium, "now batting Dan Moskovitz." It was a grand dream, made even grander by the grand slam I would hit to win the game. But in the midst of dreaming that dream, another dream, one I had never fully articulated came into view. I wanted not only the far off fame of being a baseball hero, but I also dreamed of the present reality and necessity of finding a social group in school with which I was comfortable and at ease. I didn't find that social group on the ball field, but instead found them outside of school in my Jewish youth group. And so, like many of us I had to make a choice between being involved at the level that I wanted in my youth group and pursuing my long held, but far off dream of becoming a major leaguer. I chose the youth group with its promise of instant fulfillment; a dream that could be realized in an instant was for me as a teen more promising than a dream that might not come to be. I went on to become the International President of the organization and receive a scholarship to college. Things worked out well for me, and I don't regret the decision, but I mourn the loss of that dream, and all the others that were given up along the way as I pursued just one of the many goals I had in life.

As we get older our dreams demand more and more care, we must handle them more and more tenderly. It is one thing to choose one sport over another, but now as adults, and I include among this group teenagers as well, the realization of our dreams requires not only that we give up other dreams, but more to the point that we change our lives, so that our adult dreams may be realized. Far from the dreams we had as youth, the dreams we have as adults are dreams with very high stakes, we have wagered a great deal on those dreams we still hold onto, and we know, because of all the dreams we dropped along the way in order to preserve these last precious ones that the failure to attain them will wound us deeply, to loose them now will score lines on our faces, furrows in our brow. Perhaps simply the ardent pursuit of them, the price we have paid to maintain them all these years has already left its mark.

Think for a moment, how many dreams are you down to? What have you wagered so that you might fulfill the dreams that you still hold, what have you lost in the

process? Judaism asks us questions about our dreams, about our goals and visions for our life. Judaism, and for that matter any system of life analysis, be it religion, psychotherapy, guided meditation or a host of other systems of reflection asks us first and foremost to answer the question, are our dreams worthy? Are we simply musing over the boundless possibilities that life has to offer, listlessly dreaming and never resolving, or have we done something to ensure that they come true? We can all to differing degrees answer that question, as adults we have in large part by now separated those things that are childhood fantasies, pitching for the dodgers, figure skating in the Olympics, from those dreams that we been transformed into goals for life, travel to China, finding a soul mate, children, a new home out of the city. We have made the distinction and while we still look longingly to those dreams that will not come to be, we are focuses on those that we hope to achieve.

But the question that really tests us as we see life slowly whittle away one by one each our dreams, as life dashes them and reshapes them – have we simply stop dreaming? Have we allowed the loss of our childhood and adolescent dreams, the burden of our unrealized visions of how life will work out for us to weigh us down so heavily that we no longer dream at all? Do we carry the baggage of our lost dreams upon the shoulders of our life? How do we keep faith when dreams that matter go awry?

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick", teaches Proverbs 13:12, but dreams, like hopes, are not only deferred. Sometimes they are crushed. Then what becomes of the heart? I have a favorite poem that I read each year before the High Holy Days, every time I read it, like the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac which we read each year on Rosh Hashanah and each year speaks different to us, this poem informs me in ways that I never realized the year before when I read it last. The poem is actually a prayer, written on a scrape of paper found on the body of an unidentified confederate soldier during the civil war. It reads:

I asked God for strength that I might achieve;
I was made weak, that I might learn to serve.
I asked for health, that I might do great things;
I was assigned to the infirmary, that I might do better things

I asked for wealth, that I might be happy;
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might earn the praise of men;
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing I asked for, but all I hoped for.
Despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
And I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

The author of this poem has found away to make loss matter. He has found in the pile of his lost dreams and dashed hopes a lesson in life that will allow him to continue to dream, to continue to believe. He speaks of the blessing found, not in the achievement, but in process, the journey made along the way. When we make loss meaningful, when we find as this young soldier found a way to relate to dashed hopes and unrealized dreams, then our lives become richer. We must remember that all lives, even the most successful, are filled with more loss than gain, to try and overlook the loss, to try and live our lives as though it never happened is to entirely miss the point of living.

When we suffer a loss, when we realize a dream will go unfulfilled, when we loose a soul mate, a partner in life, people, well meaning people try and fix it for us. We cannot stand to see others who are not all right, and so we try to help. But while we can share their sadness, we cannot fix their pain. In the book of Job, when Job's friend's first see him after the succession of tragedies that befall him, they sit on the ground beside him and weep. Their first reaction is quite admirable. Only later when they try to explain to Job why this happened to him, do they cross over the line. What loss cries for, loss of hopes and dreams, even the loss of loved ones and relationships is not to be fixed or to be explained, but to be shared and eventually to find its way to meaning. To find meaning in a loss means not to try and get back to where you were, to return to what

came before, but to get through, to transform. To recognize that what has happened is big, it is significant, it will be life changing, and then to allow it to change your life.

We live our lives connected to others, we live our lives built upon our hopes and our dreams, to think that all our dreams will come true, to deny that life has both a beginning and an end is not to live at all. Our tradition reminds us every day that life is both precious and finite. Judaism teaches that Shabbat begins at sunset, not matter what is going on in your life, no matter what you have planned, Shabbat begins at sunset, we know it is coming, yet even still it often catches us unprepared. That same tradition also teaches that we determine when Shabbat ends, we can make havdallah, a separation between the sacred and the profane at any time after sunset on Saturday evening, if we desire we can end Shabbat on Wednesday, our only obligation is that we must end Shabbat before Shabbat begins again. We cannot live forever in the sheltered, unrealistic world of Shabbat.

The same lesson can hold true for us in dealing with loss, we must live in this world, not the mystical world of Shabbat in all its perfection, we must know that loss will come, if is both precious and finite, and even still we must recognize that it will catch us sometimes unprepared. In dealing with our loss, we can, if we need to, prolong it almost indefinitely, take our time, hold on to our hopes and our dreams, but we cannot live in the world of loss forever, we must find away to find meaning in our loss, so as to transform our lives, to learn from its lesson and to gain strength from the ordeal.

Rabbi Wolpe writes that his deepest prayer to God used to be to spare him from the pains of life that he so dreaded. Now he writes, “I see that that is the prayer of a child. As a man I do not pray for a life without pain or loss. Instead I pray: ‘Dear God, I know that there will be pain in my life, and sadness and loss. Please give me the strength to create a life together with those whom I love, where loss will not be empty, where pain will not be purposeless. Help me find the faith to make loss matter. Amen.’