

This past Tuesday was Shiva Asar b'Tammuz, the 17 of Tammuz. It was a minor fast day marking the beginning of the Three Weeks of mourning during the summer. As those of us who attended my Lunch and Learn with the Rabbi last week studied, according to Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Taanit, that date commemorates several major catastrophes that befell the Jewish people, going all the way back in mythical memory to the time that Moses broke the tablets of the 10 commandments when he saw the people worshipping the Golden calf, but also the date in historical memory when the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Roman siege.

The end of the Three Weeks will be Tisha B'Av, the 9th of Av, beginning Monday, August 31st, at sundown. That date is a major fast day, commemorating even more catastrophes, most importantly the destruction of both the first Temple in Jerusalem in 586 b.c.e. and the second Temple in 70 c.e.

And the period of the three weeks, bookended by these two days of calamity, are considered a time of cosmic mourning, a chance to look at the whole of Jewish history not just from the lens of triumph, with which we approach most of our other holidays, but also from the lens of grief and loss.

Since I arrived here, the Tefila U'Minhag community has occasionally discussed the question of whether we should suspend the use of musical instruments on Shabbat during the Three Weeks. After, refraining from playing or listening to live music is a traditional mourning practice, and in fact a traditional practice of the Three Weeks. On the other hand, Shabbat remained a time of holy joy that overrides other practices, and in this community, our shabbat tradition includes live music. How dare we then, give it up?

I'm grateful to be inhabiting that tension. I was thinking about complexity of holding grief and joy during this time, as I was examining our Torah portion, Pinchas, this week. Near the end of the Book of Numbers, Pinchas is most recognized for two famous episodes that occur in the parashah. The first is its namesake. It opens with the zealous priest, Pinchas, receiving some kind of divine reward for his act in last week's parashah, in which he murders of an Israelite man and a Moabite woman as they are en flagrante delicto in front of the tent of meeting - and, by killing them, Pinchas puts an end to a divine plague.

Later in the Torah portion is the story of the daughters of Tzelof'chad, who successfully agitate to receive an inheritance in the land of Israel as women, despite the fact that their father died, leaving no sons. Quite fittingly for a woman coming of age, Lila will be discussing the meaning and lessons of this particular episode much more thoroughly tomorrow.

But between those oft discuss narrative episodes, there is a census. There are many occasions of census in the Book of Numbers, hence, I believe, the English name for the book! But I read this census closely, and noticed something that I found fascinating, especially in the light of the fact that this parashah falls at the beginning of the Three Weeks. A census, by nature counts who is there. But this census consistently makes mention of who is missing.

For example, in Chapter 26, verse twenty, in addition to listing the living descendants of Judah, it also mentions, "Born to Judah: Er and Onan. Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan." This refers to an episode all the way back in Genesis 38, before the Israelites were a people at all, when they were just one family in Canaan, before they were in Egypt or enslaved.

Take verses 8-10 of Chapter 26, which mention Dathan, Abiram and Korach, and the fact that they had died in a rebellion against Moses, as was discussed in Parashat Korach, three weeks ago.

Or verses 60 and 61 mention that Aaron had four sons, Nadav, Abihu, Elazar and Ithamar, before noting that Nadav and Abihu died when they offered strange fire on the altar, harkening back to the events described in Leviticus Chapter 10.

The total of the census comes to about 625,000 Israelite men who can be mustered to war. This is a large and thriving community wandering through the desert. But even as that strength is noted and celebrated, the losses, too, are mentioned. In fact, the final verse of the census chapter states that everyone who had left Egypt had died, except for Joshua and Caleb, and that this census was an entirely new generation.

This is the census of who can move forward into the land. But it requires an accounting for those who were lost. And that, I think is the wisdom of the Three Weeks, and the wisdom of grief, in general, writ large. As we move through our history, as we *make sense* of our history as a people, it is important to count and celebrate our strengths, to note what we have overcome, the power that we have achieved. But it is also just as necessary that we take the time to notice and mourn the losses, collective and individual.

It reminds me of a conversation I had with Kellee Weinhold a few weeks after the election in November. I share with her permission what she said to me then: "I can't stand people saying to me, 'Well, we survived the 1980s.' Tell that to the hundreds of thousands of gay men who *didn't survive* the Reagan administration's inaction on the AIDS crisis! Politics have consequences! Not everyone survives!"

It's an important point to take. Mourning loss not only is healthy, but it also is motivating. It helps us acknowledge what the world and the moment demand of us, and what the stakes are if we do not show up. In a cosmic sense, there may be an arc bending towards justice, but there is a grief deal of grief and casualty along the way. Not everything turns out alright for each righteous individual, but we can surely learn from that.

To hold hope and determination in the midst of grief, to acknowledge grief in the midst of a hopeful forward trajectory, is to practice the art of being complicatedly, blessedly human. It is what the census does, with its counting of the living along with its naming of the dead, just as the other stories in Parashat Pinchas do.

Pinchas's act of violence somehow stems the tide of greater violence - it could have gone otherwise, and historically, it is in fact more likely that violence begets violence, but in this story there is an unlikely grace. The Daughters of Tzelof'chad lose their father, and from that place of loss they find the motivation to demand a gain for all women.

I hope that we can take this time of the Three Weeks to practice constructively inhabiting grief, seeing loss as something not to ignore, but something to acknowledge, move through, and even allow to serve as motivation for our future growth. The Midrash Lamentations Rabbah teaches that the Messiah, the long-awaited future source of redemption, will actually be born on the 9th of Av. So may we all find that by embracing grief, we can find the seed of redemption.