



Acknowledging, But Not Yielding, To Despair

By Rabbi Richard Hirsh

A few years ago I was in line at Toronto Pearson airport waiting to clear security to fly home to Philadelphia. Having made this trip many times I was accustomed to the routine. This time, however, I was asked to step out of the line, so the security agent could go through my backpack.

I had forgotten that attached to my key ring was a very small penknife. The tiny blade was only suitable for small tasks – such as cutting out classified ads from the newspaper, which is what my father used it for back when I was a child and he ran a personnel agency. I had forgotten it was there.

Well, whatever compassion he might have felt about my family heirloom, the airport security attendant had to follow protocol. That penknife was not going on the flight to Philadelphia. With great reluctance and significant sadness, I handed over my father's penknife, and was waved through.

In surrendering possession, according to Jewish law, I also surrendered ownership: In this case, I knew there was no chance of my ever recovering my father's penknife. It had become what is called in Jewish law *yeush* – “ownerless” – meaning that the connection between an object and the owner has been severed.

In these past months of living with the restrictions, frictions and constrictions of the Corona virus, who has not had some experience of loss? To name but a few:

- The loss of everyday activities that framed and shaped our lives;
- The loss of expansive experiences such as theatre, music, recreation and travel;
- The loss of direct participation with the communities of which we are a part;
- The loss of the ways in which we are accustomed to work;

- The loss of in-class education for our children and grandchildren;
- The loss of being able to share familiar rituals of celebration and of sorrow;
- The loss of human contact, of seeing family and friends.

I acknowledge that, on balance, it is a somewhat privileged place from which to complain. There have been over 200,000 deaths from Covid-19 in the U.S. and beyond one million around the world. There have been economic implosions that have cost jobs and put lives at risk. Around the world and around the corner, there are people who would be grateful for even a percentage of the safety and security many if not most of us enjoy, even as we live within the parameters of the pandemic.

And yet. Emotionally, psychologically and spiritually, our losses are real, and remain a difficult challenge. Placing them in a larger context does not diminish their significance. The deferral of the things we had planned, the suspension of routines to which we have become accustomed, the lost time that we will not recover – these are all real. They are all disruptive. They are all difficult. They are all distressing.

And common to each of these losses is the anxiety about not knowing when, or even if, these things will “come back.” Or, to put it in terms of Jewish law, whether the things we have lost have metaphorically become *yeush* – things about which we have abandoned hope of recovery, things that we assume are lost, and will not again be found.

Yeush literally means “despair” – an emotional experience of hopelessness combined with the existential experience of a sense of finality and permanence.

These experiences have become familiar to many of us at some point during these past months. Globally, nationally, individually, we have endured the disruptive undulations of these past months, as we have faced the challenges, the confusions, and the complications of navigating through the pandemic.

Our spiritual challenge is to keep these understandable moments of despair from becoming the definitive condition of *yeush* – to acknowledge our emotional experiences of loss, without yielding to the absolute abandonment of hope. This is not easy work.

Pundits, prophets and prognosticators have been pronouncing doom for months, telling us what has been irretrievably lost, what will never be the same, what is gone forever, and what is not coming back.

But despite the definitive predictions about post-pandemic life, we actually do not know what things will look like when this pandemic begins to wind down, then taper off, and then finally is tamed.

And while inevitably some things may get lost, others may be found. A world after Covid is as likely to be a world of “both-and” as of “either-or” or “before-and-after.” We will be grateful, for example, when we can again gather in the home of a mourner during *shiva* to share comfort and consolation. But we will also now be able to share those moments long-distance through online portals that we have learned to appreciate, and to which we have become accustomed.

The future never unfolds precisely the way that we thought it would. Every definitive assumption we imagine about the future will be challenged by the unanticipated, unforeseen and unknowable circumstances through which we have yet to live and the changes we have yet to see.

We will have to work hard not to let the understandable feelings of despair of these past months become the definitive state of despair that we call *yeush*: the despair of surrender; the despair of finality; and the despair that comes from abandoning hope.

We are challenged to resist letting these very real, deep, disturbing and often depressing moments of despair steal from us the experiences of joy, celebration, happiness and connection that we have known; that we miss as these seasons roll by; and that can, and we hope will, return in the future.

And against the despair that comes from feeling weary and powerless, we are challenged to seek moments of resilience and of resolution, and of courage and of confidence, to be ready for the work of repair and improvement that surely lies in front of us.

Finding moments of meaning, and cultivating confidence, may seem to be a task of messianic proportions. Perhaps. But among the wisest teachings of the Jewish spiritual tradition is that the Messiah never arrives ... but is still always on the way. We Jews are again invited to be what the biblical prophet Zachariah once called us over two thousand years ago: *assirei hatikva* “prisoners of hope.”

Rabbi Richard Hirsh served as the curriculum consultant and facilitator for JWI's "Men As Allies" pilot project in the Greater Washington area. He is a past co-chair and current member of the JWI Clergy Task Force To End Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community.

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