

Shavu'ot: Option B

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In honour of my friend Steve.

*I felt increasingly isolated, just so lonely. I'd drop off my kids at school, and people would stop talking when they saw me. I'd walk into work ... and there'd be no chitchat. ... I could silence any room just by arriving. So, a couple of days before the end of shloshim, the traditional Jewish mourning period for a spouse, I thought, if I was going to write something, this is what I would say: "Stop asking me, 'How are you?' How do you think I am? Say: 'How are you **today**?' And get out of the way of ambulances. Because when Dave died, no one moved [their car]."*

In her book, *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook tells the story of the sudden death of her husband, Dave Goldberg. *People ask, 'What's the worst moment of your life?' Well, there are lots of contenders. But it might be telling my children their father died.*

Sandberg's message is particularly apt on Shavu'ot, since the Scroll of Ruth is about women who rebuilt their lives when Option A was no longer possible. Ruth's story begins when Elimelech, Naomi, and their sons went left Judea for the country of Moav to avoid a famine. Probably not Plan A. Elimelech died. Naomi was left with her two sons. Certainly not Plan A. The boys married Moavite women. Again, not Plan A. After living in Moav for ten years, both sons died. Definitely not Plan A. Naomi was left alone.

My Rabbi told me that I just had to lean into the suck and let it happen. But Judaism ... helped me know when to bury him and where to bury him and what prayers to say, and there is something comforting in that, and it was the same prayer that people have said over people who have died for thousands of years.

Naomi slouches back to her home town of Bet-Lehem, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, refuses to leave her. *We really become resilient for other people, not for ourselves. I think the moment I really started to see the possibilities for hope and joy was when I said, "Look, if I don't find a way to move forward, then my kids are going to have a harder time recovering."*

The women of town can't believe it is Naomi. They talk about her, but not to her. *It's not just death which does this, it's really all forms of adversity. You want to silence a room? Get diagnosed with cancer. ...Have someone in your family go to prison. Lose a job. Sexual assault. These things are uncomfortable, and because they're uncomfortable people are often afraid of saying the wrong thing and often say nothing at all, and then we have this huge elephant in a room following us around.*

Naomi thinks, "Don't call me Naomi, the pleasant one. Call me Mara, the bitter one. God has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Eternal has brought me back empty; the Eternal has brought calamity upon me." She thinks it's all her fault.

Adam Grant, Sandberg's friend and co-writer, introduced Sheryl to the 3 Ps that make it harder to heal.

We personalize and imagine that we're somehow responsible for what happened. *After Dave died, I pored over his medical records asking what I could have — or should have — done. Eventually, she accepted that she couldn't have prevented his death: His doctors had not identified his coronary artery disease. I was an economics major; how could I have? Not everything that happens to us happens because of us.*

Pervasiveness. *Will an event affect all areas of your life? Will sadness carpet your soul wall to wall?* Unable to focus when she returned to work, a moment came during a meeting when Sandberg was able to forget her grief and get absorbed in the discussion. She realized that her professional life could still be worthwhile, even after tragedy had struck in her personal life. *I didn't die.*

Permanence. For months, Sandberg writes, *No matter what I did, it felt like the crushing grief would always be there. I thought I would feel the way I felt in the beginning forever. Every minute. I... would never feel another moment of pure joy again. Gradually, I learned that we should accept our feelings — but recognize that they will not last forever.* Grief is a form of love; it can't be rushed, but it doesn't have to be permanent.

Naomi sends Ruth to glean for food. The land owner, Boaz, notices Ruth and tells her, "Don't glean in another field... Stay close to my young women. ... follow behind them.... At mealtime he said, "Come here, and eat some of this bread."

I got it all wrong before. Referring to her earlier efforts to comfort those who were grieving, Sandberg observes, *I used to say, 'Is there anything I can do?' I used to say, 'How are you?,' or not say anything.*

Rather than offer to do **something**, it's often better to do **anything**. Just do **something specific**. Sandberg explains: *My wonderful friends ... tragically lost a son and they spent many months in a hospital before that. And one of his friends texted him and said, "What do you not want on a burger?" Not, "Do you want dinner?" Another friend texted and said, "I'm in the lobby of your hospital for an hour for a hug whether you come down or not." Just show up. Now, there's no one way to grieve and not everyone will want the same thing. So the best approach is really ask people. Say, "I know you're going through something terrible. I'm coming over with dinner tonight. Is that OK?"*

The poet Rilke wrote, "Just keep going. No feeling is final." Joy can come again. Ruth marries Boaz. "She bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Eternal, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin;... [This boy] shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age."

After tragedy, some people are broken. Our UJA supports the community of Sderot. Many have post-traumatic stress disorder. The Israeli soldiers that our community has welcomed through Peace of Mind often walked away from their combat experiences with PTSD. After trauma, many suffer debilitating depression, severe anxiety. Others seem to bounce back to the way they were before.

But some **bounce forward**, and gain some positive change from a negative event. The grief or sadness doesn't go away, no one is happy that it occurred. But along with those negative emotions is the possibility of improvements in our lives, where people are able to say, "I'm stronger. I lived through that, I can live through anything. I'm more grateful."

Sandberg articulates words that Naomi might have said: *I have new relationships, or my relationships are deeper because people have helped me in ways that I never thought possible, and I've become closer to them because of that.* Post-traumatic growth is about a stronger sense of meaning — having a purpose. Jonathan, the son of two friends, died. His mother began a Hesed group at her synagogue to help others with a hand or a hug. She called it Yad Yonatan. Over time, she became a rabbi, seeking to support others in their time of need.

I remember the day that I lived longer than Dave did.... I'm alive; fingers crossed, I'm going to turn 48 and Dave never did. I have appreciation.

Why do we read the story of Naomi and Ruth? Their Plan A ended, but they made a Plan B. They supported each other, made it through the depth of despair. And something amazing happened. Ruth's son, associated with Naomi, became the great grandfather of King David.

Sandberg has since remarried, but that doesn't mean she has left Dave behind. *It's important to talk openly about memories — not just positive ones, but difficult ones, too — [to] help kids make sense of their past and rise to future challenges. It's especially powerful to share stories about how the family sticks together through good times and bad, which allows kids to feel that they are connected to something larger than themselves. ...*

And when we remember, it is important not to idealize the person who we miss. Jews remember King David as a flawed hero. So too with those we love. *I beg my friends, 'Do not set them up with [the memory of] a perfect father!'.... My hope is to hold on to Dave as he really was: loving, generous, brilliant, funny and also pretty clumsy. ... When emotions are running high in our house, but my son stays calm, I tell him, "You are just like your daddy." When my daughter stands up for a classmate ... I say, "Just like your daddy." And when either of them knocks a glass over, I say it, too.*

Most of us live some sort of Plan B. So this Shavu'ot, take time to remember the ones we loved and still do love. And then go forward with Plan B.