

Welcome Back. Are We Back?
Rabbi Zoë Klein-Miles
Rosh Hashanah 5782

“Welcome back.” Those words scroll in lights across the sign over the parking lot of my daughter’s school. “Welcome back.” The words painted on butcher paper at the temple, for the first day of Sunday school. Signs on schools, storefronts, websites, marquees, museums, gyms: welcome back.

Are we back? With our masks and vax cards, wellness checks, daily passes, elbow bumps, hybrid High Holy Day services, students getting weekly nasal swabs...are we back? Are we all the way back?

Is the you that is welcomed back the same you you once were, and is the place we are welcomed back to the same place it once was? Or is it askew. Favorite haunts, restaurants half-staffed, rent past. “Help wanted” signs pleading, *please* come back.

Many of us return here with heightened anxiety, wounded hearts, broken spirits, forgotten purpose, loneliness, lost ambition, hopelessness, fear of touch and breath, full of grief, apologizing and explaining every time we cough or sneeze.

Are we back?

Rosh Hashanah begins the Ten Days of Repentance, repentance in Hebrew being *teshuvah* which also means “return.”

Returning to Rosh Hashanah, our spiritual home base, celebrating creation and the possibility of our own re-creation, returning to the beginning, rerolling to Genesis, remembering our values, reflecting on our lives, remorseful and remiss, repairing relationships, recentering ourselves, rediscovering our tradition, recommitting to being responsible, renewing our vows. Re-, re-, re-, it’s all about return.

But can we ever really return?

I returned to a sermon I had given exactly ten years ago. It was a sermon about Return. 2011 had been a year of growth for me. I spoke about my visit to Swaziland and Ghana. I spoke about standing at the Door of No Return through which 12 million human beings were dragged onto ships in chains to build the world we still benefit from.

I wrote about a strange feeling, when encountering such unimaginable suffering and sadness, a sense that some of the walls that had shielded me from knowing history, some built for me, and some I had built for myself, were crumbling, and that for the first time, I could see.

Recently I read something in Pema Chodron’s book “When Things Fall Apart” that captured what I had been trying to describe:

“We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering, we are being kind to ourselves. The truth is, we only become more fearful, more hardened, and more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. This separateness becomes like a prison that restricts us to our personal hopes and fears, into caring only for the people nearest to us.”

These last two years we haven't been able to protect ourselves from being touched by suffering. Many walls have crumbled, and we are no longer restricted to caring only for the people nearest to us, rather, through our shared suffering, in many ways, we've become more connected to the whole.

So this is a sermon about returning to a sermon about returning, revisiting and reinterpreting its relevance for today. This is the sequel, ten years later.

The theme of the season is return, but we are not returning from vacation, refreshed and recharged. Rather, so many of us are rattled up, reeling still from another year of ruptures.

The losses we've experienced are incalculable. I have a dear friend whose son has been playing hockey practically since he could walk. He loves hockey, and has devoted himself to the sport. Hitting the rink at 5 in the morning on school days, countless hours, honing that skill, traveling on weekends to games in various cities, hardly time to visit the cities, always on the ice, years of tremendous sacrifice and dedication, discipline and focus. And this year, his senior year of high school, his last chance to be recognized and scouted for college, his New England boarding school, for which he left his Los Angeles home exclusively to play hockey, announced they were canceling all sports for the year.

We can measure devastation by the number of deaths it causes. But if we try to measure it in heartbreaks, it would be impossible.

Pauline Boss coined the term "ambiguous loss" to name the reality that every loss does not hold a promise of resolution.

There have been so many losses, the crumbling of plans and dreams. We are drowning in ambiguous loss. Will we ever come back? Can we ever return?

When Elizabeth Kübler-Ross introduced the five stages of grief, she didn't mean for those stages of grief to be applied to those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. She had intended the stages to be for people who are themselves dying. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance of one's own death. However, somehow, culturally, we started to believe the stages should be applied to grieving a loved one, that mourners should be able to start with stage one, follow a linear path, and graduate to the place where grief ends, acceptance.

However, that is not true. Especially with ambiguous loss. We don't learn to get over or get past it, rather, we learn to live with it.

I think about storyteller Kevin Kling. He was born with one disabled arm, and then a midlife motorcycle accident paralyzed the other.

He knows about losses, both the ones we inherit and ones we acquire.

He said, "When you're born into loss, you grow from it. But when you experience loss later in life, you grow *toward* it. A slow move to an embrace, an embrace that holds tight the beauty wrapped in the grotesque, an embrace that becomes a dance, a new dance..."

I was really struck by this idea, that we don't just grow *from* loss, *away* from loss, we also grow *toward* loss, *into* it.

A broken heart changes your heart, and changes you, and you don't just get over or get past it, you grow into this new person you are. Loss becomes integrated into a quilted cloak of wisdom, compassion, tears, joy, experience, all stitched together, and we grow into it, wrap it warmly around us when we shiver. This is who we are now.

We may have survived the walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but we are different. We have the eye of an artist, the soul of a sage, we are students of suffering, scholars of survival, we are pilgrims of shadow and light.

Pema Chodron teaches that "spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. At the peak we have transcended all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all the others behind — our drunken brother, our schizophrenic sister, our tormented animals and friends. Their suffering continues, unrelieved by our personal escape."

A different approach, she teaches, is that "the journey goes down, not up. It's as if the mountain pointed toward the center of the earth instead of reaching into the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt. We jump into it. We slide into it. We tiptoe into it. We move toward it however we can.

"We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. If it takes years, if it takes lifetimes, we let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water, healing water. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die."

The return is not a return to innocence. Not a transcendence of suffering. Not a graduation to acceptance. It is joining our companions in awakening from fear by returning to the very center, the source, of our turbulence and doubt. It is not about getting over, getting past the pain, or pretending it didn't happen, protecting ourselves from suffering, rather it is returning to face it, and not alone, but with community, moving with millions of others.

Pauline Boss taught about ambiguous loss, not only on a personal level, but a national level. She shared that our country was founded on unresolved loss. On slavery. On the uprooting of indigenous peoples. On the Civil War, bodies that never came home. And immigrants, fleeing persecution, and genocide. "...creating a society of suffering that is ancestral suffering that passes down through family patterns... We are a nation founded on unresolved grief."

And that unresolved grief erupts in protests, in anger, sometimes in violence.

And the answer is not to bury it. It's not to get over and past it. It is, perhaps, to grow toward it, grow *into* it, *return* to it. We are in the process of redressing as a country, growing into our losses instead of denying them, integrating history that hasn't been bleached of color, creating a new quilt of connection, our scar-spangled banner.

Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward it. We row forward by looking back. We return to the valley of the shadow of death, because scattered throughout that inverted mountain are treasures: gems and geodes, flowers that bloom only at night, fireflies and constellations. There is friendship, when one takes your hand and says, let's walk together. There is healing water. There is humanity, right there, in the place of trauma and loss. There are angels and heroes who rose up during the hardest hours, the meaning-makers, the storytellers, the justice-seekers. Beacons of light in

the form of small kindnesses. There are people of giant courage, laboring there in the valley of the shadow of death, who changed the world.

And right down there in the thick of things, we can discover love.

When we return the Torah to the ark, we say, *hashiveinu Adonai Elecha, v'nashuva*. Help us to return to You, Adonai, and we shall return. Rosh Hashanah is about returning to our deepest selves, turning ourselves around, returning home. And there, in the doorway, with open arms, call it God, Adonai, Avinu Malkeinu, Shechina... call it Yahweh, El Shaddai, Elohim... call it Mystery, call it Love, embracing you in, the parts of you that have toughened, the parts of you that have softened, the losses you are still growing into.

Welcome back, you who are different than you were before, welcome back, with your new laugh lines and battle scars. Let us gather and share the stories of our travels and travails. Let us forget the facade of "everything is fine," in exchange for authentic connection. Let us return each other's smiles, return each other's texts, phone calls and emails.

When you see an invitation for a Temple Isaiah gathering called Isaians-Helping-Isaians, consider joining. When you see an invitation for Small Groups, which you'll learn more about on Yom Kippur, or Jewish learning, or a conversation about Israel, or our sisterhood, or justice work, or meditation, or grief support, consider joining.

Because we are exhausted and overwhelmed, Let us return to our tradition and gather up the years, the tears, challenges and transformations. Let us look backwards while rowing forward. Let us hold each other as we navigate ambiguous loss. Comfort each other over unresolved grief. What we have lost may never be recovered. But having lost what once belonged to us, let us replace it with belonging to community. Let us search for treasure in the valley of the shadow of death, and share it. Fill our empty canteens with healing connections. Let us take the raw material we've collected from this year of being raw, and turn it into a feast of meaning.

The Hebrew for welcome is *bruchim habaim*. Blessed are you who have arrived. These are the words we traditionally say at the beginning of a Jewish wedding, as the wedding couple steps under the huppah to begin their marriage. Here, at the end, I return to the beginning. *Bruchim habaim b'shem Adonai*.

Blessed are you who have arrived here in the name of God, at this place, at this time, in this way - lame, limping, lost, low - how good it is to be here with you. How good it is for us to be together.

Shana tova.