



LeoBaeckTemple

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“The Dammed River”
Leo Baeck Temple
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Just one month ago, a true giant in the mind/body health field, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, died. I’d had the great blessing of studying with Dr. Remen more than 25 years ago under the banner of the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health. Her story as a pioneer in understanding how healing is not just a matter of medicine goes all the way back to her childhood, when at the age of 15, she was diagnosed with severe Crohn’s Disease and was given a prognosis of only 10 more years. She died surrounded by her loved ones just six weeks ago at the age of 88.

In her landmark bestseller, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Dr. Remen describes her battle with her illness as a teenager: “At the beginning, I reacted to suffering and limitation with rage,” she writes. “I needed to consult my disease on the simplest matters. Would it allow me to eat a piece of cheese? Did I have the strength to walk up this flight of stairs? The authority of this disease would brook no argument from me. It still shapes my life,” she concludes, “but with a far lighter hand.”

Remen recalls how she felt many years after learning to live with her diagnosis. As she headed toward the completion of her medical training, she was offered a senior residency at an outstanding hospital, but she doubted that she’d be able to accept it. Already, she barely had the necessary strength to get through each day... how could she add this significant piece to the puzzle, no matter how meaningful the experience might be? And her anger at her predicament surfaced anew: “Here was one more dream stolen.”

But something was different this time. After years of venturing in and out of this rage against everything denied her, Dr. Remen didn’t drown this time in her despair. Instead, it passed, leaving an awareness of vitality that she had never felt in herself before. Reflecting on this shift, she wrote: “My anger was my will to live turned inside out. In that first moment of surprise, I had a glimpse of something fundamental about who I am; that at the core of things, I have an intense love of life, a wish to participate fully in life and to help others do the same. Somehow this had grown large in me as a result of the very limitations that I had thought were thwarting it. Like the power of a dammed river.”

The phenomenon that Remen describes is not limited to the awakening from our struggles with chronic illness. The story speaks just as powerfully – perhaps even more so – to the awakening we seek at this hour of *Yizkor*... the awakening from our struggles with mourning. After all, we who remember know that our mourning is, in some very important ways, a chronic condition all its own. We, too, become locked inside a certain rage... or perhaps it can be better described as a paralyzing melancholia. The years go by, but our suffering and its concomitant limitations do not disappear just because “it’s time to let go.”

The persistent absence of our dear ones – the parent whose counsel and assurance can never be replaced... the sibling whose deep understanding of us emerged from the lifelong journey we shared... the spouse who was also best friend, whose departure has left a painfully lonely home... the child whose unfinished story created an ache that never heals – the persistent absence of those we loved leaves us disabled. Too often, the living joys that come our way even years after our losses are tinged with our grief, rendering them joys we are unable to claim. Each one is “one more dream stolen” by our bereavement, and it deepens our despair. We are forced, as Dr. Remen once was, to consult our mourning on even the simplest matters, and the loss in our lives continues to mount.

Perhaps that is why so many of us have made a habit of attending this service. We recite these words of *Yizkor* each year on Yom Kippur, renewing a strange and tense dance with the holes in our lives that at once enslave and ennoble us. We are here partly to return to the oddly nourishing pain of grief, and partly to revive our hope of subduing it. We wonder: “Might this be the year when my mourning is shown to be ‘my will to live turned inside out?’”

In our hearts’ deepest wells, we sense that our grieving ultimately testifies to our passion for life. After all, our losses wouldn’t hurt like they do if they weren’t reminders of just how glorious it is to love and to be loved. We miss our partners in that love terribly when they depart this earth, but the passion for living that they kindled in us does not depart with them. It simply lies in wait, until we are able to see it right there in our grief – grown larger by virtue of the very limitations that we feared had thwarted it. Love of life – the dammed river that still wells up inside us.

The contemporary Jewish poet, Adam Sol, wrote about this will to live turned inside out. He describes a grieving woman who might well be one of us, “her nose tissue-sore, her eyes dry as ash.” She agonizes over time marching on, uninterrupted by the calamity of her loss. Even the garbageman making his weekly visit is an affront to her: “Shouldn’t the air be full of grief?” she wonders. “Couldn’t the processes of the world – for one day – cease?” But she knows the answer to her own question: “Of course not.” And just when she might have descended into permitting her bereavement to

become her remaining living story, she instead welcomes that garbageman's weekly return, "faithful as a compass." That compass points her back toward life – a reminder that she need not forever assign absolute authority to her grief. The dammed river can flow once again. And the poet concludes: "It's enough to make her grief as thin as paper, and as precious."

It's hard – even shocking – to think of our grieving as something precious. We know from experience that it certainly doesn't feel in any way precious. But perhaps we should, at this hour of remembering, consider the possibility that the doctor and the poet may be right. Perhaps our mourning is a container for our love of life, a container that can be reopened once we will permit it. You see, there can be no denying – our departed ones created in us a craving for life. That's what we miss. With them, we discovered just how good it can be. We felt the power of a unique smile or embrace. We were moved by the dignity of another person's example. We grew from watching them strive to be, even when they fell short. We learned how the passage of time can be filled with richly sanctified moments. And no matter how much we may lament that it will never be the same without them, it is those very people that we miss who have taught us to hunger for love and life once again.

This is our purpose in "consulting our disease," as it were – our mourning, as we do on occasions like this. Staring at our losses, we are striving to reopen the life container within us. We know better than to try to dispose of our grief; we need it, as the doctor said, still to shape our lives, but with a far lighter hand. For that will allow us to reclaim our inside-out love of life that our departed ones helped us to acquire. They bequeathed that to us. They certainly never wished to take it with them into the earth – which is why we know what they'd tell us today, if only they could. They'd remind us that our grief has served us well, but that it was always intended to lead us back to life... to undam the river.

Wrote the Israeli poet, Leah Goldberg:

In everything there is at least an eighth
of death. It doesn't weigh much.
With what hidden, peaceful charm
We carry it everywhere we go.
In sweet awakenings,
in our travels,
in our love talk,
when we are unaware,
forgotten in all the corners of our being –
always with us.
And never heavy.

Let us gently carry their memories like a gift, not a burden... and with loving honor.