The Torah of Despair

Elliot Kukla

> *Save me, God, for the waters are flooding me. I have sunk in deep mire, where there is no standing; I have come into deep waters, overcome by flood. I have grown weary crying out; from pining for God my throat dried out, my eyes exhausted.*
>
> —Psalms 69:1–4

1. "Rabbi, I would like to die"

It is my job to be with people on the worst day of their life. I work as a rabbi at the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco tending to the spiritual needs of those struggling with grieving, illness, and dying. Someone tells me they would like to die at least once a week. I hear feelings of a loss of taste for living from the lips of those who are elderly and have lost the capacity to care for themselves or recognize their loved ones; I listen to an anguished desire to die from those living with long-term mental illness; I am often told by those who just lost a loved one that they too would like to die; people with long-term chronic pain conditions who despair of recovery often tell me that their deepest desire is to end their suffering.

Every fiber of my being longs to "fix" the situations of those who dwell in this much pain and heartbreak. Sometimes this is possible and I am able to assess the situation and offer a solution like referrals to a doctor, therapist, or psychiatrist; grieving rituals; or prayers to sustain their spirits until their anguish lifts. However, some of the people who utter these words are in situations that are "unfixable" and often the desire to die seems fair to me or at least very understandable.

This is not an article about suicide prevention, which is a worthy and important topic about which much has already been

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written. Rather this is an article about how to stay present and spiritually engaged with people who habitually live in a place of desolation. In this article I will explore the characters in the Bible who struggle with despair and I will discuss the living Torah I learn from my clients who share their journeys through anguish with me.

I have come to the conclusion that hope is not always the best response to chronic despair. Some people need to be held in their pain until it passes and be reminded that things will change; but in some situations of intractable suffering there is no expectation of amelioration in the future and pushing hope rings empty. Releasing hope allows us to connect deeply to the reality of another person's suffering in the present and offer our companionship and comfort. And in the end, what else do we have in the face of mortality and loss but the here and now and our ability to connect to one another? When we connect to one another with whole hearts that are open to both triumph and deep despair, we bring true shalom (wholeness and peace) into the world.

2. The Torah of Despair

"I can no longer bear the burden of this people alone—it is too heavy for me. If you would deal thus with me, please kill me; if I have found favor in your sight, let me no longer see my wretchedness."

—Moses in Num. 11:14–15

The Torah is filled with voices of those who despair. When the matriarch Rebekah is pregnant she suffers from terrible pain as the twins Jacob and Esau wrestle inside of her. Rebekah says to God, "If this is what it is, why me?" These words resonate with what I hear from so many people in extreme pain—why me and why should I endure? Despite these feelings we read: "Yet she went on seeking God" (Gen. 25:22).

Job's suffering is longer term and his despair is deeper. After the deaths of his children and during numerous disfiguring illnesses he says, "I am weary of my life; my speech gives out; I will speak from the bitterness of my soul" (Job 10:1). The term "bitterness" in this passage seems apt, as so often being exhausted by life is connected to a "loss of taste" for living. Many elders reach a similar place of weariness after many illnesses and losses and sometimes they simply stop eating in order to

hasten their deaths. Unlike Rebekah, Job sees no end in sight for his suffering and he is only restored to a desire to live through miraculous interventions that few of the people we serve are likely to experience.

Moses himself, the greatest leader of our people, despairs and asks to die. He is exhausted from the burdens of leadership and he says to God, "Please kill me" (Num. 11:15). Moses reminds me of those I serve who feel trapped and overwhelmed by their lives. Often the desire to die is expressed to me as the only "way out" that someone can envision.

In today's world a desire to die is often surrounded by stigma and isolation. The Torah speaks in a different voice—Rebekah, Job, and Moses are integral to the social world of the Bible. There is recognition in the Bible that while despair is painful, it is also a part of the human experience. These biblical figures are inspiring and important figures in Jewish tradition not *despite* their despair, but in part *because* their desolate states of mind are so quintessentially human. It is also what makes them such enduring characters as they offer up the wholeness of their pain and despair as well as sharing their joy with generations of readers and learners.

I do not mean to imply that despair is good. What the biblical stories teach us is that this kind of distress has been present in every Jewish society and is a natural part of human experience. We could skip over or efface these Torah portions but instead they are chanted aloud and sung melodiously from the center of our synagogues during our weekly Torah readings on Shabbat and holidays. Listening to the voices of despair without trying to "fix" these stories or encourage hope is literally a mitzvah in our tradition.

3. Hopelessness

God, please lift me from this infinite depth./The light of life and love is so far above it seems like a wisp of a dream from long ago./The sadness spreads around me reaching to every horizon./If I just lie here, eventually the lifeless air will leave me a desiccated husk of bone and skin who somehow still has the capacity for endless tears./How did I get here God? Sometimes I ask for your merciful help and implore you to fill me with your healing grace./But today I can't even seem to do that.

—"Hopeless," an original prayer by Shoshana Hadassah (2011), written in response to a psychiatric hospitalization

I recently saw Susan, a client in her early sixties, whose husband and thirty-year-old son both died in the past two years. She told me with a deep, striking calm that her life is now devoted to tending their memories—she speaks to them every day and plants flowers in their honor. She told me that her siblings and friends keep urging her to hope, to let go of tending to the dead, in order to make new friends and acquire new hobbies. "I can't tell them this but I have no intention of doing that," she told me simply. "Why would I want to lose my memories and my closeness to my husband and son on top of all I have already lost? I don't want to hope for more. I have had enough. I had a life filled with love. Now I am just hanging on day by day until it is my time to die."

Susan's hopelessness was pure and simple. Well meaning encouragement to hope was leaving Susan alone in her feelings. Susan's loved ones *have* to hope for her, as their fate is bound up in hers. As her rabbi I have the opportunity to be able to companion her in her experience of hopelessness—a lonely terrain to walk alone. This is counterintuitive for most rabbis and caregivers since we have been taught to see hope as integral to religious leadership. Holding hope for someone in a short-term crisis is often extremely healing and sometimes even life saving, but holding out hope is not always helpful for someone in deep and chronic despair.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "hope" as: "1) To desire with expectation of obtainment 2) To expect with confidence (archaic: to trust)." In some situations of intractable suffering there is no expectation of amelioration, and to expect change with confidence or trust actually gets in the way of fully experiencing the present moment. I define holiness as existing in what *is*—in the here and now, the real living world that God created—as opposed to what we think the world should be. Hence if we refuse to dwell in hopelessness we also miss out on moments of holiness.

Judaism has texts and traditions that refuse to turn away from the pain and the beauty of moments of utter desolation, and that honor the holiness of hopelessness as well as hope. Passover tells a purposeful story of suffering and redemption: We were once slaves but now we are free. The yearly observance of Passover reminds us that we can go from slavery into freedom and teaches us about the potential for change and redemption. On the other hand, the Book of Lamentations, which describes the destruction of ancient Jerusalem, portrays a world of chaos where mothers cannibalize

their young with no glimmer in sight of restoration. This text is woven into the Jewish liturgical year through the observance of Tishah B'Av (the Jewish day of communal mourning), when it is read aloud and traditionally accompanied by wailing. We leave Tishah B'Av services that evening in silence and grief, not with words of encouragement.

Tishah B'Av eve, an observance of hopelessness, and the hope-filled Passover are *both* sacred moments in the Jewish year. Likewise, Jewish spiritual caregivers are called upon to bear witness to the holiness within both types of responses to deep suffering. Even when there is no expectation for suffering to end in the future there is still companionship and connection in the present moment. And that is often enough.

The poet T. S. Elliot says all this in another way: "I said to my soul be still, and wait without hope; for hope would be hope of the wrong thing; wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith. But the faith, and the love, and the hope are all in the waiting."[1]

4. *N'chamah* (Comfort)

> *Before you know what kindness really is/you must lose things,/feel the future dissolve in a moment,/like salt in a weakened broth./What you held in your hand,/what you counted and carefully saved,/all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.*
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> —"Kindness" by Naomi Shyhbe Nye

While we can't dispel hopelessness, staying with someone *in* their hopelessness can lead to the *n'chamah* (comfort) of not suffering alone. In Jewish tradition upon a deep loss we comfort mourners by saying: "May God console you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem" (*HaMakom y'nachem etchem b'toch shaar av'lei Tziyon v'Y'rushalayim*). This formula does not offer comfort through inspiring hope in an afterlife or reunion with a lost loved one; nor does it speak to the loved one being free of suffering or other encouraging sentiments. Instead it offers comfort to the individual mourner through placing the devastation of her loss within the context of divine care, Jewish history, and all the losses of our people—the loss of the city of ancient Jerusalem and the ideal of a peaceful world represented by Zion. It comforts the mourner by

telling her that her loss is indeed devastating (as terrible as any national tragedy) and by reminding her that she is not alone.

We can help those who despair truly not to be alone by companioning them through their despair and by offering kindness. Kindness is the one thing human beings don't have to lose in life—eventually as we age all of us will lose objects we love, activities we enjoy, our health, our loved ones, our life. But we can be kind to each other even in death. This is what we learn in the Torah from Abraham who takes the trouble to purchase a cave to bury Sarah in, and from the way God personally buries Moses at the end of his life. It is what we reinforce every time we sit with someone in deep despair. And every time we allow someone to sit with us.

A friend of mine who has trouble with balance due to a brain injury once told me that when she falls down everyone rushes to help her get up, but in those first moments she needs to gather her thoughts and dignity and she does not want to be pulled to her feet. "I think people rush to help me up," she says, "because they are so uncomfortable with seeing an adult lying on the floor. But what I really need is for someone to get down on the ground with me." This simple teaching of what true kindness looks like is 99 percent of spiritual care—get down on the floor yourself before you drag someone to their feet!

5. The Valley of Deepest Darkness

> *The Eternal One is my shepherd; I lack nothing. God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me to waters in places of stillness; God renews my life; God guides me towards justice as befits God's name; Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff are before me— and they comfort me.*
>
> —Psalms 23:1–4

Getting down on the floor with someone who has momentarily stumbled can be anxiety provoking. But getting down on the ground with someone in deep despair can be dangerous. It is a balancing act to stay present with those who despair without being swallowed by their suffering. When we are accompanying someone in despair we are walking into the valley of deepest darkness and that takes a toll on even the strongest caregiver.

One of the ways I know to avoid getting lost in the valley is to acknowledge that I too need to be offered kindness, curiosity, and

companionship when journeying with a client to painful places. This can take the form of talking to rabbinic colleagues, debriefing with a therapist, or praying to God. Rejuvenation can also come through life-nourishing physical or spiritual practices such as time in nature, time with children or animals, art, or meditation, which help release feelings of despair.

Another less talked about way that can help us is to allow those we walk with to also walk with us. Lillian is a client of mine who lives with severe and chronic emotional and physical pain. She is also a person of deep and abiding faith in God. She often tells me that she asks God every day to let her die. Last time we were together she was in a place of especially deep despair after living with intolerable daily pain for eighteen years. She begged me to offer her something that might alleviate her suffering for even a moment. I read her Psalm 23 with the prayer that she would not feel alone in the valley of her suffering and her pain. She was calmed for a moment but soon felt desperate for more and asked me to read it to her again. This time, I asked her if she would read it to me. She did and for just that moment she was strong enough to accompany *me* through the terrain of her own valley of deepest darkness—a terrain she knows well; one that is etched on her heart.

I wish this was an article with a happy ending. But it is not. Many of those we serve will continue to suffer. And many of our own hearts will be broken. All I can say is that no one is alone in this situation. Despair is part of the human soul. I believe this is what is meant by the Chasidic saying "there is nothing as whole as a broken heart." Sitting with despair is challenging, and it is a part of what it means to be "whole-hearted" with one another.

This article grew out of a workshop the author co-led with Rabbi Natan Fenner at the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center for San Francisco Bay Area professional chaplains. Many thanks are due to Rabbi Fenner for his collaboration, collegial support, and contributions in developing these ideas.

Note

1. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *Four Quarters* (New York: Harcourt, 1943).