

BREATHING INTO THE RUBBLE

© Posted on July 2, 2021 by [Laynie Soloman](#)



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**This piece and the Torah behind it has been informed by almost a decade of friendship, chevruta-ship, and learning from & with SVARA Fellow Jess Belasco (b"H, thank G'd!).*

Over the past 16 months, I have felt over and over and over as though I am entering a new world. Each time new information is gleaned and shared, or new regulations are declared, my body, mind, and heart recalibrate (with more

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or less ease depending on the day), and just when they've recalibrated there is a new paradigm to incorporate. Over these past months, I've spoken with so many of y'all about the toll this recalibration has taken—on our nervous systems, on our already strained relationships, on our ability to continue to hold the boundaries we need, and beyond. This kind of upending and subsequent recalibration is part and parcel of my lived experience as a person who lives with OCD; for as long as I can remember I've moved through the world with acute attention paid to how I can incorporate new realities into my brain and body—only for them to shift moments later—without blowing a fuse.

For me, this moment of “re-opening” and “unmasking” has not brought the overwhelming sense of relief or joy that I've felt expected to express. I find myself holding new waves of tightness and confusion, even as I move through some truly beautiful moments. I've been grateful to gather in small groups around the Shabbat table, grateful to see members of my family, grateful to hug a friend whose face I've only seen across a far, masked distance. When seeing a member of my queer fam who I hadn't seen in over a year, we made the blessing together that is said over a long lost friend: *baruch atai adonai mechayei hametim*, Blessed are You G!d, who brings that which was dead to life.

These weeks have felt, in some moments, like a resurrection. At the same time, they have felt like moving through a graveyard. While resurrection (and the blessing that honors it) can serve as a powerful metaphor, sometimes it is...not. As I hold this gratitude for the moments of sweetness and connection that I've been able to bring to life, I know that even these small highly precarious behaviors (that for me still feel so new, so scary, and so stretchy), are impossible for others. In the earliest moments of the pandemic, teacher & comrade [Rabbi Elliot Kukla wrote of his experience](#):

“Taken together, the stark message to chronically sick, disabled people and elders is that we are ‘acceptable losses.’ The feeling

of being disposable is not new to me. It is knitted into my bones and sinews. It lives in my cells and the parasites in my gut. I already knew that for many of the doctors and policymakers that my health depends on, that my transgender, fat, disabled body is simply worth less than others' bodies. This is even more true for my black, brown, poor, disabled and ill friends. Each message of disposability in this pandemic rings like a bell in the hollows of my body, surfacing memories."

How can we, in our relationships and in our communities, move toward a recalibration that honors the pain, trauma, and isolation that has been lodged or resurfaces in our bones? How can those of us who are disabled, sick, elderly, and high-risk comrades be held and honored as we move through this time? What are the tools we need to recalibrate? And how can those of us who have moved through this time with other forms of trauma, discomfort, and pain attune ourselves to the needs of more vulnerable comrades? As I have been reflecting on, learning about, and feeling into these tensions in chevruta with trusted comrades, Torah has been profoundly medicinal for me, and this week I keep coming back to this image from the Rabbis in Masechet Berakhot:

אמר רב יצחק בר שמואל משמיה דרב: שלש משמרות הוי הלילה, ועל כל משמר ומשמר יושב הקדוש ברוך הוא ושואג כארי, ואומר: "אוי לי שבעונותיהם החרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היקלי והגליתים לבין אומות העולם"

Rav Yitzhak bar Shmuel said in the name of Rav: The night consists of three watches, and over each and every watch the Holy One, Blessed be G'd sits and roars like a lion, and says: "Woe to Me, that because of their transgressions I destroyed My house, burned My Temple and exiled them among the nations of the world."

After destroying the Temple (or, maybe, allowing the Temple to be destroyed), G'd "roars like a lion," with an earth-shattering, fear-inducing scream, crying out in rage at having done so, and having exiled the Jewish people. The gemara then introduces a story in which Rabbi Yosei walks

along the road and journeys through the ruins of Jerusalem looking for a place to pray. While on his journey, he encounters none other than the ghost of Elijah the prophet, who stands guard as Rabbi Yosei finishes praying in the ruins. When he finishes his prayer, Elijah scolds him for praying in the ruins. The story continues, with Rabbi Yosei narrating the events:

ואמר לי: בני, מה קול שמעתי בחורבה זו

ואמרתי לו: שמעתי בת קול שמנהמת כיונה ואמרת: "אוי לבנים
שבפגונותיהם החרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היכלי והגליתים לבין האומות"
ואמר לי: חייך ומי ראשך, לא שעה זו בלבד אמרת כן, אלא בכל יום ויום,
שלוש פעמים אמרת כן

Then Elijah said to me: What voice did you hear in that ruin?

I responded: I heard a bat kol (a heavenly voice), cooing like a dove, and she said: 'Woe to Me, that because of their transgressions I destroyed My house, burned My Temple and exiled them among the nations of the world.'

And Elijah said to me: By your life and by your head, not only did that voice cry out in that moment, but she cries out three times each and every day...

Rabbi Yosei explains that as he was praying on the ruins, he heard a heavenly voice that called out to him, proclaiming the very words with which our story was introduced: *'Woe to Me, that because of their transgressions I destroyed My house, burned My Temple and exiled them among the nations of the world.'* This time, though, instead of being expressed through the piercing roar of a lion, these words come to Rabbi Yosei through a dove cooing. Here G!d's voice provides comfort to Rabbi Yosei, offering a tender sense of G!d's loving yearning rather booming rage.

G!d's voice in this story is both a soothing, cooing dove, and a roaring lion. Our Rabbis here, I think, invite—or maybe even charge—us to hold both of these. Our ability to gather and invoke G!d's name in the midst of exile requires that we

acknowledge, whole heartedly, the ruins on which we stand. We cannot continue along a path that ignores the rubble on top of which we are living. We cannot plow forward to “return” to “business as usual,” and when we do, G!d’ voice will boom at us, in our bodies, in our hearts, and in our communities when we feel the reverberations and the impact of gaslighting and harm. We need to see, to be with, and to feel through the rubble that has been created, the grief and the trauma that we are holding, and the harm that is continuing to happen, which is far from over. And *yet*, at the same time, our sages have honored us as complex human beings, and have demanded that we hold more. As we hold the rubble, it is essential that we find the moments, when we can, in trusted, safe community, to allow the presence of G!d, Sacredness, and Transcendence to soothe us, to sing to us, to awaken our hearts to joy, to resurrected and newly created moments of connection, celebration, and healing.

As we continue to move through the period of the Jewish calendar known as the Three Weeks, a time of mourning between the [17th of Tammuz](#), which marks the breach of the first walls of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire and the [9th of Av](#) (which falls on Sunday, July 18th this Gregorian year), I invite y’all to explore this tension with me. I’ll be noticing when I find myself unable to hear the soothing doves, or when I find myself bypassing the rubble and grief. May we, through our learning, our chevrotot, and our connections to each other, this tradition, and this sacred time, find ourselves holding these sounds with awareness and open hearts, and may we, continue to heal, stretch, and heal some more, together.

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