

THE MELODY OF A BROKEN HEART

DR. SHALOM AUGENBAUM

I've just returned from the most paradoxical Shabbos of my life. A Shabbos of profound inspiration. Yet also of unbearable pain. It was filled with hope, yet shadowed by deep despair. It offered enlightenment, but left so many questions unanswered.

Nearly 100 people—men and women from every corner of Jewish life—gathered in Princeton, New Jersey, for Ohel's Weekend Retreat. A Shabbos for parents grieving the loss of an adult child. We were a diverse group: Litvish, Chassidish, Sephardic, Orthodox, Modern Orthodox. Among us were businesspeople, therapists, rabbis, writers, Roshei Yeshiva—you name it, they were there. Despite our differences, we were bound by a shared, heartbreaking experience. The loss of an adult child. For some, the loss of multiple children. Different circumstances, yes, but the pain—the deep, searing pain—was the same.

In psychology, we talk about trauma. We differentiate between capital "T" Trauma and lowercase "t" trauma to honor each person's unique experience. But this Shabbos, I came to understand something different. All-caps TRAUMA. A different category entirely. A type of suffering that defies categorization. A pain that transcends the usual definitions.

One of the presenters at the retreat shared a powerful insight. It struck me deeply. The Eskimos have over a hundred different words for snow. Words to describe the textures. The forms snow can take. The ways it interacts with their world. Each word captures a unique aspect of something that, to the rest of us, seems so singular.

In much the same way, our world has specific terms for those who suffer certain losses. We have words for those who are divorced. 'Widows' and 'widowers' for those who have lost a spouse. 'Orphans' for those who have lost both parents. But for parents who have lost a child? *There is no word.* No name. It's as if the depth of this loss, this grief, is beyond words. Beyond what language can capture or categorize.

I'm still processing it all. The stories. The tears. The broken hearts. The cracked souls.

It was a Shabbos that left no soul untouched. No heart unbroken.

One of the most profound moments for me was sitting with my Rebbi, who, together with his wonderful Rebbetzin, had suffered the tragic loss of their adult daughter. The dynamic between Rebbi and talmid is unique—marked by a certain distance, a reverence that defines the relationship. But over this Shabbos, those distinctions melted away. We were no longer just Rebbi and talmid. We were two fathers. Grieving an irreplaceable loss.

No titles. No roles. Just raw, shared pain.

At this gathering, titles, statuses, and even knowledge faded into irrelevance. We were bound by something far deeper—an unspoken membership in a club that no one would ever choose to join.

For nearly three years, since the day I lost my *bechor*, my Yehuda, on Chaf-Beis Av, I have struggled to reintegrate into the world of the living. The world of the "normal." I've tried to find my place in a world that moves forward, even as parts of me remain stuck in the past.

Hidden away. These are parts of myself that the rest of the world cannot understand. Parts they cannot even begin to comprehend.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that the world is a mirror. The people we encounter reflect both our underdeveloped parts and our strengths. But for those of us who have lost a child, that reflection is distorted. Inverted. It serves only to highlight how different we are from the rest of the world.

Yet this Shabbos, for the very first time since Yehuda's death, all parts of me felt welcomed. Present. Honored. I found myself in a space where I could allow these hidden, painful parts of myself to be fully seen. As I listened to the other parents, I saw myself in their pain. Their grief. Their struggle. Their desperate fight to move forward. To live. I saw in them a reflection of my own soul. A reflection that finally felt true and whole.

One of the most striking realizations from this Shabbos was how time seems to lose its power when it comes to the loss of a child. Whether a year has passed or twenty, the absence of a child remains as sharp and as painful as if they had died yesterday. I saw this truth in the eyes of every parent I spoke with. The wound of loss never fully heals; it simply becomes a part of who we are.

But amidst all the pain, there was also hope—a fragile, flickering light that refused to be extinguished. Being both a presenter and participant at this retreat was an odd, indescribable feeling. I found myself caught between two worlds. Like being both a black hole and the sun.

Black holes are powerful. They pull everything inward, consuming all around them. The sun, on the other hand, gives. It offers light and warmth to everything in its orbit.

As I stood in that room, surrounded by parents who had all suffered unimaginable loss, I was struck by their strength. Their resilience. Each of us had been a victim of life's cruellest twist. But there's a critical difference between being a victim and defining

oneself as one. The former is about what has happened to you; the latter is about how you choose to define who you are. These parents, though broken and grieving, had not let their loss define them. They found ways to continue. To live. To honor the memory of their children by living lives of meaning and purpose.

This Shabbos was a testament to the paradox of grief—how it can coexist with hope. How despair can walk hand in hand with resilience. It was a reminder that even in our darkest moments, there is light to be found, if only we allow ourselves to see it.

As I continue to process the experience of this Shabbos, I am left with a deep sense of gratitude—for the connections I made, for the stories I heard, for the shared pain that somehow made my own burden feel a little lighter. But more than anything, I am grateful for the reminder that even in the midst of all-caps TRAUMA, there is still hope. Still life. Still a reason to keep moving forward.

I learned that while I may feel like the black hole, I can choose to be the sun.

I sat on a panel with others who had also experienced the death of an adult child. Professionals. Non-professionals. We shared our stories. Our grief. The unique ways we've learned to navigate the unfathomable loss that binds us. I spoke about "grief languages," emphasizing how vital it is to honor our grief language—especially recognizing the different ways that men and women, husbands and wives, express their sorrow. Grief, like any language, has its own dialects. Each shaped by personal history, personality, and the depth of the relationship lost.

After the panel, a woman approached me. She had been listening intently. Something I said struck a deep chord within her. She told me that in all the years since they lost their son, she had never thanked her husband for being by her side. Never acknowledged how he had honored her way of grieving, even when it differed from his own. After hearing me speak, she realized this. That night, she went to him and thanked him. *Truly* thanked him. For standing with her. For supporting her in the only way he knew how.

I began to cry. All the discomfort, all the doubts I had about attending this retreat, vanished. My presence, my words, brought about a moment of connection and healing for one person.

I still grapple with unanswerable questions, with feelings that remain unresolved.

Like so many before me, I refuse to stop mourning, to stop grieving. I see myself in the words of my great-grandfather Yaakov: "I will go down to the grave mourning for my son" (Bereishis 37:35). And like my great-grandmother Rochel, I too will continue to cry—"wailing, bitter weeping—refusing to be comforted, for her children, who are gone" (Yirmiyahu 31:15).

Judaism sets limits to grief—*shiva*, *sheloshim*, a year. We're told that no grief should be endless. *Hashem* Himself questions those who weep beyond the appointed time, asking, "Do you think you're more compassionate than Me?" (Moed Katan 27b). And yet, Yaakov refused to be comforted. Rochel continues to cry out for her children.

This profound defiance resonates deeply with me.

When my time comes to stand before the *Ribono shel Olam*, I will acknowledge His question. But alongside Yaakov and Rochel, I will confess, "Master of the Universe, it is true—I am not more compassionate than You. *But I am more human than You.* And so, I can never stop grieving."

There's a legend about Napoleon Bonaparte, the French Emperor. Passing a synagogue on Tisha B'Av, he heard the sounds of lamentation. Curious, he turned to one of his officers and asked, "What are the Jews crying for?"

"They're mourning the loss of Jerusalem," the officer replied.

"How long ago did they lose it?" Napoleon asked, expecting the grief to be fresh.

"Over 1,700 years ago," the officer responded.

Napoleon was astounded! "A people who can mourn for Jerusalem for so long," he said, "will surely see it restored to them."

Yes, I refuse to be comforted. I continue to mourn. Because in doing so, I also keep hope alive. Through my grief, I cling to the belief that one day—one day very soon—I will be reunited with my Yehuda. With all of us.

A friend of mine asked me, "What was the message from this gathering?" My answer was simple: **We are the message.** Each one of us at that retreat is a living testament. We remind the world of a truth that's too often forgotten—never take your children for granted. Not for a moment. No matter how far they may seem, no matter the challenges they face or the mistakes they make. Hold them close. Show them love. Let no day pass without expressing how much they mean to you.

If you asked anyone at that Shabbos, they'd tell you the same. They would endure every challenge of raising a child, every sleepless night, every moment of heartache, just to have their son or daughter back. No question. No hesitation.

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announced the Torah's guidelines for men exempted from going to war (see Rambam, Hil. Melachim 7:2). The officers of the army would then repeat this to the troops, and those who were exempt would be sent home.

One of the major differences between the Kohen Gadol and the special Kohen is the issue of succession. When a Kohen Gadol dies, his son is entitled to inherit his position. This is specifically stated in Parashas Tetzaveh (Shemos 29:29,30), The holy vestments of Aharon shall belong to his sons after him... the Kohen who succeeds him from his sons. Rashi explains that if the Kohen Gadol has a son who is qualified to take his place, he is chosen as his father's successor. The Rambam (Hil. Klei HaMikdash 4:20) rules that this is true even if the son is not as great as the father in wisdom, as long as he has the proper fear of Heaven. This applies even if there is another candidate for the position whose fear of Heaven is greater than that of the son. Rambam adds that the same applies to any position of influence over the community: a son takes precedence over someone else as long as the son is qualified (see Rashi to Vayikra 16:32.)

A Kohen *meshuach milchamah* is different. The Rambam rules (ibid. 21) that his position is not inherited by his son but is given to the most qualified individual (see Radvaz ibid.).

Why is this so? R' Moshe Sternbuch, in Ta'am Vodaas (Shemos, pp. 196-197), offers an interesting explanation. The Kohen *meshuach milchamah* had a unique

task. He was a "military chaplain" whose job was to encourage the troops at a time of great crisis: war. The ability to remain strong and confident under such stressful conditions and when facing such grave danger was not necessarily a trait passed down in the genes. While a person may be an inspiring leader in times of emergency, his son might be totally unsuitable for that role and, therefore, the post of Kohen *meshuach milchamah* was not passed down to one's children.

Today there is no Beis HaMikdash and no position of Kohen *meshuach milchamah*. However, the lesson of the difference in the rules of succession between a Kohen Gadol and a Kohen *meshuach milchamah* still has great relevance. Rav Sternbuch quotes an incident involving the Chofetz Chaim where this issue came up: When the rav of a certain city passed away, the question arose as to who should succeed him. The townspeople wanted a certain well-known *talmid chacham* to fill the post of the deceased rav. The rav's family said since he had left behind a son who was a *talmid chacham*, by right the position should go to him. The townspeople strongly disagreed, and a major dispute broke out. Finally, both sides agreed to present this dilemma to the Chofetz Chaim and abide by his decision.

After careful deliberation, the Chofetz Chaim came to the conclusion that the community did not have to take the late rav's son as his successor and could choose whomever they wanted. He based his decision on the concept that the position of the Kohen *meshuach milchamah* is

not hereditary because it requires a "man of war" to fill the post. How could the position then be given to his son if the son himself is not a man of war? Therefore, concluded the Chofetz Chaim, the same applies concerning a rabbinical position in modern times. It is true that the position of rav should normally follow the rules of succession and be given to the son of the previous rav. That was possible in earlier times when the main task of a rav was to render *halachic* decisions, teach Torah, and decide financial disputes between people. Then a rabbinical position was a matter of sanctity which followed the rules of succession.

Unfortunately, concluded the Chofetz Chaim, in his times the task of a rav was vastly different. The *kedushah* and purity of Torah in all aspects of Jewish living was under siege. The onslaught of the Haskalah and Zionism threatened the very foundation of Torah life; the eternity of the nation was under fierce attack. It was not enough for a rav to simply be a teacher of Torah and a judge to decide financial disputes, as vitally important as those tasks are. He had to be a fearless warrior to bravely fight the enemies of Hashem and protect Klal Yisrael from the many adversaries it faced from within and without. Not everyone can perform the mission because it takes a special kind of person to lead this battle for survival. A rabbinical position cannot simply be passed down to the son of the rav if he is not an energetic, fearless "man of war." It must be given to the best man for the job, someone who can protect the

people and lead them to victory over those who wish to destroy them.

The Chofetz Chaim uttered these words many decades ago. What would he say in our times when the challenges of daily life are much more intense than they were in the times of the Chofetz Chaim, and assimilation continues to eat up the fabric of Yiddishkeit? Therefore it is so vitally important for Klal Yisrael to have qualified people who can lead them to oppose the constant onslaught of the *yetzer hara* and his many cohorts.

From where will these "men of war" come if not from the yeshivos and *kollelim* of our time? It takes many years of unrelenting training in the great military academies to develop the generals needed to lead the nation in battle. So too (I'havdil) must bnei Torah devote years and years of total immersion in Torah study to develop into the future leaders of the Nation of Hashem. There are no shortcuts to Torah greatness. Only when a person devotes himself single-mindedly to the growth in Torah and perfection of *middos* will he be able to become a *talmid chacham* who can make his mark on the eternity of Klal Yisrael.

Parashas Shoftim is usually read on the first Shabbos of the month of Elul, when the summer *bein hazmanim* (vacation) period is over and yeshivah students return to their intensive studies. It is a time to recognize the vitally important task they are training for. This realization should give them the greatest impetus to succeed. Hatzlachah rabbah!

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My personal takeaway from this Shabbos is best captured by a story about the renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman. Born in 1945, he contracted polio at just four years old. Since then, he's had to wear metal braces on his legs and walk with crutches. But that didn't stop him. He became one of the most celebrated violinists of our time, performing on stages around the world.

At one concert, Perlman walked out on stage, laid down his crutches, and began to tune his violin. Suddenly, a loud crack echoed through the hall—a string had snapped. He didn't pause. He didn't send for a new string. Instead, he signaled the conductor to begin and played the entire concerto on just three strings. When the performance ended, the audience erupted in

applause, moved by his resilience. Perlman simply said, "Our task is to make music with what remains."

That story hit me hard, especially after this Shabbos. To my brothers and sisters who I've come to love and befriend over this past weekend, I want to say thank you. Thank you for reminding me of our shared responsibility. To continue making music, even with what remains. Meaning-making—finding purpose in the face of trauma—is at the core of healing. You reminded me of that truth, and I am deeply grateful.

In the end, this Shabbos wasn't just about grief. It was about the paradox of loss and hope. Of despair and resilience. It reminded us that even in our darkest moments, we have a responsibility. To create. To live. To honor those we've lost by living lives of meaning and

purpose. We may never stop grieving, but we can still make music with what remains.

As I continue to process this Shabbos, I see the parallel with the journey from Tisha B'Av to Shabbos Nachamu. It's a journey not just for us as individuals, but for the entire Jewish nation. Tisha B'Av is when the music of our collective life stops. We sit in silence. We mourn the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash. We feel the weight of countless tragedies. It's a day of profound grief. A day when the burden of our losses feels almost unbearable.

But then comes Shabbos Nachamu. The Shabbos of comfort. The day we begin to revive the music of our nation's soul. It's a reminder that while the music may pause, it's never lost forever. We hold onto the promise of *Nechama*—comfort. The ultimate hope

for the coming of *Mashiach*. The day when all our tears will be wiped away. When the broken pieces of our lives will be made whole again.

This Ohel Shabbos, like Shabbos Nachamu, reminded me that even as we mourn, we carry within us the melody of a broken heart that echoes with the potential for future joy. May we all find strength in each other. And may we soon see the day when our song is complete again—not just for us, but for the entire Jewish people.

Dr. Shalom Augenbaum is the Clinical Director of Tikvah at Ohel. He deeply thanks David Mandel, Tzivya Reiter, Cheryl Chernofsky, Norman Blumenthal, Chaya Kohn, Debbie Akerman, and Miriam Turk for their compassion and dedication in creating this healing and transformative Shabbos.