

A Culture of Endless Mourning

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Bereavement and mourning play a powerful role in Israeli culture. We belong, after all, to a people with a long history of collective grief, one that casts its shadow over our lives even today. We know, as our memorial days remind us time and again, that it is our eternal duty to remember our dead and honor their memory. We must not forget what has happened to our people and what it has suffered. We have come to see this duty as a given, as an almost sacred responsibility whose purpose is self-explanatory. And for those who have lost loved ones in the Holocaust, in Israel's wars, or in terrorist attacks, the duty to remember—and to mourn—seems even more obvious and unquestionable.

Each encounter with death is traumatic, a painful psychological blow which is not easily overcome. Even in the case of natural death, it is immensely difficult to reconcile oneself to the loss of a loved one and to continue leading a “normal” life. The trauma is, of course, far weightier and more devastating if a loss is the result of an unnatural death. Thus may Israelis be said to be in a state of perpetual grief: Television regularly broadcasts into our homes the anguished images of those who have lost

loved ones in terrorist attacks. National memorial ceremonies recall, and thus reinforce, the ongoing traumas experienced by Holocaust survivors and by the family members of soldiers who have fallen in Israel's wars. Israeli authors, artists, and filmmakers have laid bare for us, in evocative ways, the nightmarish inner worlds of those haunted by death. And visits to the Nazi death camps, which have now become part of the standard curriculum of Israeli high schools, make the horrors of the Holocaust that much more real, if no more comprehensible. Clearly, the collective act of bereavement and mourning has become an integral and indispensable part of our national identity, just as the destruction of the Temple and centuries of antisemitic persecution play a critical role in our Jewish identity. What does this do to us as a people? And how does this affect us as a nation?

Undoubtedly it changes us. We relate to Holocaust survivors, for example, as though they were different people (an approach exemplified by the title of renowned Israeli author Yehudit Hendel's 1950 book, *They Are Different People*),¹ whose experience of profound suffering requires different treatment: More respect, more affection, more patience. Similarly do we treat parents who have lost children in Israel's wars and, of late, bereaved siblings as well. Following an increased awareness of combat stress reaction, our former soldiers are treated as different people too, from whom less can be expected. Finally, we feel that the Jewish people's experience of the Holocaust has made us a different nation and that one must visit Yad Vashem in order to understand us, our worldview, and our behavior. We expect other peoples to recognize and pay homage to our past sufferings and to judge us with them in mind.

These observations are in no way intended to underestimate the severity of the trauma suffered by Jews who have been through the Holocaust, or the crushing grief of those who have lost children or siblings in Israel's wars. Nor are they meant as a criticism of the country's practice of commemorating Holocaust victims or fallen soldiers by means of national memorial days, which indeed serve an important collective function. It is my firm belief that one cannot hope to understand Israel without first understanding the

impact of the Holocaust as well as the price we have paid for our numerous wars of survival. Yet I also believe that Israeli culture demonstrates an unhealthy, even dangerous fixation on grief. Perhaps more troubling, Israeli culture has come to perceive mourning as a permanent state. Regrettably, this cultural approach to bereavement disregards, and even impedes, individual efforts to resume a normal life. Ironically, it is also at odds with the Jewish tradition, which emphasizes recovery from loss as the natural and ideal human condition.

To the bereaved, every death is traumatic, a seemingly unbearable experience that can trigger the most extreme of emotional responses. Along with grief, depression, and guilt, there is primarily a feeling of intense, almost physical pain, as if a vital organ has been removed. There is the difficulty of reconciling oneself to the loss, the urge to inflict harm upon oneself, even the wish to join the deceased. There is a feeling of indistinct yet passionate rage, at times directed toward oneself, and at times toward others. And in the case of an unnatural death, there is a desire for vengeance. Bereavement separates a person from the normal flow of life, making it difficult for him to function both emotionally and physically. One's grief may even silence the will and the will power to live. It may effect a crisis of values by subverting prior distinctions between good and evil. It may, in extreme cases, result in a host of antisocial, even violent behaviors.

Yet despite its universal aspects, bereavement, like other human experiences, is deeply influenced by cultural settings. As such, different cultures demonstrate particular emotional and cognitive perceptions of death and the trauma of losing a loved one. Different cultures define their own modes of mourning, providing specific mechanisms for the relief of the negative and potentially destructive feelings to which grief can give rise. Ancient mourning customs attest to this, especially (although not exclusively) those that applied to women: The act of cutting off or burning one's hair, smearing one's face with mud, or maiming oneself (the Charrúa people of

South America, for example, had a custom of chopping off a finger and casting it into a loved one's grave) were all common practices in early cultures. In addition, both bereaved men and women abstained from eating, secluded themselves in their homes, or walked around naked, exposed to harsh weather. Some mourning customs express a refusal to accept the death of a loved one, such as embalming dead bodies, burying the dead with their belongings, preserving the remains of the dead, and maintaining and adorning the gravesite—not to mention the various legends of resurrection and the afterlife. These rituals are attempts by both individuals and entire societies to deceive themselves into believing that the deceased are still in some sense among the living and thus lessen the pain of their loss.

Biblical Judaism distanced itself from these rites, with their emphasis on suicidal rituals and the communion between living and dead. In stark opposition to the practices of the surrounding Canaanite culture, it forbade mourners from self-inflicted injury: "You are the children of the Lord your God: You shall not gash yourselves or make any baldness between your eyes for the dead. For thou art a holy people to the Lord thy God, and the Lord has chosen thee to be a special possession to himself, out of all the nations that are upon the earth."² The justification given for this prohibition, along with that of other general prohibitions against self-inflicted injury, is that the living person is sacred, for he was created *b'tzelem elohim*, in God's image.³ Judaism sanctifies life and not death, which it views as impure. This is an idea that has distinguished it from other religions throughout history.

This is not to say that the Bible is indifferent to bereavement. On the contrary, the authors of the biblical stories knew well how difficult it is for even the greatest of men to reconcile themselves to the death of a loved one. King David, for example, upon hearing of Absalom's death, breaks down publicly, crying out, "O Absalom, my son, my son!"—in spite of the fact that Absalom was his own bitter enemy. Nevertheless, the biblical narrator places wise if piercing words in the mouth of David's adviser Joab,

Thou hast shamed this day the faces of all thy servants, who this day have saved thy life, and the lives of thy sons and of thy daughters, and the lives of thy wives, and the lives of thy concubines; in that thou lovest thy enemies, and hatest thy friends. For thou hast declared this day, that thou regardest neither princes nor servants: for this day I perceive, that if Absalom had lived, and all we had died this day, then it had pleased thee well. Now therefore arise, go out, and speak comfortably to thy servants.⁴

Joab demands that David cease his self-destructive behavior, and David does so. In yet another biblical narrative, David demonstrates his remarkable strength of character by accepting the death of another beloved son to illness. Thinking that self-denial might contribute to his son's recovery, David practices the mourning customs for the seven days preceding his son's death. And yet, after the death itself, he ceases to mourn. David explains his behavior to his bewildered servants in the following astounding words: "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept; for I said: Who can tell? God may be gracious to me, and the child may live. But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not come back to me."⁵

In fact, an entire book of the Bible is devoted to the subject of bereavement: the book of Job. Here the Bible describes the unbridgeable abyss that separates the grieving from those who would attempt to comfort them. As the Hebrew poet Zelda wrote,

The consolers come
to the outer courtyard
and stand by the gate that faces
the valley of the shadow of death
with its terror all around.
Standing by the gate is all
they can bear to do.
My soul, too, is miles
from the I of the weeper.

Inevitably.
O creator of nights and wind
this terrible weeping is aimed at You—
Be not far away.
Let not millions of light-years
stand like a barrier
between You and Job.⁶

Although Job rejects the comfort offered him by his friends, experience shows that this kind of supportive circle is vital. It not only provides the mourner with much needed solace, but also grants him the strength to carry on with life. Moreover, this circle can provide the external assistance necessary to help expel the explosive emotional tension that may build up in a bereaved family. Christians customarily compare Job to Jesus, but according to a Jewish reading of the book, Job's virtue is found *not* in his suffering, but rather in his ability to move past his own grief and thus hear God's words out of the whirlwind. Upon receiving revelation, Job comes to realize that his early, anguished protests were the indignant cries of a child. They are the sounds man makes immediately following a trauma, when all is anger and woe. Though the Bible does not deny this response—on the contrary, it grants it a powerful literary stylization—it also makes clear that man is meant to transcend this stage of mourning. Suffering is not essential to the realization of God's image in man.

In its concern for alleviating the suffering of the bereaved, Judaism reveals its profound sensitivity to the emotional catastrophe that is the death of a loved one. Notwithstanding this concern, however, Jewish mourning customs require that the mourner's public bereavement follow a predetermined path. For example, during the first seven days of mourning, called the *shiva*, the bereaved is exempt from those commandments that fall within the category of *bein adam l'havero*, or those which involve interaction with other people. Such an exemption is also given to a groom on his wedding day and a leper throughout his illness. In effect, this exemption constitutes

a temporary removal from life itself. For like the bridegroom and the leper, the bereaved—particularly in the initial stage of mourning—is in a state of emotional upheaval. He may suffer a spiritual collapse and take leave of his senses. Therefore, he is rendered temporarily unaccountable for his actions. As such, while the community is obligated to visit the mourner, there is much wisdom behind the custom of not visiting during the first three days of his bereavement: Not only may the comforter be confronted with an overpowering and devastating display of emotion, but the bereaved himself may not yet be able to communicate and might inadvertently offend his well-meaning visitors.

The ancient Jewish period of mourning is meant to conclude one year after death, when the bones of the deceased were collected. During the time of the Mishna, it was customary to rebury these bones in sarcophagi at a permanent gravesite: “R. Meir said: One may gather the bones of his father or mother because it is a joy to him. But R. Jose said: It grieves him.”⁷ What is the purpose of this custom, shocking as it may appear today? I would suggest that it represents yet more proof of Judaism’s profound insight into the human mind. The mourner’s physical contact with the bodily remains of the deceased surely extinguished any illusions that the dead were still, in some sense, among the living. It is also possible that the custom sought to counter the tendency to idealize the memory of the deceased and to pine for him at the expense of the living. Jewish mourning customs therefore demonstrate a consistent attempt to prevent the mourner from severing his ties to life as well as from rendering himself morally unaccountable for his actions as a result of his grief. They are redefined after a week, a month, and a year, expressing a perception of bereavement as a healing *process*, one which has its own internal logic but also requires external therapeutic intervention. Both the individual’s ritual framework for mourning and the assistance provided by his society combine to instigate recovery and thus restore the grieving to life.

The dynamic of a healing process applies to the mourner’s community as well. “[One who meets a mourner] after twelve months... does not

tender him [words of] consolation.”⁸ In addition, unlike in Christianity, a Jewish cemetery must not be a place of pilgrimage, nor is it customary to adorn graves with flowers.⁹ On the contrary, Judaism considers the burial site a place of *impurity*, and visits to it should be limited. Jewish mourning customs also firmly oppose any displays of ostentation, lest the poor be embarrassed by their inability to honor the dead in lavish fashion. The Talmud states: “Provisions should not be conveyed to the house of the mourning on an [ornamental] tray, salver, or fruit basket, but in a [plain] basket.”¹⁰ Finally, the mandated recitation of the mourner’s kaddish and “El Malei Rahamim” (“God, Full of Compassion”), the prayer for the repose of dead souls, are meant to calm the mourner, to curb his anger or feelings of guilt, and to remind him—by virtue of the prayers’ communal response—that he is part of a larger society, one that is prepared to provide him with comfort and support. In Judaism, not only is the individual prohibited from relinquishing himself to his own, private grief, but his *community* is forbidden to allow this to happen.

Modern psychology may critique religious laws that expect such intense emotions to conform to a homogeneous method of mourning. It may also question whether this method of mourning indeed facilitates complete emotional release. Could it not, after all, inadvertently lead to harmful repression of the mourner’s negative emotions? The answer appears to be no. Most psychologists today agree that externalizing negative emotions is not in itself conducive to their alleviation. Moreover, they concur that cultural mechanisms, if properly utilized, are effective aids for coping with such emotions. By providing a legitimate outlet through which to express grief’s diminishing intensity, Jewish mourning customs help to regulate and calm the mourner’s pain, prevent mourning from becoming a permanent condition, and assist a person’s natural inclination to resume his everyday life.¹¹

And yet, in contrast to biblical Judaism’s aversion to granting private mourning a state of permanence, rabbinic Judaism throughout the ages has displayed a decisive commitment to the notion of an ongoing *collective* bereavement. We see this in the language of Jewish prayers, in specific religious

rituals, and in days of national mourning and public fasts. This type of communal mourning, the rabbis acknowledged, can play a positive role, as it reinforces national solidarity and reminds us that “we have been there before.” Such mourning contributes to our confidence in a continued national existence as well as our willingness to fight for it.

When these are indeed the outcomes, such collective rituals are not only justified, but also a necessary and important part of shaping and sustaining a national identity. If, however, the emotional outcome is not optimism about the future, but bitterness over the past, these acts may become pathological and serve a negative purpose. For can these national memorial days not also nurture a sense of distrust, hostility, and vindictiveness toward other nations? Indeed, Jewish sources recognize the latter emotions as a natural, albeit extremely dangerous, result of acts of communal mourning, as exemplified by the book of Psalms: “O daughter of Babel, marked for devastation; happy is he who shall repay thee thy recompense for what thou hast done to us. Happy is he who shall seize and dash thy little ones against the rock.”¹² Likewise, on Purim we are commanded to “remember what Amalek did unto thee” and on Passover we pour wine out of our cups to signify our delight in the plagues brought upon Egypt. Yet the book of Proverbs also warns us, “Do not rejoice when thy enemy falls.”¹³ Thus Judaism gives expression to both extremes in the process of bereavement: The psalm quoted above and the Passover ritual re-create the emotional intensity of the immediate experience of loss, while the verse in Proverbs represents the prudence of one who has been comforted and has consequently moved beyond his grief.

Jewish national mourning is designed to channel private rituals of bereavement into an enhanced feeling of solidarity and a common fate. They are *not* meant to glorify death or make a virtue out of suffering. On the contrary, the Jewish approach to bereavement takes pains to emphasize the priority of life and the living. For example, Jewish rites of national mourning such as the fast of the Ninth of Av seek to preserve the connection with something alive and present—in this case, with Jerusalem—and *not* to

foster a sense of identification with the dead. This, as we shall see, stands in stark contrast to the Israeli idea of national mourning, which is marked by a near-obsessive preoccupation with sorrow and death.

In truth, the Zionist approach to mourning owes more to Christianity and to European romanticism than it does to Judaism. Both of these traditions are marked by the worship of death. Self-sacrifice, after all, lies at the heart of Christian mythology, which sanctifies Jesus' death on the cross. Catholics and Orthodox Christians venerate the image of the lifeless Jesus and other martyrs who chose the path of pain and suffering. Their bodies are exhibited everywhere. It is as if the Christian is in a constant state of mourning: He has not, nor cannot, bury his dead. Moreover, unlike in Judaism, in Christianity it is a willingness to relinquish and abstain from earthly life that is the mark of the holy man, one who aspires to resemble God. The Christian cemetery is therefore a cherished and sacred place, one in which the living are invited to dwell freely and at length. The Christian befriends death, allays the encounter with it, and beatifies it, thus blurring the distinction between life and death altogether. Christianity has succeeded in creating a cult of mourning, in particular of the mother for her son. In the same vein, European romanticism, which served as the basis for many national movements in the modern era, glorified heroic death as the most sublime expression of human existence.

Although Jews traditionally rejected the exaltation of death and suffering, emphasizing instead the importance of life, some proponents of modern Judaism adopted Christian and romantic motifs of sublime anguish and heroic sacrifice. These European-educated Jews sought to recast Judaism in accordance with European cultural standards. As a result, the idea of the Jew's fate as a repetition of the suffering of Jesus abounded in Jewish thought, art, and literature in the first quarter of the twentieth century. (Marc Chagall's paintings of Jesus as a Jew are perhaps the most famous of many examples.) Influenced by the prevailing moods during Russia's

revolutionary period, Jewish literature of the early twentieth century exhibited many expressions of the idea that the suffering of innocents is a necessary sacrifice for the greater collective good. The best-known examples are Uri Tzvi Greenberg's Yiddish poems from the 1920s, Avraham Shlonsky's poem "Deathbed" (1924),¹⁴ Yitzhak Lamdan's poem "Masada" (1927),¹⁵ and Natan Alterman's works "Joy of the Poor" (1941) and "The Silver Platter" (1947).¹⁶ Zionist leaders and the framers of Zionist political culture also continued, in the formative years of the state, to give credence to the romantic idea that suffering and even dying for the Zionist cause is honorable and sacred.

This perception of the Zionist struggle has all but disappeared in Israel today. To us, mourning the loss of a loved one in a terror attack or military operation is not an event of mythological significance, but rather an all too familiar and tangible part of our everyday experience. Only a few identify with the words of Saul Tchernichovsky, "Here they are—our best sons, youths of pure dreams";¹⁷ or those of Alterman, "Whether the road be strenuous or treacherous; whether not only one will be stricken; we cherish you, our Homeland; we will devote ourselves to you in battle and in toil."¹⁸ Today, the grief of parents whose children have fallen in wars defending Israel is no longer portrayed as a willing sacrifice for the homeland, as it was in the early years of the state. Instead, we relate to this sort of loss mainly through psychological terminology, in particular the concept of "trauma."

Trauma is ubiquitous in Israeli life. Every war and every battle leaves a trail of traumatized soldiers. Combat stress reaction—a concept that was not even in use prior to the 1973 Yom Kippur War but today describes the long-term mental condition suffered by a large number of IDF combatants—has been depicted in literature and film as an overpowering force, one with which its victims may struggle indefinitely. Then there is the Holocaust, the traumatic nature of which needs no explanation. Of late, the perception of its victims as irreversibly traumatized by their experiences has been gaining

salience. Indeed, restitution payments are given to Holocaust survivors not only for lost property or diminished earning capacity, but also for mental damages, based on the assumption that the horrors they experienced cannot be blotted out.

Another uniquely Israeli trauma is the new immigrant's encounter with the local population. Israeli psychologists describe numerous cases of integration-induced distress among Russian and Ethiopian immigrants, some of which have resulted in suicide or even murder. This phenomenon recalls the trauma suffered by Holocaust survivors and immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries who arrived in the land of Israel in the 1940s and 1950s. Undoubtedly, the fact that Israel is a state of refugees gathered from around the globe, each suffering from both personal and collective traumas, makes it difficult, if not frequently impossible, for us to attend to the particular needs and suffering of others. The state's current failure to absorb the waves of immigrants from Africa and the Soviet Union attests to the fact that doing justice is far more difficult than complaining about injustice.

And then there are women who have suffered domestic and sexual violence. There are children who have been neglected or abused at the hands of their parents. Road accidents, which kill hundreds and maim innumerable others every year, leave the casualties and their families in a post-traumatic state. Not to mention divorce—is that not also a trauma for the couple, and certainly for their children? Even growing up on a kibbutz may be traumatic—at least according to Nahshon Goltz, who sued his kibbutz for mental damages on account of being separated from his parents and forced to sleep in the “children's house.”¹⁹ Is there anyone left in Israel who has not fallen victim to one trauma or another?

Today, we treat every loss as a trauma. There are certain traumas, however, that may be credited with generating a founding myth. The trauma of terrorist attacks, of losing a child in war, of the Holocaust, and of the new immigrant's encounter with the Israeli population—these are the painful experiences that actively shape a collective Israeli identity. They generate a

narrative that identifies both the individual Israeli and Israeli society as a whole as victims of undeserved tragedy who will suffer profound long-term psychological damage—damage that molds their character, their personality, and their response to the world.

The psychological paradigm has profoundly changed our understanding of grief. The experience of loss, we are told, leaves deep psychological wounds, the traces of which cannot be expunged. Thus, the act of mourning is perceived as a continuous post-traumatic condition, even when the affected person displays no specific pathological symptoms. As with any trauma, bereavement has been blamed for a host of abnormal and antisocial responses, including shock, guilt, and depression, along with anger, vindictiveness, and even suicidal tendencies. Moreover, if grief is indeed a pathological psychological condition, can we demand responsible and moral behavior from individuals in a state of mourning? If the post-traumatic condition is permanent, it seems that we cannot. The consequences of perceiving the individual and society through a psychoanalytic lens is the mythologization of trauma, making it a primal emotional state determined by forces greater than man and against which man cannot prevail.

This perception has permeated our collective consciousness and is reflected in our media, our art and literature, and even our educational system. Israeli culture, I believe, has embraced this view of trauma—and thus, of mourning—as a permanent and untreatable state. Journalists, for example, and especially television personalities, exploit the suffering of the bereaved in the service of politics—specifically, to attack the political establishment. They encourage traumatized victims to re-construct their experiences in order to evoke such emotions as anger, protest, and vindictiveness—even when the victims themselves might prefer to hasten the healing process and return to normal life. On the basis of a superficial understanding of the psychoanalytic method, according to which subconscious forces more

powerful than the human will and much stronger than reason cause irreversible damage, the Israeli media has entrenched the idea of trauma at the center of the national discourse, with grave consequences.

In her 1991 book *The Mountain of Losses*, Yehudit Hendel depicts the devotion bereaved family members display toward the care of their children's graves as the center of their lives, an unconscious substitute for the care of the children themselves.²⁰ Those who cannot participate in this obsessive behavior end up taking their own lives, unable to bear the pain of grief. The extreme difficulty parents have in resigning themselves to the death of a child can, Hendel demonstrates, create a kind of communion with death. Thus is it common for spouses to pass away following the death of their partners, and for those in mourning to fall ill. In her poem "My Peace" the Hebrew poet Zelda describes the continued, living connection between a widow and her dead husband.²¹ Likewise, many Israeli literary works portray the experience of the Holocaust, the loss of a child in Israel's wars, and even the hardships associated with immigration to Israel as post-traumatic conditions that persist throughout life.

In a culture imbued with psychoanalytic thought, it is hardly surprising that so many literary works feature a protagonist in a post-traumatic state who meets with an unhappy, frequently self-destructive end. It is impossible, they imply, to escape the specter of trauma without some sort of apocalyptic outpouring of repressed feelings. This is the common denominator in the novels of Hendel; the stories of Amos Oz, particularly *Where the Jackals Howl*;²² and the early stories of A.B. Yehoshua.²³ Similarly, portrayals of the psychological consequences of the Holocaust, as in the poetry of Dan Pagis and the prose works of Aharon Appelfeld, describe typical post-traumatic symptoms such as constant feelings of alienation, of living on "another planet," and even visions of a spaceship floating in a blue bubble, all long after the horrific events took place. In his stories, Yehoshua describes the Israeli condition as a neurotic and pathological mental state, a kind of illness that, if left untreated, will result in devastating consequences for both the individual and society as a whole.²⁴

The psychoanalytic perception of the Israeli condition found in these and other Israeli literary works has established the Israeli post-traumatic myth—that is, the belief that the normative Israeli condition is a post-traumatic one. The Zionist narrative of the suffering victim has been replaced by the Israeli narrative of the persistent trauma. This narrative describes a sudden calamity that befalls an innocent individual, condemning him to unavoidable ruin. This myth underlies the character of the individual Israeli as well as the country's national outlook and behavior. It enjoins us to treat them as a therapist treats a patient, i.e., someone suffering from a continuous pathological state of mind.

From this perspective, not only the Israeli condition but also the entirety of Jewish history from its inception through to its modern incarnation may be deemed extremely traumatic, from the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile through the wars of the Maccabees and the destruction of the Second Temple; from the Spanish Inquisition and the exile to the blood libels, pogroms, and antisemitic decrees of Europe, culminating in the genocide of the Holocaust. In short, a long and unbroken chain of traumas that have inspired centuries of Christian authors and artists to portray the Jewish people as destined for suffering. To live for hundreds of years as an oppressed minority in a constant post-traumatic state—can it be that such a history is written onto both the individual and collective Israeli DNA and as such can never be overcome?

In the end, the essential question is whether we should perceive bereavement as a permanent condition, a trauma from which there is no possibility of recovery, or as a temporary state that one can move past.

I favor the latter view. That is not to say, of course, that I do not appreciate the vast energies required to overcome trauma of any kind, let alone that of the Holocaust or the loss of a child in battle. I also concede that there are some individuals who, for various reasons, fall short of the task. Yet the world around me attests to the fact that there are many people who suffer

the most unbearable of tragedies only to return, gradually, to a normal life. My own mother and father lost their only son, my brother, in Israel's War of Independence when I was eight years old. I observed them closely as they crossed a gulf of suffering, undertaking the long and arduous process of recovery, each according to his or her character. I am acquainted with many people who have experienced the horrors of the Holocaust, have lost sons or brothers in Israel's wars, and have encountered enormous difficulties in the process of immigrating to Israel. It seems to me that every one of them undertook a long and arduous process of recovery. For recovery, and not fixation, is the typical, natural condition for a person, much as health is the natural condition for a body, and not illness or injury. Moreover, a person's psychological capacity to recover from trauma is, in my view, astonishing and worth taking pride in. Israelis who have experienced trauma abound, but most of them are in a state of recovery. Thus, it seems to me that the typical Israeli condition—that is, the condition of the typical Israeli—is not a persistent post-traumatic state, but rather a continuous struggle toward recovery, which is generally successful.

Of course, this success cannot be taken for granted. It exacts a colossal price and requires an enormous effort. In my eyes it is a marvel. And yet, this marvel goes largely ignored in Israel's cultural discourse, which chooses instead to highlight our psychological deficiencies. In my opinion, this cultural fixation on trauma complicates, if not precludes, average Israelis' private and collective efforts to resume a normal life. Consequently, I believe that post-traumatic conditions in Israel and elsewhere require a new perspective, as well as revised treatment.

To that end, we must consider the merits of the Jewish way of handling pain and suffering, which is related to the concept of the trial and the test. Take, for instance, the life story of Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation. From a modern, psychological point of view, his life seems laden with traumas: He was commanded by God to leave his father's home and country and travel to a distant, desolate land. There, he was forced to fight with five local kings and was tormented by his wife's barrenness—the most manifest

sign of failure in his era. When he finally fathered a son, he was commanded by God to sacrifice him with his own hands. He is pressured by one wife to disown the other one, along with the son he has fathered by her. He removes himself to Egypt, where his life is threatened. Finally, he witnesses firsthand the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra. The author of the book of Genesis, however, considered Abraham to have undergone a series of *trials*, not traumas, which he withstood with varying degrees of success. These trials were designed to assess his strength of character and moral integrity, and in so doing to establish his place on the ladder leading from man to God.

We see the theme of the trial repeated throughout the Jewish Bible and in talmudic stories, medieval Jewish tales, and Hasidic legends. Of course, as these stories tell us, not everyone has the inner strength to withstand a trial. Adam, for example, failed his test: “And the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, where art thou?”²⁵ And Adam, the prototype of man, hides away and lies. Cain, too, fails his test: He is traumatized by God’s refusal to accept his burnt offering. But God says to him, “If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin croucheth at the door; and to thee shall be his desire. Yet thou mayest rule over him.”²⁶ Trauma, God explains to Cain, creates the mythological creature called “sin.” It crouches outside your doorstep like a forbidden woman, and should you be tempted to let her in, she will make haste to come inside. Will you, God asks, have the power to resist opening that door? Will you have the power to “be accepted?” Cain does not. He is unable to stem his post-traumatic emotional erosion. He allows it to overcome him, and the result is the first murder.²⁷

Was Cain’s murder of Abel unavoidable? Most certainly not. The book of Genesis perceives Cain’s initial trauma as an opportunity to withstand a trial. This trial is a test of distinction: Will he be the kind of person who can “lift up”, do well, and realize the image of God in man despite, and in the wake of, this terrible slight? Or will he be the kind of person who will give in to the poisonous feelings that this slight has aroused? Similarly, the bereaved Job, stricken by a multitude of tragedies culminating in an excruciatingly painful rash of boils, finds himself in the midst of a dramatic psychological

and religious crisis typical of post-traumatic situations. And yet Job summons his inner strength to repel the attempts of his three friends to shake his belief in himself and in God. Thus, Job's story ends well, as he is rewarded for his ability to withstand his trial by the attainment of divine knowledge, a wisdom that offers perspective and reassurance.

"Glorified and sanctified be God's great name," says the Jewish mourner's kaddish. This declaration, a sign of one's having made peace with the death for which he is grieving, may appear indifferent to the authentic emotional state of the mourner. But Jewish mourning customs do not demand more of the bereaved than what his emotional state can withstand. As we saw earlier, they allow—indeed, they require—the bereaved to remove himself temporarily from life and from responsibility. Gradually, however, these customs work to re-introduce the mourner into society. They prove that a return to normal life is possible and is in fact an important accomplishment for the individual and his community as a whole.

Of course, the biblical narrator knows that sometimes a mourner will refuse to recover. About Jacob, for instance, he writes, "And [he] mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said: 'For I will go down to my son mourning into Sheol.' Thus his father wept for him."²⁸ The statement "but he refused" signifies that Jacob had a choice whether to be comforted or not. Jacob, wracked with grief, feels that he wants to die along with Joseph in order to continue being with him. This is a natural urge for one who has not yet buried his dead, and all the more so when the dead is one's own son. Yet the Bible's choice of words, "but he refused," seems to me an intimate criticism of Jacob. King David's love for his son was no less than Jacob's love for Joseph. Indeed, when David's son falls critically ill, David also loses his will to live.²⁹ David's servants are therefore afraid to inform him of his son's death for fear of his reaction. Astonishingly, however, David rises from his mourning, bathes, clothes himself, and requests to eat. He consoles his wife Bathsheba and has relations with her, and thus Solomon is conceived. It seems to me that the

Bible commends a response of this kind from the bereaved. It also appears to be commending the support and sympathy provided by his advisers and drawing an implicit connection between it and David's own recovery. For recovery, the Bible makes clear, is preferable. And indeed, when the bereaved avail themselves of the kinds of mourning customs found in Judaism, which are designed to ease the individual back into normal life, recovery is not only preferable, but *possible*.

I remember my astonishment upon first reading Leib Rochman's book *Un in Dayn Blut Zolstu Lebn* ("In Your Blood Thou Shalt Live").³⁰ I discovered that someone could recount his recent experiences in the Holocaust from an often humorous perspective. I consider this work a monumental achievement, one that almost defies belief. Since then, I have discovered a similar capacity to recount one's experience of the Holocaust in a humorous, even lively mode in Sabina Schweid's *War, O War, What a Lady Art Thou*, written many years after the events took place.³¹ I value these books not because they are more educational than other Holocaust memoirs, but because I find them to be more true. Their representation of the psychological state of Holocaust survivors strikes me as more honest and more sincere: It is a state of struggling to recover and to build a new life. Indeed, the experience of struggling to recover from trauma seems to me a no less compelling adventure, and no less deserving of literary stylization and media coverage, than the condition of being trapped forever in a post-traumatic state. I admire these authors and their books and feel grateful to them. In my eyes, it is they who are truly continuing the Jewish tradition, and as such they are the most fitting builders of a strong and genuine Jewish-Israeli culture.

For this reason, I find it difficult to read about the Holocaust from a perspective that aggrandizes the mythic magnitude of its horrors, its perpetrators, and its victims. From the novels written by Primo Levi and other Holocaust survivors, it is possible to learn the extent to which people's reactions to trauma differed. We may also learn that man retains a certain degree of moral freedom and responsibility in every situation, even the most amoral ones. It is easy to be forgiving of immorality in conditions of trauma and the

struggle for survival. But how long afterward do survivors retain their moral exemption? And how long the Jewish people? Or the State of Israel?

As long as Israeli education was overtly anti-diasporic, it was also opposed to a self-perception of victimhood. We were taught not to be victims of fate, but rather to fight for our lives and our right to happiness. The State of Israel is home to many refugees, each carrying his own experiences of grief and loss, each struggling to recover in his own way. We should be proud of this fact. We should promote it. We should assist ourselves and those around us in the ongoing struggle to recover to the best of our ability.

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Notes

1. Yehudit Hendel, *They Are Different People* (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1950) [Hebrew].
2. Deuteronomy 14:1-2.
3. Yair Lorberbaum, *Image of God: Halacha and Agada* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004) [Hebrew].
4. II Samuel 19:6-8.
5. II Samuel 12:22-23.
6. Zelda, "Be Not Far," in *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems*, trans. Marcia Falk (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2002), p. 107.
7. Moed Katan 8a. This custom is mentioned in many later sources as well. See, for example, *Shulhan Aruch*, Yoreh De'a 403.
8. Moed Katan 21b.

9. The Jewish custom of placing stones on a grave was originally intended to prevent the desecration of the dead body during times when it was not always possible to erect tombstones.

10. Moed Katan 27a.

11. A modern outlook will probably see these religious laws as flawed, because they make relatively little mention of women and completely ignore children. To be sure, the supportive and consoling social framework is exclusively male. Women—and more so, girls and boys under the ages of twelve and thirteen, respectively—do not receive comparable attention from halacha and custom, despite the fact that they are more vulnerable and less capable of recovery.

12. Psalms 137:8-9.

13. Proverbs 24:17.

14. In Avraham Shlonsky, *Distress* (Tel Aviv: Hedim, 1924) [Hebrew].

15. Yitzhak Lamdan, *Masada* (Tel Aviv: Hedim, 1927) [Hebrew].

16. Natan Alterman, *Joy of the Poor* (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot Lesifrut, 1941) [Hebrew]; Natan Alterman, “The Silver Platter,” in *The Silver Platter: Collected Poems* (Ministry of Defense, 1974), pp. 314-315 [Hebrew]. An English translation can be found at www.phy6.org/outreach/poems/alterman.htm. It should be noted that Haim Nahman Bialik rejected this myth, claiming it was contrary to the Jewish world outlook.

17. Shaul Tchernichowsky, “Behold, Oh Earth...,” trans. Yosef Wilford, in Ben M. Edidin, ed., *Selected Poems of Shaul Tchernichowsky* (New York: Jewish Education Committee of New York, 1944), p. 13.

18. Natan Alterman, “Morning Song,” in Alterman, *Ditties and Songs*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1979), pp. 302-303 [Hebrew].

19. See Vered Levi-Barzilai, “Accusation: Cruel Experimentation on Thousands of Children” *Haaretz* weekend supplement, December 29, 2000 [Hebrew].

20. Yehudit Hendel, *The Mountain of Losses* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1991) [Hebrew].

21. Zelda, “My Peace,” in *Spectacular Difference*, p. 63.

22. Amos Oz, *Where the Jackals Howl and Other Stories*, trans. Nicholas de Lange and Philip Simpson (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

23. A.B. Yehoshua, *For Normality* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1980) [Hebrew].

24. This is also the subject of his short story "The Yatir Evening Express," trans. Marsha Pomerantz, in A.B. Yehoshua, *The Continuing Silence of a Poet: The Collected Stories of A.B. Yehoshua* (London: Peter Halban, 1988), pp. 141-162.

25. Genesis 3:9.

26. Genesis 4:7.

27. God, on the other hand, does not repay Cain in kind, and allows him the opportunity for rehabilitation. This illustrates the difference between the divine and human responses to trauma.

28. Genesis 37:34-35.

29. II Samuel 12:17-18.

30. Leib Rochman, *In Your Blood Thou Shalt Live*, trans. Hanoch Kalai (Jerusalem: Yesodot, 1961) [Hebrew].

31. Sabina Schweid, *War, O War, What a Lady Art Thou: Childhood and Youth During the Holocaust in Zborow* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2003) [Hebrew].