Loss . . . and Found

Introduction

Ruth Gais

One of the authors, Karen Soria, put it so simply: “What a deceptively simple topic: Loss.” Exactly—it’s a little word but its impact is almost limitless, running from losing a pencil or car keys to losing—and here I pause—which direction to go—a country, a body part or its use, a beloved, faith, love . . . endless, really. As a hospital chaplain and teacher of student chaplains, loss and its companion grief are ever present in my professional life as well part of my own human experience. So too is my awareness that each fresh loss triggers all our old losses. As a result, I was interested to see the directions my colleagues would choose in their thoughts about this short little word that contains in it so much feeling.

I thought about writing about what it meant when I myself lost the keys to our apartment shortly after my first marriage. I wondered if anyone would write something humorous; no one did, though Amy Scheinerman’s “When Loss = Gain,” an honest depiction of her experience as a volunteer police chaplain suddenly plunged into a complicated family situation, is full of charm and surprises. Some wrote as rabbis reflecting on how they balanced their professional roles with their personal losses and through their experiences offer us some valuable suggestions and insights. Barry Block in “Finding the Right Words in Ministering to the Dying and Bereaved,” writes a meditation on and a practical guide to offering words of “bitachon, trust” to those in distress. In “Balancing Personal and Professional Loss in Our Rabbinate: A Personal Essay,” Bradley Bloom describes how he navigated emotionally and professionally two concurrent major losses: a devastating fire set by arsonists that destroyed his congregation’s library and damaged its administrative offices followed swiftly by the sudden

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death of his own father. Sheldon Harr’s moving address, “On Love and Loss: One Rabbi’s Perspective,” delivered more than twenty years ago at the CCAR Conference in Montreal of 1993, still resonates with its pain and truth today and leaves us to grapple with the question of how to use our own suffering authentically in our rabbinites. David Zucker, writing from his many years as a chaplain in “Loss of Life: They Did Not ‘Pass,’ They Died,” reminds us how hard it has been from biblical times to today to face death and dying and offers some suggestions for all pastoral caregivers.

Others focused candidly and openly on their personal losses. Karen Soria (“Remember, the entrance to the sanctuary is inside you . . .”) writes honestly about how the loss of her hair during chemotherapy affected and affects her sense of identity. As she writes near the end, “Loss leaves the physical home seemingly intact, but with the soul in search of its spiritual home.” Stephen S. Pearce also describes something of that loss of certainty about self in “A Temporary Life among the Disabled,” after a fall from a ladder shattered his wrist. My own extended e-mail conversation, “The Theology of Loss,” with my colleague Chaplain Sharon Burniston, uses Sharon’s experience as a person with a disability as a way for us to talk about the use/misuse of the word “loss” and the theological implications of this term. Liz Rolle’s open and poignant piece, “My Daughter,” describes her many years of anguish as she watched her daughter struggle to recognize and embrace her identity. Bill Blank’s “There Is a God and She Doesn’t Care Whether or Not You Sacrifice Goats to Her” is a frank description of how he wrestled and continues to wrestle with his bewilderment and anguish about the loss of his role as a rabbi. He prepares us for his story in his first sentence, “I never intended to leave the active rabbinate. I lost it nevertheless.”

Joel M. Hoffman’s piece, “Lessons on Loss from the Ancient Life of Adam and Eve,” could frame either the beginning or the ending of these explorations; really there is no difference. Hoffman provides us with a translation of and commentary on sections of the pseudepigraphic Life of Adam and Eve, a text we know only through many later translations into Greek, Latin, Armenian, Georgian, and Coptic, which attempts to answer the question that the Torah does not—how did Adam and Eve deal with their loss? Hoffman’s conclusion is in some sense the conclusion of all the pieces—expressed through the unique voice of each—that we have assembled: “To
be human is to work for a living, to endure pain, to live in exile, to experience loss, to long for what was, to wonder why we suffer, and—if we’re lucky—ultimately to understand that our suffering is simply a part of the universe, which inherently contains both good and evil.”