



Pesach, 5777—Day Eight
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Lost and Found

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Rabbi Harold Kushner has given over 50 years' worth of sermons. But his favorite sermon, and in his own opinion his best sermon, had to do with a certain Kiddush cup.

Once there was a small Jewish community in a town in southern Lithuania called Mariampol. This town had a shul. This shul had a Kiddush cup. The Kiddush cup was used for happy things. B'nei mitzvah would use this Kiddush cup on the morning of their big day. Cantors would use this Kiddush cup to usher in Shabbatot and holidays. Brides and grooms would drink from this Kiddush cup under their chuppah. This Kiddush cup enjoyed a happy youth, but dark days lay ahead. In 1940 the Nazis invaded Lithuania. A woman who worked for the shul did not want this Kiddush cup to fall into Nazi hands, and so she buried it deep in the earth, figuring that if she survived the Holocaust, one day she would come back, dig it up and reclaim it. As it turns out, she did survive the Shoah. She did go back to the hiding place. She did dig it up and reclaim it. She, and the Kiddush cup, both survived the Nazis. What now?

The Jewish community in Mariampol had been decimated. The shul itself was no more. Among the few survivors of that shul was a man who would become the father of Rabbi Harold Kushner. The woman who hid and reclaimed the Kiddush cup entrusted it to Rabbi Kushner's father. Maybe one day you will be able to use this Kiddush cup again in peace, she said. Roll the film forward. It is 1979. The place is Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts. Rabbi Kushner's daughter Ariel is celebrating her Bat Mitzvah. She leads Kabbalat Shabbat, and when

it comes time for Kiddush, she uses the Kiddush cup of Mariampol. Thirty nine years after it had been buried, this Kiddush cup again knows joy, light and love.

All of which led Rabbi Kushner to write his sermon called *The Kiddush Cup from Mariampol*. I reread his sermon this year in anticipation of Passover because it struck me that the drama embodied in that Kiddush cup is both at the heart of our seders—and at the heart of our lives.

There is that moment early on in the seder when everything is whole: we have three matzot that symbolize a whole, happy family, a kohein, levi, and yisrael.

Then comes that part of the seder called yachatz, which means break in half. We know the Hebrew word chetzi, half. We take the middle matza, levi, and break it in half. What used to be 3 matzot is now 2 and a half matzot. The half that is broken off is removed from the table, removed from the family, removed from the seder, is hidden, remote, inaccessible.

Yachatz. Brokenness. What was once whole is now half. What was once here is now gone. What we once had we no longer have. Is this not at times the story of our life?

We once had health. But then we had to contend with illness.

We once had work. But we lost our job.

We once had our loved one. But our loved one passed.

There is a word that is often used to describe a family that is whole. That word is “intact.” The dictionary definition of “intact” is “not damaged or impaired in any way”; “complete.” What happens when we are no longer intact? What happens when something important is missing? What happens when we are damaged or impaired?

First comes a period of telling our story of loss, the magid part of our seder. We share our pain with others. We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt. We tell our own personal story of

loss at the shiva. Or in the hospital. Or when we go home to convalesce and somebody comes to do the mitzvah of bikur cholim.

But there is an important asterisk about telling your story of pain. You can't say it out loud for too long. My father in love, after losing his life partner of 70 years, told me something that I often think about. Laugh and the whole world laughs with you. Cry, and you cry alone. People will respectfully hear you out *at* your shiva, but for the most part, not *after* your shiva. We learn to mourn our losses privately, quietly, individually. How are you? Fine. Fine. Fine. To the world at large, we project ourselves as fine. When we pine away, we pine in private.

And yet we hang in there and adjust, and readjust, to a new normal, to a new life making peace with what we have lost. If I were ever to do a PhD in psychology, based on the work I have done as a rabbi, I know exactly what I would study. I already have the subject of my thesis. It is a thing I have seen repeated, in family after family, a pattern that looks like this. A husband and wife are truly happily married for a good, long time. 40 years. 50 years. 60 years. They have children, grandchildren, great grandchildren together. And then, typically, not invariably, but typically, the husband passes, leaving his widow.

Yachatz. A life torn in half. You might think that, since this couple was so truly happy for the many decades of their marriage, that when the love of her life passes, the widow would crumble. But often the opposite happens. The widow goes on to write new chapters, beautiful, rich, full chapters on her own.

I recently met with a widow whose long-time husband passed away about 15 years ago. She was celebrating a milestone birthday. I asked her, what would your husband think of you if he were here right now, and could see you now. Without skipping a beat, she said: he would not recognize me. I am not the same person he was married to. I am so much more independent

now, and happy to be independent, than I ever was in our marriage. He would not know what to make of me now.

Life is sometimes full of surprises. The wife of 50 years who could never imagine being on her own thrives on her own. After *yachatz* comes pining away, but after pining away in private, after long nights alone, comes a new reality which is beautiful in its own, different way.

Which leads us to that part of the seder called tzafun. Tzafun means hidden. The half a matza that was taken away and hidden is restored. What happens to it? It is passed out to everybody and eaten as dessert. So I want to ask two questions about this mysterious part of the seder. Why is it called tzafun, hidden? Yes, it is true, it was once hidden. But it is hidden no more. By the time we reconnect with it, it is outed as the afikoman. Typically your child or grandchild extracts something in exchange for coming out with the afikoman. So why call it hidden when it is the opposite of hidden. It is dessert. And, second question, why is something that is so dry and tasteless as matza considered dessert?

To answer these questions, we need to take a step back. It turns out that it is not just the Kiddush cup of Mariampol that is lost and found. And not just the middle matza that is broken in half, lost and found. But this pattern—lost and found, disconnected and reconnected—is part of the cosmos.

This pattern applies to the Jewish people as a whole. Early in our people's story God tells Abraham that *yachatz* and *tzafun*, lost and found, will be a part of our story. "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth." Genesis 15: 13-14.

This pattern also applies to Moses. Born an Israelite, the child of Israelite slaves, he is hidden by his mother in a wicker basket, found by the daughter of Pharaoh, hidden again, this

time as an Egyptian prince, growing up in the Pharaoh's sumptuous palace, only to be found again as the leader of his people who would resist Pharaoh and lead them to freedom.

What's hidden is not the matza. The matza is right there before you, in all of its tasteless dry glory.

What's hidden is the sense that there is a purpose, a meaning, a message, an order, to all of this loss, all of this sadness, all of this private pining which we cannot share publicly, all of this loneliness, and then all of this resilience, reaffirmation, restoration of purpose. It's exhausting. We might quit the fight. And so tzafun comes to tell us: hang in there, don't give up, there is a deeper meaning there to extract. If you persist, you will find it.

And that explains why we consider the reclaimed and rediscovered matza dessert. Because when the granddaughter makes Kiddush on the Kiddush cup that was lost and found, when a widow writes a new chapter that is filled with a different kind of meaning and purpose and joy, when we hang in there and fight for a renewed meaning in life after suffering a staggering loss, and we actually find it, what could be sweeter than that. The matza is not sweet. A hard-won life is sweet.

Yachatz will happen. Whole will become broken.

But if we don't give up, tzafun will happen too, and what was lost will become found, or some *different* meaning and purpose, beautiful in its own way, will be found. We may be broken, but we are not broken forever. We may be lost, but we are not lost forever. At the heart of our seder, and at the heart of our people's story, is a message for every broken and lost soul: I was lost, but I did not give up, I kept fighting for life, and now I am found. God, thank you for that. *Chag sameakh.*