

YIZKOR 5778, YOM KIPPUR

THE SUN THAT STILL SHINES BEHIND THE SHADOW

RABBI JONATHAN BLAKE

It may happen only once or twice in a lifetime, but you don't forget a solar eclipse. Even from our latitude, the experience at 2:42 PM on August the 21st was chilling. The temperature dropped; the crickets started to chirp; the world seemed illuminated as if behind a tinted glass; and, through my officially approved eyewear, I saw it plain as day: the shadow of the moon had taken a bite out of almost three quarters of the sun, leaving behind a glowing crescent.

In that moment I understood why the ancients looked upon eclipses as terrifying omens and why the Talmud does not provide a blessing for seeing an eclipse the way it does, for instance, upon seeing a rainbow¹. The sun should not set in midday. The sustaining light of life should not fall prey to the darkness.

To be sure, science gives some comfort. We can explain what our ancestors feared. This was no sign of divine wrath, no aberration in the laws of God or the universe. Quite the contrary, really: precisely *because* the earth and the moon and the sun carry on in their elegant

¹ As inferred from *Bavli, Sukkah* 29a.

and timeworn orbits do the rare intersections cause the shadow of one to fall on the other.

Still, it was a cold and strange day, and my mind will not dispel that image of the crescent sun, or the televised image of millions of Americans who turned out for totality to stare in awe at the heavens.

Grief is like this—a shadow that comes into our lives to block out the sun. It comes to us, it visits us, it stays with us for a while, and then it passes from us; but even when grief is gone we are changed by its having been with us.

El Malei Rachamim, the memorial prayer that we will recite in a few moments, says of our dead: *k'zohar ha-rakia mazhirim*, they shine like the brilliance of the firmament. It is an extraordinary turn of phrase, one of the most beautiful in all of Jewish liturgy. It says so much with so little. It reminds us that love does not die; people do; and that the light our loved ones brought into the world while they lived does not fade into darkness when they die; it shines on, brilliantly.

Even the darkness of grief does not have the power to vanquish the light of life and the radiance of love. It will eclipse our joy for a time. It will take a bite out of us, leaving our human heart a raw and glowing crescent. But grief will pass and love will remain. The goodness of the

people we've come here to remember has left a permanent mark on us and on the world that can never be eclipsed, not even by our sorrow.

Rabbi Jack Stern of blessed memory once shared with our congregation his experience of a concert at Tanglewood where “Isaac Stern was playing Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto, and the melody sang with uncommon beauty. Suddenly, without warning, the skies darkened and the heavens broke loose. A strange sight as the man guided the bow over the strings as though without a sound, a pantomime, because all we could hear was the thunder. And then suddenly, the thunder still rumbling, above that rumbling, we could hear the magic melody of the violin.”

Judaism is wise to give us a lot of time for bereavement—seven days of *shiva*, a first thirty days to mourn called *sheloshim*, a year, give or take, for unveiling a gravestone and reciting *Kaddish* at *yahrzeit*. We do not “get over” the death of a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a child, a friend—we “get through”—slowly, steadily. The 23rd Psalm acknowledges as much by declaring, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”—there is no way around the shadow, only through.

But there does come “a moment,” Rabbi Stern said, “when we begin to hear the melody above the storm, when the remembering of the

beauty and the laughter does not cause the pain but begins to soothe it.”

In 1883, Henry James, the American novelist most famous for *The Portrait of a Lady*, received a distressing letter from his longtime friend Grace Norton, an essayist who had fallen into a deep depression following a death in her family. No stranger to depression himself, and writing just months after the deaths of his own parents, James replied with some of the most compassionate words ever put to paper:

“I don't know why we live,” he said, “—the gift of life comes to us from I don't know what source or for what purpose; but I believe we can go on living for the reason that (always of course up to a certain point) life is the most valuable thing we know anything about and it is therefore presumptively a great mistake to surrender it while there is any yet left in the cup.”

...

“Sorrow comes in great waves—no one can know that better than you—but it rolls over us, and though it may almost smother us it leaves us on the spot and we know that if it is strong we are stronger, inasmuch as it passes and we remain. It wears us, uses us, but we wear it and use

it in return; and it is blind, whereas we after a manner see.... [I]t is only a darkness, it is not an end, or *the end*.”

So we come here today, to this *Yizkor* service of memorial, to listen, to hear the melody above the storm, to remember the beauty that surpasses the pain, to stand as living witness to the sunlight that unfailingly shines, even behind the shadow.

K'zohar ha-rakia mazhirim. May all our departed loved ones continue to shine like the brilliance of the firmament. And may the light of God's countenance ever shine upon them. *Amen.*