

## Yizkor Passover 5780

Rabbi David E Levy

19 years ago, I made a choice that changed my life. A friend of mine, Hillary Cohen, found out that I didn't go anywhere for second seder. The moment she had this tidbit of news, she invited me to her home. I was introduced to her two brothers, her parents, her cousins and their family. We spent that seder joking and laughing, and finding freedom in the words of the Haggadah. Her father, Ira, presided over the seder, lovingly clutching a fifty year old haggadah, that the family had been using their whole lives. Hillary, along with her siblings and cousins battled over favorite lines, including the description of Yehoshua Ben Hananya, who was described as "the most unattractive of men" and one of the poorest. Years later, I'd read about how the talmud described him that way to showcase how important it is not to judge a book by it's cover, as he was one of the most brilliant sages of his age.

When steaming hot soup was placed before me, Hillary turned to me in *sotto voce* and said: my mom Erica believes that everyone should add their own salt to their soup, so don't be embarrassed to add as much as you like. A moment later, Erica came in and proudly presented apple sauce from the local kosher caterer, Petoks. It vanished in moments, as everyone scrambled to get a taste of it before the bowl was empty.

That was my first seder at Hillary's home, which became an annual tradition, because Hillary's cousin, who I met that first seder night, is my wife, Kate. Hillary's family became a part of my family, and holiday gatherings with the Cohens became a staple. Ira and Erica, became treasured members of my family, and I came to love Erica's understated smile, and wit. Her quiet way of being in the world. And to adore Ira's presence and support, as one year he turned to me and asked the Rabbi to lead seder instead.

Right before Passover this year, both Ira and Erica died due to complications from Covid 19. Passover has been forever changed, for my family. But it isn't just Passover, and the grief I'm feeling from losing such wonderful people: everything this year feels strange. We are preparing to conclude, *zman cheruteinu*, the time our sages referred to as the season of our freedom, yet I feel shackled in a way I never have before. I've driven my car maybe once a week to gather groceries for my family and then returned immediately to the seclusion of my home. I've tried to be only a phone call away, and yet I don't feel the same sense of closeness as I normally do when physical closeness is limited. When Hillary called me last week to share the news, all I wanted to do was offer her a hug, and we both knew that wouldn't happen. We both knew we'd wait weeks or months until we're able to gather again.

Last week, even in the shadow of death, my family gathered for a Zoom seder. Each group gathered around a computer, a phone, or a laptop and we did our best to engage with our sacred tradition in a novel way. My sons danced and sang their songs that they have mastered over years of sederim, and there were smiles through the screens, as family members felt a moment of connectedness and shared loss, even through this strange reality.

This year, our gathering felt emptier. This year, we were missing people who should have been there. This year, we were also grieving the world in lockdown. This year, at Yizkor, we all face two types of grief. The first is the grief we all know and understand, the pain we feel as we think about loved ones who have died in years gone by and those that we have only so recently laid to rest. The second is the grief we feel when we think about the world we used to know. The world we are reminded of every time we turn on a TV show or movie and see people hugging in the street as if it were normal. The world where we gather together in person and not virtually. The world where we weren't afraid that every cough we hear is a harbinger of something worse. That world feels so far away.

As we face this painful path, I want us to consider a teaching from the grief researcher and author David Kessler. "Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn't mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining."<sup>1</sup>

We are all grieving here today: facing pain for people we've loved and lost, and the pain for the world we can no longer live in. I also want to thank you for witnessing my grief, as I continue to respond to the loss of Erica and Ira. As each of us continues to grieve: how can we be fully present for those we love? How can we not immediately compare our grieving experience to theirs, but instead, welcome them as a fully unique human being lives a different life and therefore grieves in their own unique way?

Yizkor is an invitation to find the strength within ourselves to be present for those who are grieving, and to remind ourselves that we could offer that gift to someone else. To Zachor, to remember, and in that act of remembering share it with someone else as they strive to find their own path. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lithub.com/our-experience-of-grief-is-unique-as-a-fingerprint/>