

THE SACRED STRUGGLE

JEWISH RESPONSES TO TRAUMA



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• CCAR Challenge and Change Series •

Study and Discussion Guide

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE FACE OF PAIN, loss, and tragedy, Rabbi Benjamin David asks, “How do we not turn to anger? Or, better yet, how do we cling to a Judaism of relevance and hope even in our anger and frustration?” (11). On one hand, this is the age-old question about why suffering comes to good people. Rabbis and other Jewish professionals have some experience with this question when their families, congregants, or friends face difficulties and come to them for guidance. On the other hand, the emotions and questions that tragedy and hardship prod may look different when it is one’s *own* pain or loss. What kinds of feelings do we have then? Where can we go for advice or help?

The wisdom of *The Sacred Struggle* is that its authors are rabbis or other Jewish professionals who are speaking not *to* someone else who seeks guidance but *of* their own experiences—of their own moments when they themselves faced illness, grief, addiction, natural disaster, disability, or other of life’s hardships. Each chapter describes, evocatively and with compassion, the events of the author’s life and then follows the author’s path through often unpredictable emotions. Chapters explore the authors’ responses and further highlight the resources that helped them understand what they experienced and find a way forward. That “way forward” is often not an overcoming or a moving “beyond” the traumatic event, but rather a “living with” memories, nightmares, new constraints, and irretrievable losses amid remarkable care and generosity from family, friends, and communities. Resources are not always from the Jewish tradition, but most are, be they Yiddish stories, lessons from the Talmud, Biblical characters, Israeli songs, medieval midrash, and more. Each author brings specific verses, rituals, or tales and explains why and how they worked along the path to grappling with hardship and rediscovering joy.

The first goal of this book is to make vivid the message that no one is alone in tragedy and hardship—even professionals trained in pastoral care experience despair and utter confusion. The second goal is to offer a rich collection of ways forward, both in the authors’ stories and in what they found helped rebalance them in life. The hope of the book is that it will become a resource for others on their paths through loss and rebalancing.

These resources taken together may be read, Rabbi David writes, “as guideposts for any of us attempting to seek out those Jewish ideas that can help us in the aftermath of crisis and incidents of trauma” (13). Betsy Stone, PhD, then explains what trauma is: “Trauma is *not* the event. Trauma is the emotional response to the event. . . . We cannot offer comfort if we do not respect the individual emotional power of loss and pain. . . . Trauma is personal and idiosyncratic. We do not get over it. We only heal forward. And trauma can impact individuals, communities, and tribes” (16, 19).

Following Dr. Stone’s explanation of trauma, part I of *The Sacred Struggle* highlights five overarching areas of resources: the Book of Job, the Talmud, Jewish liturgy, Israeli song and poetry, and prayers from the Gaza War. After this introductory framing, the rest of the book is divided into various types of loss and trauma, each category containing several individual chapters recounting how the author experienced enduring and emerging from trauma even as they live with it. Those types of loss and trauma include illness, marginalization, personal and communal violence, natural disaster and pandemics, trauma within community, and tragedy in the family.

How to Use This Guide

Reading Approaches

The Sacred Struggle is meant to be read in a variety of ways. Some may read it from cover to cover. Others may select certain arenas to focus on (e.g., illness or natural disaster), and still others may look at single chapters. Some may prefer a mix of approaches. Each chapter is self-contained and does not require knowledge of the other chapters. The important point is that readers use the book in ways that are most beneficial to them.

This study guide also notes where some chapters may be most helpful when read and discussed together, as a chapter cluster. The study guide begins with a quote or short recap of each chapter, followed by discussion questions for each. In many cases, there are also questions that pertain to all the chapters in the cluster. This study guide also notes where chapters may be most helpful when they are read singly. Here too, the study guide begins with a quote or short recap, followed by questions.

Discussion Questions

The reader will notice that certain discussion questions are relevant to many chapters in this book and thus may appear in several places throughout the study guide. Though these discussion questions may be similar, the responses will not be. Readers' reactions will differ from reader to reader and from chapter to chapter as the chapters recount each journey taken.

Individual and Group Reading Contexts

Individual readers may use the study guide to further their thinking about a given chapter or cluster of chapters, to develop their own practice, to boost journal writing, or as a way to talk with friends, family, or their own clergy. *The Sacred Struggle* may also be read in a variety of group settings, including in synagogue or other adult education classes; in chaplaincy settings in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and elder-care facilities; in patient, caretaker, and bereavement support groups; in social justice groups, synagogue retreats, clergy self-development classes, or book clubs; or as a basis for teaching or a sermon.

The groups that read *The Sacred Struggle* may be large, small, or in the classic Jewish *chavruta* style of study pairs. Larger groups can subdivide into smaller groups or pairs, with each subdivision focusing on one aspect of a chapter or one question from the study guide before coming together to discuss the chapter.

Personal Responses to the Chapters and Discussion Questions

The emotional trajectories experienced by the contributing authors vary considerably, as did their responses to them. The resources that the authors relied on also vary significantly. Whether you're in a group or reading individually, it's often illuminating to say why you think a passage is insightful or not helpful to you.

In reading these personal and at times heartbreaking accounts, many emotions may be triggered, but they will not be triggered in the same way for all readers. The study guide leaves room for—indeed, asks for—a wide range of responses. What we learn from reading is often strengthened by a diversity of perspectives and even disagreement. This is one way that we come to novel and fresh understandings and new practices for our own lives.

Because of the sensitive nature of talking about pain and loss, it's often useful to establish discussion ground rules for group study—a group *b'rit* (covenant) for how to structure the conversation and respond to others. The Jewish learning tradition includes the idea of *machloket l'shem shamayim*, “disagreement for the sake of heaven,” which implies that the goal of discussion is not to be “right” but to inch closer to what God hopes we will understand. It also includes the idea of *tikkun olam*, the effort to repair the world. We hope that the conversations sparked by this book and study guide are undertaken with these goals in mind.

Suggested Group B'rit/Covenant

1. I will use “I statements” when expressing my opinions and understand that others may not agree with my opinions.
2. I will disagree with opinions, not people.
3. I will engage in discussion with the goals of *torah lishmah* (learning for the sake of learning), *machloket l'shem shamayim* (disagreement for the sake of heaven), and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). I will come to others with these intentions as others come to me with them.

Consider Together:

Chapter 1: Job’s Traumatic Breach

Adriane Leveen, PhD

Chapter 2: Talmudic Responses to Trauma

Rabbi Dvora E. Weisberg, PhD

Chapter 3: Can Religion Bring Comfort? The Case for Liturgy

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD

These chapters have been brought together because they draw from classic Jewish texts and liturgy to discuss the emotional and pragmatic complexities of harm and loss. Each of these classic texts may serve as a resource for understanding trauma and the process of healing.

Questions for Chapter 1

In describing the devastating travails of Job—the death of his children, loss of all belongings, boils head-to-toe—Adriane Leveen, PhD, observes the following about Job’s way through anger and despair: “Job moves through stages of heartbreaking grief and fury. Instead of waiting for divine justification, Job discovers what he needs to say to God. Once Job finds his voice and speaks truthfully about God’s behavior, his trauma subsides and his recovery slowly begins” (26).

➤ What could “finding your voice” with God mean for us today? How does the idea of finding your voice with God, expressing your views about God’s behavior, and addressing God as a conversation partner resonate with you? If it doesn’t, why not? If it does, what would it look like for you to talk personally and honestly—even critically—to God, especially when you experience trauma or feel angry at God?

Dr. Leveen also notes the following about Job’s friends: “They are certain that God inflicts tragedy only on those who deserve it. Job must have sinned, says one, even if he doesn’t know the reason” (28).

➤ To our ears, the friends may sound tone-deaf and somewhat heartless. Rather than comfort Job, they stick to the idea that God rewards righteousness and punishes evil. According to this view, the innocent never suffer, which is something that most of us observe is simply not true. Why do Job’s friends hold to this view of God and insist on Job’s wickedness? What’s in it for them? Can you describe other instances when people are harsh toward each other because sticking to something else—a value, idea, worldview, or goal—is more important to them than comforting another person or even the relationship itself?

Questions for Chapter 2

Rabbi Dvora E. Weisberg, PhD, recounts several Talmudic passages about grappling with tragedy and loss, including one that describes the “long-term effects” of trauma.

➤ How can we identify when past hardships or our responses to them are influencing us even long after the original event? How can we notice when that influence is itself damaging? What would help us notice these effects? How can we intervene in our own memories and emotional responses?

Rabbi Weisberg recalls the Talmudic story where Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Y’hoshua look out at the Temple ruins. Y’hoshua is aggrieved over the destruction of the Temple, but Yochanan comforts him, saying, “Do not grieve. We have another way to atone [for wrongdoing]. . . . Deeds of loving-kindness [*g’milut chasadim*]” (39).

➤ What is your response to Rabbi Yochanan’s suggestion? Has doing acts of kindness helped you or

someone you know to manage loss or pain? If so, what was the experience like, and why do you think it worked? Would you do this again in times of hardship?

Questions for Chapter 3

This chapter begins with noting that religion may not provide relief from suffering or comfort for loss—though many think it should. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, looks at unrelieved anguish straight on: “The beginning of liturgical comfort is to dispense with such explanations [for pain and loss]. For suffering, pain, and death, there is neither moral nor theological ‘why.’ There’s also no meaning of any sort” (42).

➤ What is your reaction to reading that there is “no meaning” in suffering? How does your answer affect the way you understand and respond to tragedy, pain, or loss?

Rabbi Hoffman then considers whether liturgy offers comfort. Perhaps it does, he writes—not because we believe the words literally but rather because “liturgy is not informational, it is inspirational. . . . Liturgy provides a safe and scripted way of sharing how we feel” (45).

➤ How does Jewish liturgy work for you? In times of tragedy or disaster, what is especially helpful or relevant? Are there passages of liturgy that you’ve thought seem off-target or even hurtful?

Questions for Chapters 1, 2, and 3 Together

➤ When in pain or grief, when feeling lost or despairing, to what do you turn for comfort and support? Some turn to writing or reading, listening to or playing music, physical activity or meditation, connecting with community or Jewish tradition. Could you share an example of what provides you with comfort and support and explain why it works for you?

➤ In times of trauma or loss, how do you respond when someone else—a rabbi, cantor, family member, friend—brings in a teaching, text, or perspective from the Jewish tradition? Explain your response and what may or may not be helpful to you.

Consider Together:

Chapter 4: Again the Song Goes Out: October 7 Through the Lens of Classic Israeli Song

Rabbi Wendy Zierler, PhD

Chapter 5: Speaking About the Unspeakable: Prayers from the Gaza War

Rabbi Dalia Marx, PhD, translated by Rabbi Ari Vernon

These chapters have been brought together because they draw not from classic Jewish texts and liturgy, as the chapters above do, but from contemporary prayers and poems recently authored in response to the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack in Israel. These prayers and poems, some newly written, may serve as springboards to discuss the complexities of trauma, as resources for understanding it, and as aids in the process of healing.

Questions for Chapter 4

In describing what she turns to in times of loss and grief—including deaths from COVID—Rabbi Wendy Zierler, PhD, talks not of traditional Jewish prayers but of a prayer of her own making: Each day, she translates a Hebrew poem into English and writes her own commentary.

➤ Have you—or has someone you know—developed new practices out of the experience of difficulty or loss? If so, what were they? Could you imagine such a new practice now? Take a moment to think of what that might be, or work with a friend to brainstorm and develop one.

Rabbi Zierler also describes singing old Israeli songs as one of the only ways to connect to a relative with advanced Alzheimer's. She writes that the songs have "the capacity to bring people back—not just to a shared sense of tragedy, but to a feeling of unity and purpose" (59).

➤ Have you experienced a similar "bringing together" through song or some other activity? If so, how did that activity help you connect with others and grapple with tragedy and loss?

Questions for Chapter 5

In her chapter, Rabbi Dalia Marx, PhD, focuses on national crises and disasters, especially the trauma of the Hamas attack in Israel on October 7, 2023. She finds that texts and rituals created in response to that attack have three overall purposes: to connect to the past, to the history of the people; to help survivors and the community grapple with the devastating events; and to imagine redemption and a better future (63–64). To achieve some or all of these purposes, old prayers may be reinterpreted and new prayers may be written. Explore the reinterpretation of an old prayer on pages 65–66 and the new prayers on pages 67–69, all of which were written in response to the October 7, 2023, attack.

➤ What is your response to the new interpretation of an old prayer? Does it resonate with you, or is it too removed from your experience and feelings? Does this new interpretation help with Rabbi Marx's three purposes: to connect with the past, grapple with devastation, or imagine a better future?

➤ What is your response to the new liturgy? How is it meaningful or express how you feel? How does it help you connect with the past, help you grapple with devastation, or imagine a better future? How or why does it miss the mark?

Consider Together:

Chapter 6: Every Challenge Is a Journey: What I Learned from Chronic Cancer

Rabbi Lindsey Danziger

Chapter 7: Spoons and Scripture: How Chronic Illness Became My Torah

Rabbi Annie Villarreal-Belford, PsyD

Chapter 9: Hawks and Snakes and Not Giving Up

Rabbi Robert A. Nosanchuk

Chapter 10: The Next Chapter: Moving Forward with Chronic Illness

Rabbi David N. Jaffe

These chapters have been brought together because they share a concern with chronic or long-term illness rather than acute trauma from, for instance, sudden natural disaster. They look at the emotional and practical effects of prolonged trauma, at ways of living with them, and at thriving even with illnesses that are likely to remain.

Questions for Chapter 6

In this chapter, Rabbi Lindsey Danziger recalls how she learned of her cancer diagnosis on voicemail and how the on-call doctors remarked that her diagnosis was not an emergency.

➤ What's your reaction to this? Discuss the kind of care you would like to see—for yourself and others—from professionals, doctors, clergy, and therapists. Be as specific as you can, perhaps with examples. For each type of care you describe, explain why it's important to you. Why or why isn't it realistic to expect such care?

Rabbi Danziger writes that she felt comforted by the word "us" in *T'filat HaDerech*, the Traveler's Prayer (77). It made her feel less alone in what may be experienced as a lonely ordeal, one in which—though others may love and care for her—it is only her body that is at stake.

- How does this “us” in the Traveler’s Prayer resonate for you? Would you or someone you know feel comforted by it, or might there be a different reaction? In comforting others or being comforted, how should we think about using “us” talk?

Questions for Chapter 7

In coping with chronic illness, Rabbi Annie Villarreal-Belford, PsyD, writes that her body became her Torah, her information source, and guide to living well. “I learned to apply Rabbi [Lawrence] Kushner’s words—‘Never assume you know more than the Torah’—to my body. Now, my body is my teacher, my rabbi, my Torah. My body always knows the way, even if my brain is slower to figure things out” (84).

- What does “never assume you know more than the Torah” mean for you? Are there any areas where you feel the Torah “knows” more than you? How might the Torah’s many lessons apply to your life in times of loss and trauma and at other times?
- Rabbi Villarreal-Belford came to see her body as another source of wisdom, another Torah. Is there another source of wisdom, parallel to Torah, for you? If so, can you describe it and explain how it teaches you what you need to know?

Questions for Chapter 9

Rabbi Robert A. Nosanchuk writes, “I am as skeptical as anyone about what the will of another person’s love can do to protect someone from a growing tumor, fast-spreading metastasis, a dangerous medical complication, or a sudden cancer recurrence” (99). This is a common feeling today, when we rely on science to fight illness. But, he continues, while a tumor may not slow, “there is a strengthening effect that comes from others holding you in the light of their prayerful optimism” (99). Rabbi Nosanchuk recalls the rabbi who “placed his hand on my shoulder. He told me, ‘I want you to live’” (97).

- What was most important or impressive for you in the description of the many therapies that Rabbi Nosanchuk endured in the fight against cancer? How could that description help you or others? When might it be ineffective?
- This chapter describes several things that may soothe the soul when the body is being undermined by disease and the treatments for disease. What was your response to the soul-soothing methods described? In what ways could they be helpful to you or someone you know? What else do you think would be helpful—what soul-soothing resources or activities would you add to Rabbi Nosanchuk’s list?

Questions for Chapter 10

Rabbi David N. Jaffe distinguishes between *teivah*, the outer cover that a person presents to the world, and *nefesh*, the inner self. In his battle against ulcerative colitis, he writes, “I began to seek the *nefesh* in other people” (105). To some extent, all of us present ourselves differently in different situations, with a different outer *teivah*. But, in Rabbi Jaffe’s understanding, some feel a substantial break—a greater distance—between the outer and inner selves.

- In what ways do you agree with Rabbi Jaffe’s approach to the inner and outer selves? In what ways do you disagree? Can you give examples of people you know who may have greater gaps between the *teivah* and *nefesh* and others who seem to have narrower gaps? How does the degree of difference affect their lives? What are the upsides and downsides of greater and lesser differences, especially in coping with pain and loss?

➤ Rabbi Jaffe describes how standard Jewish practice—for instance, reciting the appropriate blessing before an action—steadied him in facing ongoing, multiple difficulties and gave him a much-needed sense of control when “my life turned to chaos” (104). What else might give that sense of anchoring? Can you give an example from your life or from the life of someone you know and explain why you think it created a sense of stability?

Chapter 8: Finding Light Amid the Fractures: Spiritual Lessons from a Bike Accident

Rabbi Daniel B. Gropper

Rabbi Daniel B. Gropper begins this chapter admitting to a bit of hubris. He thought he was “greater than I really was,” owing to the accolades he received from his congregants. “Humility was not part of my identity” (85–86). When he was injured, this active, agency-filled rabbi was caught off-guard by sudden limitation. While at first he yearned to return to his former vigorous if hubristic self, he came to understand that what he really needed was more humility and the practice of paying attention to others.

➤ We all have contradictions and blind spots, and our self-awareness is complex and imperfect. How do we develop appropriate agency, especially the agency to weather hardship and loss, without sliding into hubris or self-absorption? Conversely, if we are already skilled in attending to others, how can we keep our skill from becoming hubris? How can we help others to do so? What resources would you use—stories, art, Jewish texts, rituals, other practices or exercises?

➤ Have you ever had an experience that caused pain but eventually led to greater self-awareness? How do you feel about that experience in retrospect? Would you endure the pain again in order to achieve what you learned? What other ways might there be to gain such self-awareness?

Chapter 11: Discovering Holiness: A Jewish Love Story in the Shadow of Alzheimer’s

Rabbi Debra R. Hachen

In her account of caring for a husband with advancing Alzheimer’s, Rabbi Debra R. Hachen recalls a shift from noting the accumulating loss of function to noting that her husband remained “a multi-faceted person who did not deserve to be defined by his deficits” (110).

➤ What enabled this shift in Rabbi Hachen’s perspective? Can you describe a similar experience in your life or in the life of someone you know? What motivated it?

➤ Rabbi Hachen describes the challenges and pain of watching someone else’s illness progress. Other chapters in this book have focused on the authors’ own illnesses. How do you think these might differ in terms of trauma, grief, and loss?

➤ Rabbi Hachen also discusses the idea that all are in God’s image, regardless of skill or capacity (110). What does being in the image of God mean to you? Is it a relevant or useful idea? In the Jewish tradition, God is understood to be infinite and without a body, without a physical image. What could it mean to be in the image of an imageless God? What about God are we in the “image” of?

Consider Together:

Chapter 12: Calling Out to God: Trauma and Transition

Rabbi Ariel Tovlev

Chapter 15: *T'mol Shilshom*, Reflecting on Times Past: The Trauma of Disability

Rabbah Rona Matlow, DMin

Chapter 17: Esther, Sexual Assault, and the Winding Road of Healing

Rabbi Iah Pillsbury

Chapter 29: Choosing Life and Finding Resilience in the Face of AIDS

Rabbi Denise L. Eger

These chapters are grouped together for three reasons. First, they are concerned with harms linked to gender identity. Second, they all in some way speak to this line from chapter 29: “What did it mean to be forgiven of their sins in a world that called gay men sinful?” (236). Said another way, what does it mean to seek solace in the Jewish tradition, to be forgiven through Jewish ritual, when the larger world—and sometimes non-Reform streams of Judaism—defines your very existence as sinful or wrong? Third, each chapter details a way to find solace in the Jewish tradition—even if at first blush you don’t think it’s there.

Questions for Chapter 12

In discussing the abuse received in connection with gender identity, Rabbi Ariel Tovlev describes reaching out to God in distress and God responding, “From a narrow place I called out to God, and from an expansive place God answered me. God is on my side, I have no fear; what can a human do to me?” (Psalm 118:5–6). . . . I recalled the story of the famous Chasidic rabbi Zusya, who said, ‘In the world-to-come, they will not ask me: Why were you not Moses? They will ask me: Why were you not Zusya?’” (119).

- How do you respond to Psalm 118, especially to the feeling of being squeezed into a “narrow place”—an untenable situation—and being answered, released, or even liberated by a force in a much broader, “bigger picture” place?
- What does it mean to “be Zusya,” to be who you are even if it goes against what is expected or even tolerated? What does that effort involve, and what are the consequences? Can you give examples from your life or from the life of someone you know?

Questions for Chapter 15

In dealing with a painful disability, Rabbah Rona Matlow, DMin, found consolation in two things: in the psalms and in recognizing hir gender identity. One draws from the Jewish tradition; the other does not. In their different ways, they helped hir recognize self-denigrating thoughts “as internalized ableism. Ableism is the denial of disability, particularly when one does not *appear* disabled” (138). First, the psalms soothed the pain of disability *and* of being confined to a gender that is not who ze is. Then, recognizing hir gender identity led hir to write, “I began my gender transition, becoming Rona. I’ve never been happier” (140).

- Thinking of yourself and people you know who have been in similar circumstances, has there been anything in the Jewish tradition that was helpful, as it was for Rabbah Matlow? What was helpful from outside the Jewish tradition—a text, song, practice, activity?

Questions for Chapter 17

In grappling with sexual abuse, Rabbi Iah Pillsbury found help in coming to understand the Biblical *M’gillat Esther* (Scroll of Esther) in a new way, in grasping the unspoken sexual abuse of the character Esther.

➤ Have you understood a Biblical or Rabbinic text one way and then later come to a quite different interpretation? How or why did that shift happen? What did the new interpretation mean to you? How did it change your understanding of what the text is teaching us?

Rabbi Pillsbury continues with this thought: “My journey of healing, like all journeys, has not been linear or straightforward. It has moved in spirals and circles, doubling back and moving forward. Sometimes it has felt insurmountable, and other times healing happened when I wasn’t paying attention” (156).

➤ How does Rabbi Pillsbury’s description of her nonlinear healing resonate with you? Can you think of something extraordinary that happened when you weren’t “paying attention,” as Rabbi Pillsbury puts it? How do you feel about this unpredictability? What are the upsides and downsides?

Questions for Chapter 29

Rabbi Denise L. Eger describes sharing good times—and even creating good times—in periods of duress and loss. Describing meetings with people with AIDS, she writes, “We agreed that during each meeting, everyone would also share something positive. Maybe it was only that they were able to get out of bed that day. . . . Sometimes we interpreted and reinterpreted the meaning of a ritual or idea. . . . We created a new understanding of the Chanukah story: They [those with AIDS] became the jar of oil that lasted longer than anyone expected” (238).

➤ Can you describe moments from your life or the life of someone you know where highlighting good moments—even if small—brought comfort or healing? How would you, like Rabbi Eger, develop occasions for good times even in periods of illness, disability, and loss?

➤ Rabbi Eger’s congregants reinterpreted the Chanukah story such that they became the long-lasting oil. Can you describe a time when you or someone you know reinterpreted a moment in life or a Jewish ritual to help with healing?

Questions for Chapters 12, 15, 17, and 29 Together

➤ Are you familiar with Reform Judaism’s approach to gender inclusion and equality? If you are, how might it impact someone’s gender-based trauma? Discuss how you see Reform Judaism’s resources on gender inclusion. If you aren’t familiar with them, how could you find out? Where would you go, and whom would you ask?

➤ If you wanted to explore Jewish tradition for something that might be helpful to you or someone you know in times of distress, how would you find it? Whom would you ask? How would you begin?

➤ What outside the Jewish tradition has been helpful—a book, poems, music, performance, ritual, other activity? How did you locate these? What made them helpful? Would you combine any of them with something from the Jewish tradition—for instance, Psalm 22? If so, how? Brainstorm with a friend about possible creative mixes.

Consider Together:

Chapter 13: Alcoholics, Addicts, and Finding Ourselves in Judaism

Rabbi Susan B. Stone

Chapter 14: Learning to See in the Dark: A Jewish Approach to Depression

Rabbi Debra Kassoff

Chapter 22: September 11, 2001: Crossing the Narrow Bridge

Rabbi Serge A. Lippe

These chapters are grouped together for two reasons. First, they all address issues that have not always been openly addressed by Jewish tradition, texts, or communities, such as addiction and depression. Second, while chapters 13 and 14 focus on personal trauma and chapter 22 looks at collective trauma that terrorizes and destabilizes the entire community, both chapters 14 and 22 turn to words from Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav in *Likutei Moharan* 2:48:2:7: “A person must cross a very, very narrow bridge. The main rule is: Do not be frightened at all!” We will explore how Rabbi Nachman’s words illuminate all three chapters.

Questions for Chapter 13

Rabbi Susan B. Stone notes that she could not fully recover from addiction until she found a place for her story in Judaism. She needed a way to be seen and accepted in the tradition. “As a rabbi and an alcoholic, I could not best live my life until Jewish teachings and practices were included in my recovery” (125).

- Have you or someone you know ever had the experience of trying to find your own story in Jewish teachings and practices? Why were you better able to handle difficulties or heal from loss when you felt your own story is represented or expressed in Judaism? Why might this not resonate for you or someone you know?
- Have there been important aspects of your life, or the life of someone you know, that are underestimated by the Jewish community—things that were or are considered problems that do not impact the Jewish community very much? If so, has the community come to appreciate that under-recognized part of life? How and why? What did it do to address the issue?
- If you feel an issue remains under-recognized, what would need to happen for such recognition to begin? Where would you look for possibilities of change? Whom would you ask? If you’re studying in a group, brainstorm one example of an aspect of life that has been underestimated by the Jewish community.

Questions for Chapter 14

Rabbi Debra Kassoff writes that “in Jewish wisdom” she learned to not fight depression but to discover “a regenerative, creative, redemptive aspect of darkness that gave my experience of depression an entirely different frame. . . . Things happen in darkness that will not happen where the sun shines, literally or figuratively. Life in general, and Jewish tradition in particular, bears this out” (131–32).

- What do you think Rabbi Kassoff means by this passage? What sort of valuable things happen only in the darkness? Where do we find support for this idea in Jewish tradition? How might this idea enrich your own life—or do you feel it doesn’t describe your experience?
- Rabbi Kassoff also notes that Jewish tradition helped her find a ray of light, goodness, and joy in the hard, down times (134). What in Jewish tradition has done the same for you—has respected the difficulty you faced and also helped locate a small trace of light?

Questions for Chapter 22

Rabbi Serge A. Lippe talks about putting a brake on fear by bringing people together—by opening his synagogue to all after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and by coming together with people from all over Brooklyn on the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, which faces lower Manhattan and the site of the World Trade Center.

➤ If you remember September 11, think back to where you were on that day. Did you join with others in the days following the terror attacks? Would this be important to you in facing other traumatic events? In what circumstances and at what times would gathering be meaningful? In what circumstances and at what times might gathering be less helpful?

Questions for Chapters 13, 14, and 22 Together

In *Likutei Moharan*, Nachman of Bratzlav writes, “And know, that a person needs to cross a very, very narrow bridge, and the essential principle is not to make yourself entirely afraid.” Rabbi Serge Lippe understands this as follows: “The core of Reb Nachman’s message isn’t about denying fear. It is about not allowing fear to freeze us in place. His words remind us that life is lived by moving forward, by not allowing ourselves to become immobilized” (189).

➤ What are the links between Rabbi Lippe’s understanding of this teaching and Rabbi Kassoff’s words about grappling with depression or Rabbi Stone’s words about facing addiction? How would you bring the Kassoff and Stone chapters together with Reb Nachman’s message for a lesson that applies to all three chapters and perhaps to other experiences of trauma?

➤ Rabbi Nachman emphasizes ways of moving on—even with trauma—at times when it is impossible to “get over” it. Are Rabbi Nachman’s words and Rabbi Lippe’s interpretation useful to you? When is it possible to prevent fear from immobilizing us, and when is it unlikely or too difficult? Can you describe a moment from your life or from the life of someone you know when it wasn’t possible to resist immobilizing fear? What might be necessary to address or change this sort of dread?

Chapter 16: Radical Resistance: Overcoming Racial Trauma to Build *Olam Chadash*, a New World *Yolanda Savage-Narva*

Yolanda Savage-Narva comes to her understanding that all humanity is in God’s image—that we cannot divide ourselves into us-them enmities—through her identity as a Black Jewish woman. She calls this her “superpower.” She writes, “I am relying on my intersecting identities as my superpower to bring Black people who aren’t Jewish and Jewish people who aren’t Black closer together to realize the sacred humanity in one another and to allow us—even at this very challenging time in history—to see each other through the lens of *b’tzelem Elohim* (the image of God)” (148).

➤ How might complex identities influence one’s worldview? What are some of the positive and negative outcomes of complex identity?

➤ Complex identities aren’t always combinations of well-known demographic categories, like race and religion. What other complex identities are you familiar with—in yourself or in someone you know? How can we work to be more inclusive of multiple identities in our communities?

Chapter 18: From the Narrow Places: The Trauma of Gun Violence

Rabbi Joel Mosbacher

After his father was fatally shot, Rabbi Joel Mosbacher writes that in spite of great pain and anger, he “did what *B’reishit Rabbah* advised. I immersed myself more deeply in my family and my community. As I felt like I was drowning in grief and anger, I found a life preserver in words of Torah” (165–66).

He mentions Psalms 44 and 118, Deuteronomy 30:19 (“Choose life”), and the Mourner’s *Kaddish*, which guides us toward seeing the good even in moments of deepest sorrow.

➤ Rabbi Mosbacher asserts that both turning inward and taking care of oneself and also turning outward toward others help one heal from trauma and loss. Have there been times in your life or the life of someone you know when turning both inward and outward provided a path to healing? What are the challenges and benefits to this approach?

➤ Are there specific “words of Torah” that have served as a life preserver for you?

Chapter 19: Running into the Flames: A Jewish, Army National Guard and Army Reserve Response to Trauma

Rabbi Aaron A. Stucker-Rozovsky

From his participation in the National Guard and Army Reserve, Rabbi Aaron Stucker-Rozovsky brings a unique perspective to this book. He writes, “When I think of the word ‘trauma,’ my first thought is always ‘Who’s coming to the rescue, who’s going to run into the flames?’ In other words, I’ve always believed that the fires of trauma are best quenched by the waters of selfless service” (167).

➤ How does Rabbi Stucker-Rozovsky’s commitment to military service shed light on your understanding of trauma? How can we better honor those who serve in this way? How can we bring his perspective to the choices we make when confronting disaster and loss?

➤ In times of emergency, we are indebted to the people who “run into the flames.” At the same time, we are aware of historical and present abuses of military force for political or economic gain. What questions or complexities does this chapter raise for you? What resources—Jewish and non-Jewish—can we use to help prevent abuses?

Consider Together:

Chapter 20: The Holocaust and October 7: The Personal Impact of Generational Trauma

Rabbi David Spinrad

Chapter 21: Witnessing History: A Memphis Rabbi’s Journey Through the Assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Rabbi Harry K. Danziger

These chapters are brought together because of their concern with trauma that has effects across generations—that colors the worldview, behavior, fears, and hopes of people long after the initial event. Because both worldview and actions—personal, political, and economic—are influenced even over considerable time, the trauma may have significant impact on public life, on our visions of the future, and on what we think is possible to achieve.

Questions for Chapter 20

As a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, Rabbi David Spinrad evocatively writes that he always had the sense that some evil was “gaining on” him (173). This led him to ponder how the intergenerational effects of the Holocaust shape his understanding of security, well-being, and antisemitism, which came to the fore after the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023. He writes, “Even though there is abundant evidence that the Jewish people are under assault, not everything that happens confirms this belief. I’m only choosing to believe that it does” (176). He notes that he never before realized the impact of his intergenerational trauma and knows that he needs therapeutic help to work this out (177).

- What are some of the intergenerational effects of the Holocaust that you or someone you know has experienced? How do you think it has influenced your or their understanding of current events?
- How can we untangle history, realistic present concerns, and the effects of trauma so that decisions about the present are productive? To help us with this, what kinds of conversations and research should be done? In what contexts, and with whom?

Questions for Chapter 21

In describing the intergenerational effects of the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rabbi Harry Danziger notes the enduring presences of scars: “April 1968 is long past, but as is true of many who survive cancer, all is not over when one is cancer-free. . . . Like a patient who has heard a diagnosis of cancer, a city once traumatized will never be the same” (181). Yet Rabbi Danziger also writes about how trauma was, over the generations, transformed into interfaith activism for the thriving of the community: “The Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association . . . would address hunger, shelter, job training, emergency services, clothing, utilities aid, and senior care issues. It became the largest community service agency in the region” (182–83). This is what’s meant, Rabbi Danziger writes, by the maxim “You are not required to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:21).

- Why do you think an interfaith organization was one outcome of the long-term, indeed intergenerational, effects of the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the racism that preceded it?
- What are the gifts and challenges of interfaith work?
- How do you understand the teaching from *Pirkei Avot* 2:21? How might it apply to national, communal, or personal traumas?
- What is your opinion of Rabbi Danziger’s assertion that some events leave permanent scars on people, communities, or entire cities? What events have left permanent scars on your life, the life of someone you know, or a community you know?

Questions for Chapters 20 and 21 Together

- How might Rabbi Danziger’s experience building social service organizations speak to Rabbi Spinrad’s experience with intergenerational Holocaust trauma? What from Rabbi Danziger’s story seems realistic and possible in Rabbi Spinrad’s post-Holocaust context—for instance, in German-Jewish and German-Israeli projects—and since October 7, 2023?
- How does the Biblical idea that the sins of the parents “transfer” to the children unto the third generation speak to the intergenerational effects of trauma? This teaching—found in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:5), Exodus 34:7, and Numbers 14:18, for instance—seems to imply that people can be not only victims across generations but also sinners or perpetrators. What are the psychological or sociological implications of this teaching? How might it help or hinder our understanding of and response to transgression and aggression?

Consider Together:

Chapter 23: Two Bombs: How the Boston Marathon Bombing Changed My Life

Rabbi Benjamin David

Chapter 24: A Personal and Communal Journey Toward Healing: The Story of Parkland

Rabbi Melissa Zalkin Stollman

These chapters are brought together because they discuss the feelings, reactions, and responsibilities that we have when we are confronting trauma that has not happened directly to us.

Questions for Chapter 23

Rabbi Benjamin David was not injured in the bombing at the Boston Marathon, but he was physically close to the place where others were. Yet proximity to violence or danger, he writes, can be a trauma of its own, prodding feelings of guilt for surviving, a destabilization of reality, and generalized insecurity and anxiety—the sense that life can literally blow up at any time.

➤ How has an event that you or someone you know experienced led to a heightened appreciation of the fragility of life, that it can change at any moment? Can you describe the event and the feelings that followed it? How did those experiencing this sort of indirect trauma react? What resources were used to address that reaction? Can you think of other resources that might be helpful—both Jewish and non-Jewish texts, music, art, rituals, or other practices or activities?

Questions for Chapter 24

In chapter 24, Rabbi Melissa Zalkin Stollman offers a detailed account both of the toll on those not physically harmed by the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, and of the resulting activism that contributed to healing—from emergency worship services and vigils to teen hang-out spaces and social service projects. Other chapters of this book address times when *individual* trauma is soothed by reaching outward; in this chapter, it is *community* trauma that is soothed in this way.

Rabbi Stollman also notes that caretakers need care. “I needed my own shivah and *shloshim* period” (198). This is her double lesson: “Our response—rooted in activism, community support, and personal healing—illustrates the transformative power of Judaism to guide us through the darkest of times” and “for me, I learned the value of community and friendship . . . [and] that self-care is vital” (201).

➤ This chapter is a very full account of the need for community and personal support in responding to trauma, including events where you have not been physically harmed but nonetheless sustain emotional harm. What about Rabbi Stollman’s description was especially meaningful for you? What stood out and why? Would similar project-building work for you and your community, and why? Would something else be more helpful?

Chapter 25: From Brokenness to Blessing: Serving as a Chaplain in Pittsburgh

After the Tree of Life Massacre

Rabbi Shira Stern, DMin, BCC

Rabbi Shira Stern, DMin, BCC, connects the Biblical story of Esau’s pain when he was swindled by his brother Jacob to the people she served in Pittsburgh after the Tree of Life massacre. Esau cried, “Did you not reserve a blessing for me? . . . Do you have but one blessing, Father? . . . Bless me! Me too, Father!” (204). Rabbi Stern writes that like Esau, the people she served were saying: “*Didn’t God reserve some special blessing that could help me in this awful situation? God, do You really only have one blessing to give?*” (204). Yet in addition to this sense of abandonment, Rabbi Stern talks also of emerging

resilience: “We always carry the scars, both internal and external, when life is upended. Resilience lies . . . in being able to pick oneself up when it is the hardest thing in the world to do, over and over and over again. In tiny steps. In small increments” (207).

➤ The Biblical Esau is often seen as a minor character and someone not fit to carry forward the covenantal promise made to Abraham and Isaac. Yet Rabbi Stern sympathizes with him and sees his pain in those she has served. How does this rereading change your understanding of the Biblical story? Does Esau’s despair help you understand circumstances in your life or in the life of someone you know?

➤ What other Biblical stories might shed light on our experiences of loss and fear if read in an untraditional way? For instance, one might be the story of the Golden Calf, where the Israelites commit community-wide idolatry, the gravest of sins. But on a rereading, might we extend sympathy to them for the trauma of being left alone in the barren, waterless desert for forty days without guidance from Moses—without even hearing from him? What does this narrative tell us about human responses to loss, anxiety, and fear for survival? What other Jewish narratives would you like to reinterpret in a nontraditional direction?

➤ Rabbi Stern suggests that surviving trauma and loss is a matter of rekindling the wick of survival daily, much as the ancient Israelites re-wicked the oil of Chanukah. Is there some daily or weekly “rekindling” you have done or others you know have done to address harrowing circumstances and loss? What are the gifts and challenges of focusing on resilience?

Consider Together:

Chapter 26: Floods, Winds, and Wheels: Lessons from Hurricane Katrina

Rabbi Robert H. Loewy

Chapter 27: The Rising Floodwaters: Surviving Hurricane Harvey

Rabbi Adrienne P. Scott

These chapters are brought together because they recount the trauma brought by natural disaster, where the entire community infrastructure is destroyed and there is very little left to enable help and support.

Questions for Chapter 26

This chapter describes the unpredictable, devastating destruction resulting from Hurricane Katrina to everything—homes, schools, hospitals, jobs, shops, businesses, houses of worship, community centers, and city infrastructure. To help find some inkling of an attentive God, Rabbi Robert H. Loewy points to I Kings 19:11–12, where Elijah hides from those who wished to kill him and finds spiritual shelter not in the great winds or shattering rocks, not in fire or flood, but in “a soft, murmuring sound, a still, small voice.” Rabbi Loewy continues, “[Hurricanes] Katrina and Rita were not acts of God, but simply of nature, part of the forces in our world, which are simply random. . . . God is that still, small voice that spoke to us when we lost faith and courage. God is the presence that reminds us there will be tomorrow and we will have the strength to face it. God provides us with a path to share our fears and know that we are never alone” (219).

➤ What is your response to Rabbi Loewy’s assertion that natural phenomenon are random events? How do you understand the natural world and its connection with God—if any? How might different understandings of this connection impact our response to natural disasters?

Questions for Chapter 27

Facing the devastation and displacement of Hurricane Harvey, Rabbi Adrienne P. Scott finds the attentive God in Jewish history. She writes, “Displacement is part of our Jewish heritage and legacy. We have been taught that we can find comfort and support through Torah and Jewish texts during times of suffering. As a community, we remained true to observing Shabbat and other sacred times throughout the rebuilding after Hurricane Harvey. We gathered together and found the important strength we needed to move forward” (227).

- Rabbi Scott notes that Jewish history includes many instances of exile, hardships, and the persecutions that come from being outside one’s homeland. But she also emphasizes history’s lessons in how to survive—even thrive—under hardship. How does this perspective on Jewish history strike you? How can looking at history’s lessons help our understanding of contemporary events? Under what conditions might it be less beneficial?
- Is there an event from Jewish history that you find particularly meaningful and that provides you with a helpful framework for understanding life?

Questions for Chapters 26 and 27 Together

Rabbis Scott and Loewy emphasize that community, ritual, and text can assist us in grappling with devastation and loss; they are all things to hold onto while life is in chaos. Rabbi Loewy also recalls the Biblical passages where Elijah hears the small voice of God. This too is a source of stability and comfort.

- Have you had a similar experience of realizing, in the midst of the din around you, be it natural or human-made, that you suddenly found a “small voice”—a grounding, stabilizing presence that centers you and reminds you that you can go on? Can you describe it? How can we hold onto that for future challenges?
- What role does community have in times of communal loss and trauma? Do you think there is a difference when a traumatic event is personal or communal?

Consider Together:

Chapter 28: The Still, Small Voice: How Faith Helped Navigate California’s Wildfires

Rabbi Paul Kipnes

Chapter 36: *Im Yirtzeh HaShem*: Rebuilding a Shattered Theology After Stillbirth

Rabbi Karen Glazer Perolman

Chapter 37: Seeking Solace: Faith After My Father’s Suicide

Deborah L. Greene

Although they discuss different kinds of trauma—wildfires, stillbirth, and suicide—these chapters have been grouped together because each trauma brought the author or community to a near rupture of faith and a later return, renewal, or re-understanding of faith.

Questions for Chapter 28

Facing the destruction of the California wildfires, Rabbi Paul Kipnes describes the sense of devastation in terms of a shaken covenant. He writes, “Our covenant with God is a basic agreement: The Holy One is supposed to spread a *sukkat shalom*, a ‘shelter of peace,’ over us. When that sukkah failed to appear, we wanted to know where and when we might find God again” (232). Rabbi Kipnes and others eventually did find their covenant with God, but they also acknowledge that for many, covenant with God was not the priority or even possible in the immediate disaster. Rabbi Kipnes writes, “Now we would act as we must, and hopefully the inner understanding—the ‘spiritual stuff’ as one

congregant called it—would follow *afterward*. . . . It was not that God wasn't there during the fires; it was just that our 'fight or flight' inner function forced us to choose. At first, during danger, we take flight. Later, after the immediate danger subsides, we fight our way back to renewed faith" (233).

➤ How might tragedy or hardship destabilize one's belief in the basic connection, the covenant, with God? What might allow the covenant with God to remain alive throughout loss or disasters?

Questions for Chapter 36

Rabbi Karen Glazer Perolman describes the despair of having a stillborn child in a way that echoes Rabbi Kipnes's anguish in chapter 28. Rabbi Perolman writes, "I returned to my rabbinic work newly awakened to the theological quandary that was now my life. How was I to teach about a God who had failed me so spectacularly? Or praise a God who gave someone a living baby and me a dead one?" (298–99).

➤ Many people feel abandoned by God at some time in their lives. Have you or someone you know faced such a "theological quandary"? Can you share the situation that brought such feelings about? How would you describe this sense of abandonment?

➤ Rabbi Perolman addressed her anguish by modifying Jewish liturgy and by drawing on a song from the musical *Les Misérables*. What other Jewish and non-Jewish resources would you draw on to address the specific loss of a stillbirth or another despair-making loss that ruptured relationship with God?

Questions for Chapter 37

Describing her response to her father's suicide, Deborah L. Greene writes, "My mind cried out, demanding to know where this all-knowing, intervening God was when my father was ending his life. Why hadn't God sent an angel to cry out to stop him, as God did when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:11–12)?" (304). In her anguish, Greene felt unable to go to synagogue or to continue in relationship with God: "If I could not return to synagogue, to that notion of place where I had been taught that God dwelled, how could I be in relationship with the Divine? . . . If I dared to speak to an intervening or almighty God, I'd never be able to forgive Them for not intervening to help my father" (304, 306).

➤ Losing a loved one to suicide is often a deeply complex loss. What emotions and experiences are in play in this case?

➤ Greene describes slowly letting go of her anger at the father who took his own life (306). Have you or someone you know ever felt that you had to work your way toward forgiving a sick or deceased loved one? What other emotions—guilt, regret, shame, sorrow—were involved? How were those feelings handled?

Questions for Chapters 28, 36, and 37 Together

➤ Have you or someone you know responded to loss or trauma by losing connection with the synagogue community, with liturgy, or with God? Can you describe the experience for you, for them, and for those in the family or community? How was the disconnection healed, and if it remains, what are its effects? What is your response to the situation?

➤ Deborah L. Greene writes, "Somewhere along the way, I was able to let go of the guilt and the unanswerable question of why" (306). The "unanswerable question of why" people suffer or are harmed emerges in many kinds of trauma. What does it mean to you to let go of the "why" question? How would that be helpful in facing trauma and difficulties? What are some of the times when it might not be helpful?

➤ Are there crises—personal or historical—where there is no path back to God? Do your ideas about this affect the way you think about loss?

Chapter 30: *Nachamu Ami*, Comfort My People: Serving as a Hospital Chaplain During COVID

Rabbi Leah Cohen Tenenbaum, DMin, BCC-PCAHC

After serving as a hospital chaplain during the COVID-19 epidemic, Rabbi Leah Cohen Tenenbaum highlights two ideas. The first is her interpretation of a phrase in the Jewish morning service: “How great is Your trust in me.” Rabbi Tenenbaum understands this to mean: “Even with all the brokenness of this pandemic, God trusts us. The Almighty thinks we’ve got this! . . . How do we deliver on God’s faith in us? In small ways. . . . *Elohim b’pratim*, ‘The Divine is in the details’” (248–49). Second, Rabbi Tenenbaum takes this text and puts it into action by creating one of those “small ways”: She wrote short biographical notes and hung them on the door of each person in the end-of-life COVID unit so that all those coming into contact with that person would see the *person*, not just the disease or a case number. This holistic, humanized understanding is often missing from the way we respond to disease, disaster, and trauma; people are often “processed” through the system. It is also missing from many aspects of daily life. We see people in one setting—behind a store counter, at work—and often know very little about them beyond it.

➤ How do you think a more holistic understanding among people could be achieved in the different areas of your life? What comes to mind that you and your community could put into effect?

Consider Together:

Chapter 31: The Legacy of Trauma: Reckoning with the Reform Movement’s Ethical Misconduct

Rabbi Marina Yergin

Chapter 32: Leaving a Toxic Community: Ritual Moments

Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen

These chapters are brought together because they speak to the painful issue of abuse within a trusted community. In such cases, one is often not able to seek help from those belonging to the community or organization. Where does one go to stop the abuse and to heal afterwards?

Questions for Chapter 31

In discussing ethical misconduct in the Reform Movement, Rabbi Marina Yergin notes that “institutional harm is the mistreatment of a person by a system of power, and it is different from the primary harm that occurred. When institutions cause additional harm based on their silence and lack of accountability, ethical misconduct is perpetuated and harms continue” (258).

➤ How did learning of sexual, psychological, and other abuses in various Reform institutions change the way you feel or think about the Reform Movement or about Judaism overall?

➤ On pages 259–60, Rabbi Yergin summarizes the five steps of *t’shuvah* (repentance) developed by Maimonides: public acknowledgment of wrongdoing, change in behavior, restitution (based on what the victims need rather than what the wrongdoers believe the victims need), apology, and not repeating the harm when faced with a new opportunity to do so. What is most important about this process for you? Is there anything you would add, delete, or change? What do you think makes this process effective—or not?

➤ In response to the sexual, psychological, and other abuses discovered in the Reform Movement, several major institutions—including the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Hebrew Union College, and the Union for Reform Judaism—hired external investigators, who issued detailed reports (see pages 255–56, 258). In what ways did this process fulfill Maimonides’s requirements? In what ways did it fall short? What are your thoughts about the measures taken at these institutions to address the abuse? Are there things you find especially helpful or moving? Are there things you would like to add, and if so, why?

Questions for Chapter 32

Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen writes, “She took some of its fruit and ate. . . . Then the eyes of both of them were opened’ (Genesis 3:6–7) . . . Eve began to understand that the so-called Garden of Eden was no paradise” (264–65). Rabbi Ashworth-Steen uses the story of Eve to speak about eyes being opened to new knowledge—in this case, to knowledge of harm within a community. Eve is usually identified as the person who brought wrongdoing into the world, causing the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise. In this chapter, Eve is seen as a positive figure, one who contributes to true understanding.

- How does understanding Eve this way help people in toxic communities understand their own experiences, their roles in those communities, and their options—to take action within the community or outside it? To leave? Something else? How could this reading of Eve be a framework for empowerment?
- Rabbi Ashworth-Steen’s interpretation of the Eve narrative is in essence a new and expanded midrash (commentary) on the Biblical narrative. Choose another Biblical tale to develop in a new way in response to a personal experience, trauma, or emotional need. Expand on or change what the characters say and do; add characters; change the outcome or lesson of the story!

Questions for Chapters 31 and 32 Together

- In addition to the Maimonidean steps of *t’shuvah* described in chapter 31, chapter 32 includes rituals of healing specifically for survivors of abuse that occurs within the community. What do you find meaningful, useful, or challenging about these types of rituals? What makes some of them less beneficial, in your view?
- Develop either a *t’shuvah* process or a ritual of your own for healing harm that occurs within a relationship, a family, or a community. What needs should the ritual address?

Consider Together:

Chapter 33: The Unexpected Trauma of Retirement

Rabbi Daniel A. Roberts

Chapter 35: Conceiving Hope: Navigating Infertility in the Jewish Community

Rabbi Jen Gubitz

Chapter 33 describes challenges near the end of life, at retirement, while chapter 35 pertains to losses concerning life’s beginning, in the pain of infertility. They have been brought together because they both describe opportunities for creating new rituals for moments that are not marked—or not fully marked—by traditional Jewish practice.

Questions for Chapter 33

In this chapter, Rabbi Daniel A. Roberts describes the sense of chaos, disorientation, and lack of resources when facing retirement. While seeming like “free time,” retirement actually demands quite a lot from us: “Retirement requires us to redefine our egos. Retirement requires us to figure out how we are going to preserve our finances, to make decisions about how and when we are going to downsize our residence, and to confront our mortality” (272). Rabbi Roberts also mourns the lack of community with whom he could share his feelings and that could perhaps have provided resources for moving forward.

- We often think of retirement as a time for celebration, but it can also carry a loss of identity. How does Rabbi Roberts navigate this tension? Have you experienced a similar dissonance between expectation and reality, and if so, what was the situation and how did you respond to it? What pragmatic solutions did Rabbi Roberts identify, and how might you apply these solutions to your life?

Questions for Chapter 35

In her chapter on infertility, Rabbi Jen Gubitz writes, “In my work with Modern Jewish Couples, we never assume that anyone is planning to birth children into the world or even want to become parents at all. Instead, we ask couples, ‘How do you define family? And what do you hope your family will look like in five or ten years? Is it a community of friends, furry animals, tiny humans, or something else?’ For those interested in having children, we talk about genetic testing, fertility, and pathways to family building. . . . What is helpful, however, is unique for every person; one can try out different modalities to see if it helps them, knowing that there is always another pathway to explore” (290–91).

➤ What does family mean to you? Are there different types of “families” that you know of or to which you belong? Can you think of stories in Jewish texts of rituals, history, or halachah that speak to these different ideas of family?

➤ Rabbi Gubitz writes about the implicit and explicit expectations about “family” that are often found in Jewish families and communities. What are the expectations in your family or community, and how do you feel about them? If there are differences between your beliefs and community expectations, how do you navigate among them?

➤ If you feel some expectations should change, how would such change come about?

Questions for Chapters 33 and 35 Together

Rabbi Roberts writes, “Not only is it important to foster welcoming, supportive community spaces, but I believe that it’s also essential to create new rituals, either community-wide or private, to help people acknowledge the moment of retirement and contemplate and map out new directions for their life” (273). Similarly, Rabbi Gubitz describes a new Rosh HaShanah ritual to acknowledge infertility: “We would also offer a blessing ‘for the Hannahs among us’—all those yearning to create and birth someone or something into the world” (289). She describes the healing power of Jewish music: “We listened on repeat to songs that prayed for healing, songs that spoke to the narrowness of being human, and songs that imagined God as a healer of the brokenhearted” (291).

➤ What experiences have you had that are not marked in traditional Jewish practice, ritual, or liturgy? What kind of ritual would you develop to address that experience? For what other life events can you imagine creating a ritual, and what might it look like?

Chapter 34: Broken Glass, Mended Heart: Healing from the Trauma of Divorce

Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar, MAHL

In this chapter, Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar, MAHL, describes the years of divorce proceedings and a bitter custody suit that was expensive financially and emotionally. She describes four aspects of her healing process: forgiving herself for having made a poor choice in marriage; learning that “life is about learning lessons on a soul level, and everything we experience is meant to teach us something” (280); and understanding that much of healing is done through one’s relationships and, on the other side of the coin, through self-reliance.

➤ In what ways does Rabbi Bahar’s description of her divorce resonate with you or with the experiences of someone you know? How might these sorts of life events lead to greater self-awareness or personal growth?

➤ Originally, Rabbi Bahar envisioned a more positive and collaborative divorce process, only to have a much more challenging and combative—even abusive—divorce. What different models of divorce can you imagine? Which models have you experienced? How have you responded when your expectations for the future did not exactly unfold as you hoped?

➤ Rabbi Bahar describes four types of healing. Which of them do you find most meaningful? Which do you find challenging? Do you know of additional approaches to healing that could be helpful? If so, what are they, and how do they offer support?

Consider Together:

Chapter 38: The Crawl Space Between Grief and Gratitude: The Devastating Death of a Daughter

Rabbi Susan Talve

Chapter 39: A Path to Healing Through Tradition: Jewish Mourning Rituals and Beliefs

After the Death of My Child

Rabbi Rex D. Perlmeter, LSW

These chapters have been brought together first because they confront the trauma of the death of a child. They also both ponder when Jewish ritual and texts have been helpful and when other life arenas provide additional kinds of support.

Questions for Chapter 38

After the death of her daughter, Rabbi Susan Talve turned to Jewish ritual, Torah study, and especially the practice of “loving-kindness, giving the benefit of the doubt, generosity, and deep listening.”

These, she writes, “continue to pick me up from my pain and push me forward. . . . As lonely as grief is, my tradition and my practice remind me that I am not alone” (314–15). Yet, she also notes that we are each constrained by our limited capacities, energy, resources, and mistakes. Judaism teaches that our heroes and role models are similarly flawed, and so we must learn to move forward and make an effort to help others, in spite of limitation: “Each of our heroes gives us lessons on being at the mercy of our limitations. They teach us to avoid making the same mistakes and accept that we, too, are flawed. They help us live with our limitations and encourage us to try and be better” (316).

➤ The title of this chapter is “The Crawl Space Between Grief and Gratitude.” What does this mean for you? What is the space like—what’s in it, how do you live and act from within it? How does this image help you understand your own challenges, losses, or traumas, or why does it not work for you?

➤ How do the flaws of our ancestors help you to better understand your flaws or the flaws of others? How do they help us strive to do better? Are there any ancestors whose flaws speak most powerfully to you or whose actions most inspire you? What other models could support you in learning how to go on in spite of limitation?

Questions for Chapter 39

In describing the long mourning process following the loss of his son Mitch, Rabbi Rex D. Perlmeter, LSW, explains the *shiviti*: “It is a piece of word art centered around a verse from Psalm 16:8, which says, *Shiviti Adonai l’negdi tamid*, ‘I have set the Eternal always before me.’ The *shiviti* is used as an object of contemplation to help us see that there is truly no place or entity in this Creation where God is absent. Every morning, before reciting *Kaddish* [the prayer of mourning, acknowledging the dead], I would open my iPad to my home-screen photo—a picture of Mitch” (323).

➤ How has a ritual object been a support for prayer or contemplation for you, especially at times of loss? What made it helpful? Are there any rituals or ritual objects that had the opposite effect and hindered you during a time of loss and need? Why were they unhelpful?

Questions for Chapters 38 and 39 Together

- In chapters 38 and 39, Rabbis Talve and Perlmeter seek out regular Jewish practice and study in their times of loss. Other people seek out different resources to help with grief and anger. Still others need time to turn inward, process their feelings, and regroup. In times of loss, what do you gravitate toward and why?
- Rabbis Talve and Perlmeter talk about engagement not with a childhood God but with one that grounds study and sophisticated practice. These are serious reckonings with a relationship that is complex and challenging—a relationship where there may be a lot of silence and at times a lack of soothing explanation. When have you felt a similar reckoning in your relationship to God? How do you—or someone you know—maintain relationship with God? What difficulties disrupt this relationship?
- What texts, rituals, or other practices have been helpful to you in times of loss and trauma? Why are or were these specific things important to you? What made you connect with them?

Conclusion: *Nechemta*: Finding Comfort

Rabbi Lindsey Danziger

In this concluding chapter, Rabbi Lindsey Danziger offers a two-part summary of the book. First, she writes, “*The Sacred Struggle* set out to provide a usable and practical Jewish anthology to navigate and find comfort in the most difficult parts of life. . . . The connections formed in the midst of trauma are life-giving and irreplaceable. . . . We hope that this book can provide a small sliver of that companionship.” Then, Rabbi Danziger adds, “Even so, it is important to recognize that there will be readers who do not find themselves in these pages—those whose struggles are not voiced in this volume or those who went through similar experiences with vastly different reactions, feelings, and learnings. We hope this will inspire readers to share their own stories, because there are people who need to hear them” (329).

Rabbi Danziger also recognizes that “not every story has a *nechemta* [comforting conclusion]. . . . Perhaps the *nechemta* in this volume lies in navigating that tension together, across these pages, across the generations of our people, and across the relationships that we build in our darkest moments. It is okay to not be okay for as long as it takes” (330).

- Now that you have read several chapters of this book, please share where you or someone you know can be found in its pages. Conversely, what stories are missing that you would you like to talk about or see discussed?
- What are your reactions to the complex idea that “It is okay to not be okay for as long as it takes”? Which stories from your life do not have a *nechemta*, comfort or closure—or don’t yet? What help or comfort do you find in “navigating that tension together”?