

# Tragedy Near and Tragedy Far

Rabbi Yohanna Kinberg

I want to speak tonight about tragedy. Sudden and unexpected loss and the suffering it causes, both near to our lives and far from our lives. And in relation to our lives, what do we do with it as human beings?

How do we cope? How do we live through and with tragedy, loss and suffering in our lives when it is near, so near that you feel as if a piece of you has been cut out. How do we live through and with tragedy when you feel as though life has shifted forever. When you know that there is no turning back, no restoration of what once was.

All I know is my own experience of how I integrated the pain of tragedy and the suffering of loss into my own being. All I know is that the person I am today carries this wound of loss—it is like a tattoo. It marks me always. It is a reminder when I lie down and when I raise up that this loss of corporal relationship is forever and has changed me forever. There is no getting through it or passing beyond this pain. There is just living with it, making it a part of you, and incorporating it into whom you are in this world.

But this I want to say about loss that is near to you and intimately related to your life—there comes a point in your mourning when you say to yourself — “This person I lost can no longer be dead to me. They must be alive to me and in me. There is so much more of my life that I want to live and I want them to live this life with me.” There is a point where you embrace the pain; you stop wanting it to go away. You accept it and learn to live with it. Living not a diminished life but a real joyous, amazing life filled with infinite possibility.

And so you carry them with you always, like a secret badge of courage sown into your pocket. When you see something that they would have loved, something that they should have seen—you smile and cry. When you hear a joke they would have loved, you laugh for both of you—and then you might cry. Crying (with or without tears) shows that your beloved is alive in you, their voice is there—and the cry means —“I still miss, you, I still wish you were here.” That part just never goes away—and thank God.

I am so grateful for the ever present sense of loss that I carry inside. Does that sound strange? For those of you who feel overwhelmed by loss at this time this might be hard to understand. But this pain is a piece of my ongoing, ever present relationship. It is a new relationship, an unexpected relationship, and yes--an unwanted relationship—but it is no less real of a relationship than when they were living.

On tragedy, loss and pain that is far:

What do you do? How do you respond? How do you live with the pain of suffering a loss that is not close to you? A loss that happened to someone else, perhaps to an acquaintance or perhaps to people you have never met?

Many times we take notice of the tragedy in the lives of people we do not know, the loss of lives that feel very distant from us. But I believe that many of us do not allow ourselves to go beyond taking notice, skimming an article in a paper, half-listening to a news story.

You may be thinking—can I really truly mourn every life lost tragically? What about the tsunami where so many people died?

I want to suggest this. Allow yourself to be moved by the losses from afar. Allow yourself to feel a twinge of pain, and to let your heart ache a little for the mother, the sister, the aunt who is living with this loss intimately.

Open your heart just a bit because through this you allow yourself to connect into your own humanity. I believe that every day each of us should let ourselves, even if for just a few seconds, tap into the immense suffering that exists in this world because life is also all about this suffering.

When we attempt to shield ourselves, to distract ourselves with the ideal of pure happiness, and believe that our lives must be devoid of suffering if we are to call them “good” lives then we are turning away from reality, the core of reality which is how I understand God. Life is about birth, growing and death. We must embrace the entirety of life as holy.

We are so conditioned to run away from the suffering of others, and to turn away from that which is painful and hard (unless it is our own loss and then we can no longer run) that we need tools to help us reconnect to our full humanity.

This is my tool: when I see or hear of tragic losses, things that I want to turn away from and not deal with, I try to remember this quote by Martin Buber—

“Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. For if there had been someone like him before, there would be no need for him to be in the world. Every single person is a new thing in the world and is called upon to fulfill his particularity in the world.”

I think to myself, “This person brought something unique and new to this world and now they are gone. I am sorry and sad that this manifestation of infinite possibility is lost to our world. This is a loss.” Every time someone dies before their time it is a loss because they have not fulfilled the fullness of their own possibility. The world suffers over this loss. Each of us should allow this suffering to touch us, to inform us, and to make us even more human through an acknowledgement of this loss.

I want to close with a story about comfort because in our Jewish tradition a primary mitzvah is to comfort the mourner, whether near or far. This is how the Jewish tradition responds to tragedy and to the suffering caused by unexpected loss. Comfort is not making the pain go away because that is not the goal, and it is not even a good idea. Comfort means to make life bearable, to help ease the suffering that makes it so that we cannot really live, the suffering that immobilizes us and makes us dead to creation. This comforting which consists of kind gestures, hugs, offerings of time, space, and an ear or a hand to hold, are key ingredients in living with loss, pain and tragedy. Each of us has the power to aid others along their very human path from mourner to someone who is living, really living a life with loss.