

Leave a Section Unpainted

Rabbi Dara Frimmer
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For those who remember, I grew up in New Jersey. No, not near an exit. Yes, there was a shopping mall.

And, as you might imagine, there are some notable differences between New Jersey and Los Angeles.

For example: In L.A. we have “as-is” home sales. Perhaps you are familiar with this? “This lovely home could be yours, but we, the owners, will change nothing about it. You will buy it “as is” - broken roof, cracked walls, lots of termites... Do we have a deal?

Well, as luck would have it, in 2013, we did: A sweet, little home on Greenfield Ave, built in the 1940s, was ours.

We got to work and two months later: We had replaced the wires and pipes. The cabinets and appliances. The house shimmered and shined with IKEA installations and fresh paint...**except for the pink bathroom.** That we didn’t touch.

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Now, why am I telling you about home renovations on Kol Nidrei?

Because when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the Sages of that generation instituted a new rule. Moving forward, Jews must leave a portion of their house unpainted.

Let me say that again: The Temple was destroyed. The center hub on which the Israelite tradition revolved...gone. The Jewish community was in exile and the leadership declared: **Even as you rebuild, you cannot forget this tragedy.** As a reminder, leave a space in your house unfinished.

To be clear, just like the two-headed man or the dead body in the field that have been featured in past Kol Nidrei sermons, this is not something you missed in Sunday School. It’s not what I would

call a “popular” Reform Jewish practice...to paint your home and then tell your contractor to stop midway, in order to leave a section of roughly 19 by 19 inches unpainted. But that’s what our ancestors asked us to do.

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE was devastating. No one expected it. No one planned for it. It was brutal, and in that moment of reorganization and reinvention, the rabbis *could* have made the decision to say, “Let's not talk about it ever again.”

But they did the opposite.

They put it front and center and on our wall. Because even this degree of tragedy has something to teach us.

Like the mezuzah we hang on our doors, the unpainted wall is meant to serve as a reminder that the world holds brokenness. **And our daily work is to notice and integrate that loss - not deny or avoid it - but instead to be curious about what it might teach us.**

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And what better moment in the Jewish calendar than Yom Kippur to consider the **unfinished** nature of our lives? All the ways we have missed the mark, disappointed friends and family, hurt others and been hurt ourselves...and none of it resolved or cleaned up by the time we arrive at this moment.

This is Yom Kippur. The entire PREMISE of this holiday is that you will arrive **unfinished**. With work still left to do.

The question our tradition asks us tonight, as we begin our fast and annul our vows is: *IF we are given another year to live*, how will we live WITH the brokenness, and the incompleteness, and the unfinished work, so that it will not shatter us or depress us, but rather, **give us direction, deeper connection, and greater attention and intention each and every day?**

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The pepto-bismol, pink-tiled bathroom (with canary yellow highlights) is not the only place in our home that reminds us of *another time* in the life of the house. Let's be honest, we didn't leave a wall unpainted for very long. But we did do something else.

In our kitchen, over the banquette, we have a framed photo of Baby Jack, may his memory be a blessing. He was stillborn at 29 weeks.

And this moment of grief and heartbreak is not hidden or forgotten. His picture. The imprints of his tiny hands and feet. They are a gentle and enduring reminder for us to consider: ***In the wake of our family's greatest loss, with every day that we are blessed to have together, how will we choose to live?***

We're not so different from our ancestors. We all need tools to live with loss. Loss that is deeply personal. Loss that is communal, national, and global. Jewish tradition invites us to begin at home: Our one domain of control in a world that repeatedly spins off its axis.

On Greenfield Avenue, Eleanor and Madeline are growing up as Rabbi's Kids. The future therapy bills are a given. But when I'm not screwing them up, they are blessed to live in a home where grief and loss and brokenness are a part of "normal" life.

They hear me on the phone comforting congregants after the death of a loved one. And after I hang up the phone, they ask about the person who died: What was their name? What was their story?

And we talk about Baby Jack often. How old would he have been this year? Why did we cremate and not bury him? We explain to new friends who join us for Shabbat that we light 2 candles for Shabbat and one tea light to remember Baby Jack - a ritual we started before the girls were born. Now, they argue over whose turn it is to light his candle.

They are learning to tell the story of a brother they never met. Of a life that ended too soon. They are learning that sometimes children die before their parents. But, usually not. They know that stories connect us, and rituals, like Yizkor candles and tea lights, also help us remember. And that it's okay to talk about our loss. **We can take the grief and the heartbreak with us as we begin the next chapters of our life - and there will be room for it all: the sadness, the joy, the absence and the presence.**

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To be honest, I think the Rabbis were winging it.

No, I say that with love and respect. They just experienced the destruction of the Temple. There was no back-up playbook in case the centerpiece of your cult was burned to the ground by invaders.

Sitting in Exile, they had to strategize: What are we going to do? What do we do with the part of our story that now clearly says “we lost” and “we are lost”?

Sitting here tonight, we may be asking the same questions.

First, we have to have **faith**. Through every dark chapter, Jewish wisdom, strength, and creativity have always persevered, and they instruct us, even today: It is possible for us to build and rebuild our lives in the face of tragedy.

Second, we have to believe these memories will help us create enduring and meaningful next chapters in our lives *if we bring them with us*. The rebuilding is done in connection to the memory, not apart from it.

We don’t “get over” our grief and THEN feel ready to date or marry again. Even when someone has apologized for hurting us, we still feel tender. We carry our pain with us...but do we remember to *honor* what we’ve lived through? Where we’ve come from?

What might it look like and sound like to bring forth those memories, *even as you worry they will make you too sad?*

The story of a child who died.

Of a loved one who committed suicide.

A story of addiction.

Mental illness.

Estrangement.

Abandonment.

All the stories we stow away because we fear it will “bring up the past” or “cause pain”, but in fact, for so many who grieve, after the funeral, the divorce or separation, the painful goodbye...after the public post on social media that *initially* receives a wellspring of consolation, it gets too quiet.

We think we save ourselves and others if we don't talk about the sadness. But our ancestors thought differently. They knew that talking about our grief and our loss is EXACTLY what's going to help us rebuild.

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So, what comes next?

First, I don't expect you to drive home tonight and chip away the paint on your wall, though if you do, let me know. :-)

Instead, take time to remember how these moments fit into your life story. Holding onto these memories, ask yourself: Who am I? Where did I come from? And where am I going? Most importantly, learn to tell those stories out loud. And if you can, write them down. Share them with a friend. Save them for your children and future generations.

Second, we love our homes. It's where we retreat or hide out when the world feels brutal. “Come home,” we say to our kids. Here you will be safe. “Come home,” our partner replies when we've had an awful day.

But you have cleaned up and put away things that need to come out. Stories and objects that will be the answer to your question: “What do we do next?”

You have a picture.

You have a quilt.

You have a T-shirt.

You have a ring.

You have a piece of Judaica.

Take them out.

Now, some of you might think, I can’t take THAT out...that’s too painful. People won’t know what to say. It’s better to keep it hidden.

The Rabbis say: Take it out. There’s a place for it all. Not hidden away or suppressed or whispered about so the children won’t see. We welcome it into the room. We make space for it on our walls. And, more often than not, we find that integrating grief and loss strengthens our connections with others. Helps us live with greater purpose. Deepens our joy.

Our ancestors taught us to sit with the loss, and to build alongside it. They had faith that we would learn from it. Discern which pieces become part of the way we rebuild, and which pieces we are ready to discard. And they had faith that even if the lessons weren’t clear at first, someday, the stories and the objects would provide the blueprint for our next chapter.

Yom Kippur helps us to live *with our brokenness*, and to know (with confidence) that it is not only possible to rebuild after disappointment and loss, but that often, the new construction is stronger. And that the strength of our build will come from our willingness to be in the mess, not separate from it. Integrating the loss and learning from it, not ignoring it.

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We live in a world in which *structures* are *always* at risk of being broken. Where foundations of faith can be turned into rubble: With the stroke of a pen, rights cease to exist. To live in the world is to always be proximate to grief and loss.

And when we feel courageous, THIS is what we tell our children and grandchildren, in a way they can understand, in a way that we know will not break them, but in fact, will make them stronger: **that life will not always be a smooth, linear pathway. But even from our darkest moments, it is possible to rebuild.**

And the unpainted wall is our daily reminder.

And it's next to that wall, that we will celebrate Shabbat. It's next to the wall where family and friends will gather. And together, we will write the next chapters.

So, too, with our family on Greenfield Avenue. Every Friday night, we light 3 candles, which illuminate our kitchen, our photos, our faces...the fullness of our lives, even as we acknowledge the emptiness.

Like the Sages, WE needed to create a ritual of memory that would help us integrate unprecedented and unfathomable loss. We needed to have faith that we could build something beautiful out of our brokenness.

And in that space, of grief and joy, fragility and strength, we learn to tell our story.

G'mar Chatima Tova.