

## Game Days

In memory of my father, Michael Leis z”l

As many of you know, my father was killed on Shabbat Shuva - in between RH and YK - two years ago. He was struck by a car in a hit and run while walking on the sidewalk on a quiet beach road in cape cod. They were on the cape for a conference in her lifelong career advocating for recovery courts to provide mandatory treatment - in partnership with community leaders in order to prevent future harm.

September 14, 2022. Our day in court.

No one could see or understand what had happened in the dark of that night. But the sky was crystal clear blue on this September day, one year later.

In the intense unetaneh tokef prayer, dreadful scene unfolds. The angels quake in fear on behalf of humanity who is facing the truth of our mortality- who by fire, who by water. our family's harsh decree would be laid out before the packed courtroom: graphic evidence of the circumstances of my fathers death.

The liturgy offers not a way out but a way forward

*Utshuva tefilah utzedakah are practices to make the harsh decrees, easier to bear.*

*Teshuva turning back into to conscious, empowered, honest resilient, selves*

*Tefilah contemplative practice, prayer for the purpose of alignment and compassion*

*Tzedekah - efforts to dismantle systems of injustice, making things as right as possible*

None of these things were in my mind when we sat for our day in court, but the truth is, I had been practicing these pillars over the year before because i had to, there was no other choice.

My family sat in the front row on the right side of the courtroom. The defendant and his family on the left.

I couldn't face that direction. Instead I turned behind me to the face of our close family friend. Curled up in Barbara's eyes, I felt safe.

Until then we had known nothing about him but his name and his record. Our minds naturally filled in the voids, forming snapshots as humans do. (Reference to Rosh Hashanah sermon on judging others and ourselves)

He pleaded guilty two times.

vehicular homicide [bang on table] GUILTY,

leaving the scene after a death

[bang on table]

GUILTY

The man who killed my father admitted to killing him and leaving him on the road. The core of my being shook; facing reality shook me to the core.

The court system had kept us apart for the year. We were on our own to make sense out of my fathers senseless death through bits of evidence shared through third parties. We were also on our own to imagine who this person was, to fill in the blanks with snapshots, in *our* heads, of who he must have been.

When I see a human face, I seek to find the spark of the divine, to see goodness but I was overwhelmed by the enormity of seeing the face of the man who killed my

father. I don't know if I was more afraid of recognizing the humanity in his face, or seeing none.

In my statement I shared about my incredible father, and the immeasurable impact of his death on our family and so many outside of our family. I *also* spoke as rabbi about how the Talmud, a basis of our legal system today, carefully through much debate lays out laws for assessing harm and damage done, ensuring accountability for the various losses to one who has been harmed. There are categories including loss of work, shame, and physical loss. The rabbis of the Talmud *overturn* the Torah's ruling which speaks of an eye for an eye - *rejecting* revenge as an appropriate response, prioritizing *prevention of future harm*, and affirming that the dignity of all involved is maintained.

The actor and martial artist Bruce Lee said "Under duress, we do not rise to our expectations, but fall to our level of training." My studies compelled to claim a moment in the courtroom, to call on core values on this day of judgment.

Yet my frame was limited to my own experience. As the proceedings unfolded, I could only look on “our side of the room.” I wasn’t ready to face him, and that was OK.

Then my sister Jenny stood up. She paused, took a deep breath and looked around the *whole* room, trying to make eye contact with everyone, with his family, with the court staffers and with the judge.

In her statement she shared with wrenching sadness, four impacts:

losing a parent and her closest person.

*sudden* loss

*violent* loss

And lastly The impact of the violent, sudden loss of her most special person without apparent regret, apology, taking responsibility.

After she was done, my sister Jenny, like the salmon who swim upstream [reference to repeated mention in *tefila* of the salmon who compelled to live fully, while their skin is falling off, on their way home] in her adopted state of

Oregon, defied the norms of the courtroom in which we are only to address the judge.

“Under duress, we do not rise to our expectations, but fall to our level of training.”

Jenny’s training - her life's work and regular practices include intricate colorful visual maps based on deep reflection; she practices the principles of non-violent communication, facilitates conflict resolution and weekly community meetings. Jenny *practices* conscious community.

Unbeknownst to any of us, Jenny had practiced for this moment.

My sister turned to him and told him directly that what she most wanted at that moment was a human connection.

She told him that he could write anytime with an authentic apology, his experience of what happened, and what he had learned.

She extended her hand with a self addressed stamped envelope. I slowly followed her hand hand, and the envelope to the police officer who then handed it to the

man. She had granted him *humanity*, expanding our side of the room to include his side of the room.

I looked at him.

He is tall.

large frame.

longish dark hair. He was crying, nodding his head in response to my sister Jenny's invitation to connect.

I saw so much pain in his face, and also he seemed relieved. I felt relieved to see his humanity. He was a person (What had I thought he was?)

We were both crying, the unetaneh tokef angels quaking in fear at the horror of what had happened and what it meant for our lives.

I could see him as a human suffering, which in no way lessened or invalidated our suffering, which had been so fully and lovingly witnessed including by many of you here today. I had become in some way concerned for *him* at that moment, in *his* world. (Quietly) *Could this be compassion?*

Facing life without my dad, my children without their beloved grandfather, my mother suddenly alone to navigate life.

Facing the gruesome details of how he died and that he was left on the road like roadkill!

THE HORROR! The angels tremble in fear.

Yet here there was- a human. A human who was taking responsibility for his actions.

Emmanuel Levinas a

French Jewish philosopher who survived the Holocaust spoke of the face not merely as a physical feature but as a profound conduit for the word of God, a manifestation of the Divine that beckons our respect and ethical duty.

Levinas believed that the face, in its raw vulnerability, stands as a testament against violence, compelling us to acknowledge the inherent humanity and divinity in the other.

Facing takes practice. Facing reality is sometimes harsh. Practicing facing our decrees, whatever they may be - and so much is beyond our control- lessens their harshness.



But I discovered that day that the human face is not the harsh decree. *The human face is never the harsh decree.* Seeing his face that day in the courtroom, watching him taken away in the sheriff's van in cuffs, saying "I am sorry, I am sorry" to my sister Jenny, speaking with his family afterwards, and finding out that they are good people (what kind of people did I think they were?), I felt the profound resonance of Levinas' teachings — the imperative to approach the face of the perceived "Other" with compassion.

How do we overcome our pain, our judgements, our biases, our fears, our moods to be on both sides of the Courtroom? The courtroom is also our kitchens our bedrooms our offices the courtroom is also our schools our cars our futures.

How do we face the unfaceable? The unfaceable is sometimes our spouses, our children, our co-workers, our neighbors, voters. How do we face the unfaceable?

We practice. And every day *is* game day. Practicing facing means treating every day like game day.

What faces are hard to face? Take notice. I have started to.

Whose faces do I actually face on any given day. Start to notice.

In the Torah portion we read yesterday/ Shabbat God hides gods face when God is angry.

So too do we hide our faces from one another when almost any strong emotion arises.

Every interaction can be a sacred encounter, a moment where we truly see the face of God.

Eye contact is not easy for everyone...yet in seeing faces and hearing stories, witnessing joys, struggles, we find reflections of the Divine.

Turning towards the other, especially when it's challenging is a profound act of spiritual courage and INTIMACY In-to- me -you -see.

It is a conscious choice to recognize our shared humanity and the divinity in each of us. Do we feel it in our own face?(touch it)

Compassion naturally arises when we choose to see and feel humanity.

Rena DeLevie, a voice of wisdom in the realm of compassionate leadership, urges us to introduce compassion when there is fear or anger, suggesting that this shift not only transforms our internal experiences but also leads to better outcomes in our interactions at work and at home.

Levinas taught there is trace in every face of the divine...

My sister Jenny's act of reaching out was not a spontaneous gesture but the culmination of a life in which she practices intentional compassion in her everyday life. She *lives* teshuva tefilah and tzedakah as practices.

Why should game day be any different than practice?

My mother Roberta, the morning after, I think even before her coffee, began making phone calls in her mind to follow up on addressing the needs of the man who killed her husband in order to help him, for prevent future harm. She has spent her lifetime doing this- why would game day be any different?

*A friend of mine supported us before our day in court, Roberta wall. She writes about Torah from a social justice*

*and healing lens. She has facilitated restorative circles with israelis and palestinians. Roberta reflected to me: "I want to live in the flow of forgiveness as much as I can bc I feel how it unravels trauma in me and in the world. She then clarified that living in the flow of forgiveness does not mean that we must forgive everyone who hurts us. It is not always possible to forgive and we can choose stand in the flow of compassion as a practice.*

When we yearn for connection, for compassion, for love, for forgiveness, we are expressing a yearning for God's face like Moshe yearned for until the end of his life.

May there be yearning for each other's faces in the new year, may we turn towards one another, embrace our shared humanity, and when possible, be given the strength and courage and trust that comes from practicing to forgive - starting with ourselves.

Two days after court, I posted this on Facebook.

After an entire processing The Day, I am greeting This New Day with gratitude. May we move on to live our lives as dad would want us to.

May all being - including a man who made a big mistake and his family - know happiness. May all be relieved from suffering. We are one humanity. One heart. One struggle. G'mar Chatimah Tovah — may you be sealed in the Book of Life for a year of blessing, compassion and only goodness.