

On Loss and Meaning

from The Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco's Rabbi Eric Weiss and Ellen Goldsmith, URJ Camp Newman's Nefesh Faculty Coordinator

We all have a memory of a special place. Maybe it was the location you first heard someone say 'I love you', maybe it is the place of a first date, maybe it is the place you gained important insight into your own life, maybe it is a place of deep spiritual succor. You may have never returned to that place but you carry it in your soul for the feelings, thoughts, or spiritual experience you had there.

The truth is that we human beings need immanent structures to contain our transcendent experience. Shabbat happens in a beautiful amphitheater and so all the important thoughts and feelings we gained and then carry inside are anchored to that place. We take a hike on a particular path, have important conversation, and suddenly the path is not just dirt and a winding road, it is a place of deep friendship.

Place matters because of what the place gives us. What we get stays inside forever. And so the paradox of loss is that loss inherently exposes deeper truths about where we deepen relationship even though relationship continues beyond any singular place. It becomes important then to think about place, how you honor the gifts it has given, how a place needs to be enhanced so that it can still give important life lessons, memories and nourishment.

This kind of loss can be baffling because it is sudden and because the loss itself occurred in the very place in which a lot of people intentionally gather to deepen relationship. Another part that is important to recognize is that people are attracted to this place because it is in nature. Nature is a core place in which people have spiritual experience. Our tradition recognizes this by many prayers like *maariv aravim*.

And so it is important to recognize that it was of nature itself; a fire, that altered the place itself. This can be a kind of spiritual bruising that is different from other kinds of loss.

It is important to reflect on what the place gave, how one interacted with and in the place. And talk about what lives inside you from the place and how you want to return to the place.

These resources are an effort to help you frame this conversation of this kind of loss. The most important thing is to talk and listen.

Here are some pointers:

Feelings of loss can bring up other losses but try to not compare this to a death of a person or even pet, even though you may recognize similar feelings. Let this loss have its own distinction unto itself. Here are some things you may want to consider:

It may be helpful to talk about what you did in this place and how you would like to return to it.

Describing the beauty of a place: its physicality and what you learned there, can be helpful for this kind of loss. You may want to write a poem, a short essay or draw a picture to give expression to it.

Teach your family your favorite songs from camp and tell them where in camp you sang them, then sing them together.

Our use of technology has both improved communication and challenged it. Give yourself some leeway to calibrate yourself. Maybe share on social media what you have done to respond to the loss, even what you may be learning along the way. And remember not everyone feels the same

about social media and so the folks on social media may or may not be your whole community. Maybe call one person to talk or take your own moment of quiet.

Write a letter to God with all your thoughts, feelings, questions, and keep it to share with others. You do not have to provide answers. Whatever you think, feel, or question is just fine. But a letter like that can be important conversation to have with others.

There will be much to reflect on into the future. We hope these resources will guide you over the next days and weeks as we all continue to form more deeply our sacred community.

