The Dayenu of Grief

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by Janet R. Kirchheimer

(Janet R. Kirchheimer is the author of two poetry books, *How to Spot One of Us* (Clal, 2007) and co-author with Jaclyn Piudik of *Seduction: Out of Eden* (Kelsay Books, 2022). She is the producer of AFTER: Poetry Destroys Silence, in which contemporary poets confront the Shoah. It was named one of the best films of 2024 by RogerEbert.com. AFTER. Her poems and essays appear in print and in online publications. www.janetkworks.com.)

In every generation, one is obligated to see herself as if she left Egypt. (Exodus 13:8)

My mother died almost a year and a half ago. I was her full-time caregiver for the last four years of her life. As she was dying, I sat with her, spoke to her, watched her take her final two breaths. While waiting for the hospice nurse and the funeral home to come, I told her what was happening, assured her that I remembered the sheet. Ruth, my father's older sister, gave him a set of white linen sheets to bring to America while she remained behind in Germany trying to get a visa. The sheets were for her trousseau. She was murdered in Auschwitz in 1942. Seven years ago, my mother told me she wanted to be buried in one of Ruth's sheets.

There are days I want to stay in the narrow place that is Egypt, to remain in the darkness.

When the hospice nurse came, she asked if I wanted to send my mother to the funeral home as she was. I said no; we needed to wash and dress her in a nice housecoat. After, the nurse and my brother laid her on the floor. It was my *tahara*. My mother did her first *tahara* with her mother when she was 16 and her last when she was 90. Though my mother taught me, I knew I couldn't do *tahara* at the funeral home. I waited outside the room and tried to say Tehillim; and when the *tahara* was completed, I went in to see my mother wrapped in Ruth's sheet. I shoveled dirt onto her coffin. I sat shiva for seven days. I said kaddish three times each day for eleven months.

I left the life I had, moved home, cooked three meals a day for my mother, and gave her the care she needed. I became her mother when I needed to, advocated for her, signed the paperwork for hospice care at home, signed the DNR. The last words she spoke to me were, "You get some rest." That was her gift to me: she got to be my mother again, and I got to be her daughter.

There are days I want to stay in the narrow place that is Egypt, to remain in the darkness.

I was supposed to continue with my life; but I wasn't sure how to do that. Somewhere deep down I knew that my parents had taught me how to go on. They survived the Shoah. My father was arrested on Kristallnacht and sent to Dachau. He was 16. My mother was six years old when the kids in her first-grade class backed her up against a wall at school, threw rocks at her, beat her up, screaming *Jude, Jude*, Jew, Jew. Her parents got her out of Germany almost a year later to the Israelitisch Meisjes Weeshuis, the Jewish Girls Orphanage in Amsterdam. There were 104 girls. Four survived. The way

my parents lived their lives would show me how to live a new life. I just wasn't ready.

Some days I tried to knit my mother back to life as a sweater I could climb inside of, wrap around and hold me. She learned from her mother and taught me. I don't have the experience that my mother did. Her tension, the tightness or looseness of stitches, the interaction between needles and yarn, the control and feel in her hands, was perfect. I tried the seed stitch, basket weave, broken rib, twisted moss, but nothing helped. I could not hold a pattern; the stitches remained, stuck on the needle. I could not knit them off; all I could do was move the stitches from one needle to the other. My knitting was loose, loose as my grief. Yarn unraveled into my lap; then fell and covered the floor. My mother knitted with a control learned over many years. Green, her favorite color: I cut a piece of Kelly-green yarn and placed it in her hands as she was dying. I keep that strand with me.

Some commentators on Exodus 13:8 explain, "In every generation, a person is obligated to show herself, to see her essence, as if she had left Egypt. A person must strengthen their inner spark no matter how low a state one reaches." The one thing I knew for certain was that I could never go back to being the same person I was before my mother died. There were days when I could not find any spark. Intense grief is a weighty task, it's a practice, and I needed to keep in mind Oscar Wilde: "Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground." I needed to hold my grief, to keep trying to knit the stitches off and, perhaps most importantly, to be patient. It was an interior time when I had to be responsible to my emotions and begin the work of remaking myself.

And now as the intense grief has subsided, my inner spark, which is everything my parents taught and showed me, is beginning to assert itself most days. Those are the days when I walk to the water's edge. I dip my toes into the Sea of Reeds, begin to make my way through, and can almost see the waters divide to let me pass. Those days give me strength, soothe me. I don't expect every day to be like that; and I'm okay with not being okay. That's part of being in the reeds, of learning to live with grief, not despite it. I know I will grieve for the rest of my life yet get better at making it part of who I will

become.

The word resolve, from the Latin resolvere, means to dissolve, unloose, release. I know my grief will never be fully resolved, but it will loosen. There will be some release; it will happen when it does. In the meantime, I'm enveloped with loving memories of my parents. Often, I feel their presence pushing me forward to carry the past with me and release it at the same time, to begin a new life.

I have been leaving Egypt gently, gingerly. I will not rush away the grief. Yet, I find myself more and more willing to come out of the darkness and make my way to that edge, walk into the water up to my neck, keep walking as I feel my feet on the ground in the reeds that try to hold me back. I will wait for the Sea to split. Maybe that's release; maybe that's redemption from the narrow spaces of Egypt. And maybe that's enough.