



From Wave to Wave to Wave

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When my dad died in my early 20s, I remember being wowed by the ways in which grief came in waves. One minute, I was crying and couldn't imagine ever moving through my sadness and several hours later, I was surprised to find myself laughing—actually able to laugh—within the first days of my dad's death. With confidence, I realized, this was the way it was going to be. Each time that I cried and each time that I laughed, I knew it wouldn't be the last time. The grief and the joy—they would keep coming in turns, like waves rolling in and out in their own time.

From Pesah to Shavuot, we count seven weeks of the *omer*, 49 days in which we count up to the receiving of the Torah. However, this time which one would expect to be a period of joy, as we await revelation and the gift of Torah, instead is marked by sorrow and death. The Talmud (Yevamot 62b) teaches us that during this period from Pesah to Shavuot, 12,000 pairs of R. Akiva's students died because they did not treat each other with respect. An ancient tradition cited by R. Menahem ha-Meiri, the 13th century talmudist, further narrowed this window and taught that more specifically that the students died until Lag Ba'Omer, the 33rd



day of the Omer.¹ On Lag Ba'Omer, the deaths finally came to an end. Thus, while the time from Pesah until Lag Ba'Omer is treated as a time of mourning, with calls for the observance of mourning rituals like refraining from cutting one's hair or buying new clothes, Lag Ba'Omer is marked as a day of joy because the deaths finally came to an end.

While everyone agrees that mourning rituals are suspended on Lag Ba'Omer, there is a difference in practice, however, within the Jewish community regarding what happens **after** Lag Ba'Omer. Some communities drop mourning practices altogether from then until Shavuot, while others return to them after Lag Ba'Omer. For those communities, Lag Ba'Omer doesn't mark the end of mourning, but rather a temporary break and momentary joy.

The latter practice makes sense to me. It makes sense that we don't get over the deaths of 24,000 students the moment they stop dying. Instead, I would think that that's when the real work of mourning and grieving begins. It's only after they stop dying, when we have a moment to finally take a breath, to acknowledge each life and each death—only then can we properly sit with our grief. Taken in this way, Lag Ba'Omer is the pause, the breath, that finally gives us space to mourn such catastrophic loss in the weeks to come leading up to Shavuot.

On this day in which we can finally catch our breath, I want to turn to two stories in Bavli Yevamot in which the waves teach us a lesson in grieving.²

Story one: Rabban Gamliel is on a boat and he witnesses another boat capsized with R. Akiva on board. Rabban Gamliel is distraught, assuming the worst for R. Akiva. And, then miraculously, when Rabban Gamliel arrives onto dry land, who is sitting before him teaching?

¹ The Meiri in his commentary to Yevamot 62b says that this is “a tradition in the hand of the Geonim.” R. Yosef Karo, who did not know the Meiri's work, attributes this position originally to the slightly earlier R. Zerachyah ha-Levi (12th century); see Beit Yosef Orach Hayyim 493:3.

² I am grateful to R. Leora Abelson for directing me toward these stories in Yevamot with the insight from her teacher to read them as teachings about grief.



None other than the very same R. Akiva whom Rabban Gamliel thought had drowned.

Rabban Gamliel asks, “My son, who brought you up?” R. Akiva answers:

תלמוד בבלי יבמות קכא.

דף של ספינה נזדמן לי, וכל גל וגל שָׁבָא עָלַי — נִעֲנַעְתִּי לוֹ רֹאשִׁי.

Talmud Bavli Yevamot 121a

A plank from the boat was arranged for me, and I bent my head before each and every wave that came toward me.

Story two: this time it's R. Akiva that's on a boat and he witnesses the sinking of R. Meir's ship. R. Akiva is aggrieved, fearing the worst for R. Meir. But remarkably, when R. Akiva arrives at his destination, who is sitting and deliberating *halakhah*? It is none other than R. Meir whom R. Akiva was sure had drowned at sea. R. Akiva asks: “My son, who brought you up?” R. Meir answers:

גַּל טָרְדָנִי לַחֲבֵרוֹ, וַחֲבֵרוֹ לַחֲבֵרוֹ, עַד שֶׁהִקְיָאֵנִי לִיבְשָׁה.

A wave carried me to another and another to another until I was vomited up onto dry land.

Both of these stories feature shipwrecks at sea and the assured death of the person onboard. Yet, in both of these stories, the rabbis on board these capsized ships are remarkably spared and arrive safely at their final destination. How do they do it? In the first story, R. Akiva grabs on to a wooden plank and stays low, with his head bowed to the waves. In story two, R. Meir allows himself to be carried wave to wave to wave, until finally he's deposited safely on shore. If we read these stories as teaching on grief, what can we learn from them?



R. Akiva teaches us that we can't fight grief. To fight grief would mean to stand up on our wooden planks and to challenge the waves that threaten to capsize us, and in doing so, we would lose our center of gravity and surely fall. The attempt to fight the wave, to challenge the grief, would be that which secures our downfall. Rather, R. Akiva teaches us, when the waves of grief threaten to capsize us, hold on tight, don't fight them, and allow them to crash over our heads. The waves will eventually stop and, at the end, we will remain safe on our wooden planks.

R. Meir teaches us that we have to trust our grief. We have to let our grief carry us from wave to wave to wave with the hope that, at some point, we will reach dry land. This is a hard one. This requires giving in and submitting to the process of grief, a timeline that is not of our own making. It requires trusting that our grief will not carry us farther and farther out to sea, but rather will safely spit us out on dry land.

In her poem "Ocean," Mary Oliver writes,

I am in love with Ocean
lifting her thousands of white hats
in the chop of the storm,
or lying smooth and blue, the
loveliest bed in the world.
In the personal life, there is

always grief more than enough,
a heart-load for each of us
on the dusty road. I suppose
there is a reason for this, so I will be
patient, acquiescent. But I will live



nowhere except here, by Ocean, trusting
equally in all the blast and welcome
of her sorrowless, salt self.³

Mary Oliver writes of an ocean that churns with the power of a storm and lies still, smooth and blue. This is an ocean that can capsize us and an ocean that can bring us to safety. We humans each carry “always grief more than enough, a heart-load for each of us,” but Mary Oliver ends her poem by affirming her trust in the ocean, “trusting equally in all the blast and welcome of her sorrowless, salt self.” Like R. Meir, who allowed himself to be carried from wave to wave to wave, Oliver teaches that we must trust equally in both the power and the calm of the ocean, an ocean that in its sorrowless self can perhaps carry us through our own sorrow.

While Lag Ba’Omer marks the end of the deaths of R. Akiva’s students, it also marks the beginning of the next stage of mourning. The last eight months have brought with them losses that have cut us deeply and wounded us. And, we are not yet done. We have not yet hit the pause when we can finally reckon with the enormity of our loss, when we can take a breath and begin the real work of grieving. As we hold the tremendous losses of this past year, may these stories teach us how to sit with our grief: to bow our heads to the waves and allow them to carry us safely until we one day reach the dry land.

³ “Ocean,” Mary Oliver, *Red Bird*, p. 15.

