

Jewish Relational Care A-Z

We Are Our Other's Keeper

Rabbi Jack H Bloom, PhD
Editor



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A Story of Brokenness and Healing: The Relationship of Rabbi and Congregant

Rena Halpern Kieval
Dan Ornstein

Congregants look to their rabbis to help them feel God's love and presence—God's Self. What happens when rabbis' own struggles with their "selvies" prevent them from being fully present with their congregants? In 1994, a tragedy forced both of us to consider this question. Rena's ten-year-old son, Jonathan, died suddenly one week into Dan's tenure as the new rabbi of our congregation. The pain of this loss was exacerbated by a rabbi and congregant relationship that did not develop properly for either of us. Two years of personal and professional struggles eventually grew into healing and reconciliation. We learned much from this process about the nature of such relationships, grief, healing, and for giveness.

Rabbis navigate a complicated network of demands between service to the congregant, to God, and to their own needs. In this chapter we present some of the insights we gained by examining our relationship following Jon's death. We explore the relationship between two aspects of the rabbi's life—being a reflection of God's Self and being a human being who is made up of many "selvies."

Beginnings: Where We Came From

Rena

The day I gave birth to Jonathan, I also lost my innocence. My illusions of security and of life's predictability were shattered when the doctor told us, "Your baby has severe medical problems, and possible brain damage." Jonathan's life began with major surgeries, many weeks in the intensive care unit, and uncertainty about his survival and his future. Fortunately, his medical situation improved, and he developed well in many arenas. He was articulate and charming, and he learned to walk, talk, and read. But as he

grew, neurological abnormalities affected his emotional development and social behavior, which did not conform to those of his peers. Jon never seemed to "fit," or to feel safe and at home in the world.

I was determined to help Jonathan overcome every one of his challenges. Part of me believed that if only I showed enough persistence and sheer will-power, then he would somehow "become normal" and behave like any other child. But as the years passed, reality began to sink in. I began to understand that there was only so much my love and my efforts could do to compensate for Jonathan's limitations, and that my task was to accept him for who he was. My helplessness came as a shock to me, as I was forced to apply to my own life a lesson I had learned as a professional social worker: some situations cannot be repaired.

The summer of 1994 was an important turning point. For the first time we planned two family trips during which Jonathan would stay at home with a babysitter. In addition to working toward acceptance, I began to forgive myself for not having the power to meet Jon's every need perfectly, and for wanting to have a life for myself, my husband, and my other children.

The shift in my attitude was accompanied by a renewal of my spiritual life. I had recently become more deeply involved in Judaism, appreciating anew some of the more profound aspects of my tradition. The rabbi of our synagogue was a significant mentor for me as I explored a new, more adult framework for my Jewish connection. In 1993, when he left for a congregation in another city, I mourned his departure. I hoped that the rabbi who succeeded him would be an important spiritual guide and religious resource for me, and I enthusiastically signed on as a member of the Search Committee to select him or her. By the spring of 1994, after a yearlong process, the committee had selected Dan, and he had accepted the position.

The week before Dan officially became the new rabbi, he and I met over lunch to discuss the synagogue's adult education programming, for which I was the chairperson. That weekend, my family was to leave for our second long trip without Jonathan. I mentioned our plans to Dan and commented that it was a big step for our family to go away without Jonathan. He asked about Jon, and I replied briefly, not inclined at that time to go into detail. There would be plenty of time, I thought, for Dan and me to get to know each other, and for him to get to know Jon. There was no hurry. Little did I know that Dan would never meet Jon, or that a few days later he would bury my little boy, officiating at the most terrible event of my life.

Dan

I recall from as early as the age of five accompanying my father, a nursing administrator, to the nursing homes in which he worked, visiting and talking with the residents. He and my mother, a public health nurse, ex-

posed me and my siblings to experiences with the sick, frail, and elderly. They were not trying to scare or shock us, but rather they were teaching us to look for the humanity that resides in each person. As a result, I learned to focus on the whole person and to become engaged with that person. What I learned from my parents was, and continues to be, tremendously helpful to me in dealing with illness, death, and people's suffering. Yet I also learned to cope with the painful feelings arising from these encounters by distancing myself emotionally. This later became the "professional persona" that I would use to deal with painful circumstances, rather than acknowledge how sad, frightened, or angry I felt. Within limits, this mode of professional detachment is what allows clergy and all helping professionals to survive the storms of their work. However, my later experiences would show me what happens when that detachment becomes excessive. I carried this excessive detachment into my work as a congregational rabbi after I was ordained in 1989.

In 1994, my preparations to move to a new synagogue community were filled with the normal mix of excitement and anxiety. My first contact with what would become my new congregation in Albany, New York, was a telephone interview with members of the Search Committee. Rena, a member of the committee, asked me, "Rabbi, how would you explain to a mourner the meaning and importance of *kaddish*?"¹ I responded that a mourner is not looking for a lecture on the history or theology of *kaddish*, but for consolation. I explained that I would try to explore with the mourner how the regular repetition of *kaddish* in the embrace of community establishes a rhythm in the mourner's life, helping him or her to work through grief.

After several months of interviews and discussions, I was hired, and my family and I moved to Albany in July 1994. I arrogantly believed that, with five years of congregational experience under my belt, I was ready for anything, and yet I felt persistent anxiety as the demands and complexities of my new community became apparent to me. In addition, my wife, Marian, and I were expecting our second child, our three-year-old son was dealing poorly with the transition, and I had heard that a few people in my new community were unhappy with my selection as the new rabbi. I was also aware that my predecessor had developed a reputation which felt, to me, larger than life. Filling his shoes would be a daunting challenge. I arrived in my new community anxious and lonely. Whom could I turn to to sort through my feelings and concerns? My wife and I had no friends in our new community. We could barely keep pace with the demands placed upon us, and

1. Doxology recited often throughout the service and also said by mourners: "May God's name be hallowed and exalted throughout the world."

friends from out of town lacked the time and the energy to help us. I responded to these feelings by hiding behind a wall of tight-lipped restraint. Acting in "professional persona" became my strategy for fending off my feelings of dislocation and isolation. The more pain I felt, the more rigid, distant, and clinical I became. To complicate matters, by the time of the move, I had neglected my relationship with God for so long that I could not turn to it for guidance and strength. I tried to convince myself that I was strong, when in fact I was quite weak. I had lost my sense of how my work was actually a part of my relationship with God.

Lost

Rena

The Monday after our weekend in Lake Placid, I lay in bed contentedly. When we had returned the previous night, Jonathan had not been feeling well, and now Shalom went to his bedroom to check on him. Jonathan was not breathing. Next came a flurry of unbelievable events: the call to 911; the arrival of the emergency medical technicians (EMTs); their attempts to revive Jon; Shalom's departure by ambulance with him to the hospital; the stunned faces of our two other children as I stood in our kitchen receiving the phone call—Jonathan had been pronounced dead in the hospital emergency room.

I called Nancy, a close friend, to tell her what had happened and to ask her for a ride to the hospital. I was certain that I was sleepwalking in a nightmare. We arrived at the emergency room. A few friends had already heard the news and were waiting there for us. Shalom had asked the hospital to call Dan, our new rabbi, and he, too, was there when we arrived. As we began to contact family members, I was vaguely aware that Nancy and Dan had begun to discuss funeral arrangements. All I could feel was intense, suffocating pain, like nothing I had ever felt before.

Jonathan lay on a stretcher, looking peaceful and asleep. Could he really be dead? I was afraid to touch his skin and find it cold; that would mean that it was true. But needing desperately to touch him, I sat by his side and stroked his thick black hair over and over again. The sweet little boy who was a part of my being, the child on whom so much of my life had centered for the past ten years, suddenly was no more.

Arrangements were being made. Dan had been our rabbi for one week. The fact that he was virtually a stranger added to the unreal feeling of the situation, and to my feeling that everything familiar was being pulled out from under me. In the blink of an eye, I had lost control of everything. I was

filled with panic as my child slipped through my fingers. We were surrounded by strangers—EMTs, nurses, doctors, the rabbi, funeral directors—one after another they were taking him away from us, his parents. Suddenly they seemed to have a claim on him, while we no longer did. I had lost Jonathan, for whom I had fought for so long. Now I was defeated. There was no more fighting back.

I did not know much about funerals. As we began to talk, I imagined Dan speaking publicly about my child, whom he had never met. I conjured an image of stilted, formulaic speeches. Desperate to hold on to Jonathan in whatever way I could, I decided that only Shalom and I would choose what words were said to sum up our child's life and to bid him good-bye. I asked Nancy to tell Dan that we did not want him to deliver the eulogy, that we would write one, and she relayed the message. The thought flashed through my mind at the time that Dan might hear this request as some kind of rejection, but I did not have the emotional energy to worry about that or to communicate directly with this person I hardly knew. I remembered Dan's professionalism during the Search Committee process and assumed that, under the circumstances, we did not have to be concerned about personal sensitivities.

The funeral took place the following day amid a sea of people and waves of overwhelming emotion. My son's body was lowered into the ground. Every minute that passed took me by surprise; it was hard to imagine that I could continue to live while enduring these events. The only relief was the numbness that came and went periodically, alternating with moments of agony.

Along with the sheer horror of that day, I experienced great comfort from the love of friends and family. In the back of my mind, however, I began to feel resentment toward Dan. The seeds of the alienation that was to plague us were planted at the funeral. Dan was physically present there and conducted himself with complete professionalism, but in some way he seemed absent. After he read the words Shalom and I had written about Jonathan, I waited for him to add some of his own thoughts. I wanted words of comfort from him, but I did not hear anything beyond formal prayers and formulaic words of condolence.

I experienced the same feeling during the week of *shivah*² at our house. Dan led the services and always spoke kindly and appropriately, but I kept sensing that something was missing. I began to question whether I or Sha-

2. The seven-day (hence, *shivah*, Hebrew for seven) period of mourning, following interment, spent at home receiving visiting consolers; called "sitting *shivah*"; one of the great inventions of Judaism.

lon had somehow unwittingly pushed him away, asked him to keep his distance, or whether he was standing back because we hardly knew one another. I wondered whether he was holding back because of the many rabbis in our family, afraid of intruding.

Sometime during the *shivah* week, I mustered my strength, approached him, and said, "Please don't think that because we come from rabbinic families, we don't need you. We do—we need you to be our rabbi." It felt like an open, honest moment, and he seemed to be listening, but nothing changed in our subsequent interactions. He seemed distant and closed off, strangely mirroring my own feelings of numbness and alienation. Nothing was connecting properly in my inner or outer world, and Dan became yet another component of that disconnection. Later I understood that Dan was also unwittingly one of the strangers who represented our loss, one of the interlopers who reflected the most frightening stranger of all, Death, the stranger who had claimed Jonathan from us forever.

Dan

The first Monday morning of my new position, I went to *minyan*³ at the synagogue. August 8 was a pleasant summer day, typical of the Adirondack region of New York. Returning home in a good mood, I came home only to be told by Marian that she had received a call from a local hospital, asking me to come right away. I looked at the message pad: a son of Rena's had died. Fear seized me. Which son? Was it David, her eldest, whom I had just met? I got into the car and drove to the hospital, feeling the foreboding and anxiety of having to deal with a messy, ugly situation for which I was entirely unprepared. I gripped the steering wheel, thinking out loud about the right professional things to say and do when meeting the family.

I was led into a room in the rear of the emergency department. Rena, her husband, Shalom, and their friend Nancy stood around the examining table where Jonathan lay dead. I expected Jon's parents to be wild with grief, shrieking, as tears ran down their faces. Instead, both parents were silent, their faces contorted by a mixture of deep pain and shock. Rena continuously stroked Jon's hair, from time to time letting out a soft, muted cry.

I stood frozen, not knowing what to say or do. I felt a cold numbness and a dumbness about the whole scene. I felt I needed to say something, but only the right something, as if that could truly exist at that moment. We stood over Jon's lifeless body in excruciating silence. Then they asked, "What do we need to do to prepare for the funeral?" Nancy suggested that

3. A quorum of ten Jews required for public prayer.

we call one of the local Jewish funeral directors to handle the arrangements. When she broke the silence with a practical suggestion, it was a blessed relief for me. It gave me a chance to speak and to feel a sense of power in a situation over which none of us had any power. I could be useful; I could arrange for the rituals of burial to begin.

Unable to share myself in those moments—I was paralyzed by fear, horror, and confusion—I threw myself into the busywork of the preparations. I ran out to the phone booths in the waiting area of the emergency room to call a member of the synagogue staff who was on vacation at the time. The funeral director arrived and took Jon's body. We began arranging for the Jewish burial society to prepare his body, and I contacted the coroner and the pathologist's office to make sure that the dictates of Jewish law would be followed in the event of an autopsy. There seemed to be an almost otherworldly smoothness to all of the tasks, as if by their sheer orderliness they would dispel the chaos and horror of the situation.

I arranged to meet Rena, Shalom, and their other children, David and Daniel, at their home later that evening to finalize arrangements for the funeral, which would take place the next day. When I arrived, the house was mobbed with close friends, family, and neighbors. The family and I moved away from the noisy crowd into their living room. We spoke briefly about what would happen the next day, and I answered some of their more technical questions about the preparation of the body, the burial, and the *shivah*. Shalom and Rena kept the conversation rather matter-of-fact, despite the anguish that showed all over their faces and in their exhausted bodies.

I remember the scene vividly. I had never before dealt directly with the death of a child. I had counseled and prayed with families who had lost children in the past but had never confronted the lifeless body of a child in front of his grieving parents. Now I was sitting with a family I had known for one week, preparing with them for the funeral of their ten-year-old son. His death had ripped out the hearts, not only of his family, but of an entire community that had watched him grow up. Around me were strangers, people with whom I had yet to build relationships. Perhaps the "sin of humility" that I was about to commit during the week of *shivah*, and in the months that followed, was initially sparked by the family's request that they eulogize Jon, rather than I, the new rabbi who had not known him. Naturally I agreed. A part of me heard this as, "We need you here, but we don't really need you here." On one level I felt that I was at best a tolerated outsider rather than this community's rabbi. At the funeral I did what I believed I had been told to do: I acted as master of ceremonies and as coordinator, yet I did not venture to offer more than the most basic words of comfort.

I perpetuated this misguided humility throughout the week of *shivah*. I felt every moment like an interloper, and I shut down in the face of such emotional intensity. I attended the *minyan* at the *shivah* house in the morning and quickly shuffled out when it ended to make room for the “important” people: the close friends and family from all over the world who were camped out in Rena and Shalom’s home.

One morning toward the end of the *shivah* period, as I prepared to leave their home, Rena and Shalom approached me: “We’ve been missing our rabbi this week.” Sensing that I was being criticized, I hastily assured them that I would stay behind to speak with them, which I did. Afterward I kept feeling that my efforts had been transparently inadequate. I had to be told by people in crisis that I was needed by them. I knew that I had sorely missed the mark, and this feeling of incompleteness would stay with me for a long time. My first two years in Albany after Jon’s death would be tumultuous, and my feelings of alienation from this grieving family, Rena especially, would only add to my sense of inner and outer chaos.

I Need a Rabbi

Rena

After the end of our *sh’loshim*,⁴ I felt completely broken, yet the world went on as if nothing had changed. While I understood this rationally, on a primal, emotional level, I felt uncared for and abandoned. Shouldn’t everyone around me share in my state of chaos and despair?

I was surprised to learn that the struggles of grief are so physical. Every breath seemed to require enormous effort, and moving through the motions of a day felt like pushing my body through molasses. I breathed, spoke, and perhaps appeared like a functioning person, but I did not feel like one. I felt as though I had been knocked down by a huge truck, one of those eighteen-wheelers that Jonathan—a lover of big trucks—had taught me about.

My wounds were too severe for anyone to heal. Yet, in those early months, many tried. People reached out to comfort me. “What can I do for you?” “How can I help you?” They sincerely wanted to ease the hurt. I appreciated the kind impulses behind these questions, but I was incapable of answering them. In the initial weeks and months after Jon’s death, I had no idea what I needed. What could possibly soothe a hurt this deep?

I tried hard not to judge people’s words and behavior. When they avoided the subject of Jonathan, I understood that they wished to protect themselves

4. The official thirty-day period of mourning.

from my pain, and that some thought they were protecting me, even though I always felt better when I was able to talk about him. I knew that as they tried to respond to my loss, many of those around me were themselves lost. Most of their words of comfort sounded meaningless; there *were* no appropriate words for this situation. Still I learned to take comfort in the simple fact that people were reaching out to me, and to accept the feelings and intentions behind their clumsily inadequate words. I held on to the beauty of the fact that people cared enough, and were brave enough, to grope their way toward my family and me through all the pain. Accepting help was something I had never done easily, but now I needed to grab every hand that was extended to me. I learned a lesson I have carried with me ever since: there is no such thing as a small kindness.

Immediately after Jon's death, some people urged me, "Be angry!" Some of them were angry on my behalf, feeling that his death was "just not fair!" I knew that I had grounds for anger, but I did not want to feel angry. In my ten years as Jonathan's mother, I had struggled to embrace what had been given me, and not to feel that I always had to fight it. Now, I needed a sense of peace and wholeness that I could find only in acceptance.

Yet there were those toward whom I felt anger. Some friends and family members were surprisingly inattentive. Most noticeably absent were various professionals: friends who are doctors and mental health professionals, some of Jonathan's doctors, and the rabbis we knew. After initial expressions of sympathy, many were strangely quiet. How odd it seemed that the "helping professionals" in our circle of acquaintances were the least helpful in comforting us! This puzzled and disappointed me. I thought, aren't these the healers, the ones who know how to respond to these tragedies? Despite my best efforts, I *was* angry at some of these people, probably because they were the people from whom I expected the most.

My most conflicted feelings were toward Dan. I had felt open to trusting him, as my rabbi, and Shalom and I had looked for his support and comfort. But in the weeks following Jon's death, he hardly spoke to us about Jonathan or about his death. When we crossed paths, we always ended up in quick exchanges about matters that jarred me with their irrelevance to my life: synagogue ritual issues, politics, and "small talk" about the community. At that time I was living in another universe, a universe in which none of those subjects mattered to me.

For me, the days moved in agonizing slow motion, whereas Dan always seemed to be rushing, in particular, rushing away from me. I was baffled. Dan seemed to be a sensitive person. I tried to be patient, as I waited for him to show concern for me, but I did not feel patient; my needs were urgent. I needed a rabbi.

On Rosh Hashanah,⁵ one month after Jon's death, I sat in *shul*,⁶ looking up at Dan on the *bimah*,⁷ and silently begging him to acknowledge us. I yearned for something from him, however irrational. Perhaps I hoped that he could uncover a secret about Jonathan's death that would make everything clear. Perhaps I had the crazy expectation that he could tell us how to end the pain. On some level I think I believed that he held special knowledge that could help me transcend the suffering. I assumed that, as a clergy person, he would have answers, even though I could not even name my questions. But that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur,⁸ Dan seemed oblivious to our presence. My anger and confusion deepened. I spoke to him silently: "You are our rabbi, who just buried our child. This crowd of hopeful, boisterous people, these prayers about self-examination and repentance, all of it affronts and assaults us. The whole scenario intensifies our loneliness. Don't you see that? Why are you ignoring me?"

I did not want to cultivate my angry feelings, so in dialogues with myself, I continued to make excuses for Dan; it was the High Holydays; he was facing the complex demands of a new pulpit in an unknown community; he was under major stress. After all, my family was only one of several hundred that needed his attention. Dan and his wife were preparing for the birth of their second child, and perhaps he could not face the thought of a child dying, or perhaps there was something about my family or me. Maybe we had insulted him at the time of the funeral.

I knew that certain special dynamics complicated my responses to Dan. As the daughter and daughter-in-law of rabbis, and as someone who had at one time yearned to pursue that calling myself,⁹ my history with rabbis was not a neutral one, and my relationship with my own rabbi was bound to be complicated. Part of me may have resented his being in a position of which I had been deprived. Also, the mystique of a rabbi was different for me. I know very well that rabbis are human beings. I could not be fooled or soothed when Dan presented the professional persona of Rabbi Ornstein, with formal rabbinic statements and ritual diversions. I needed the genuine person. When Dan did interact with us, he seemed to be trying to give us something complicated, something grand, befitting a rabbi. Gifts that were complicated and grand, however, went over and beyond us. We felt humbled and small, flattened by our loss.

5. The first of the month of Tishrei observed as the Jewish New Year, beginning of the High Holydays.

6. Yiddish for "synagogue."

7. The front of the synagogue where the rabbi and cantor officiate.

8. Day of Atonement concluding the High Holydays.

9. I did pursue that calling and was ordained as a rabbi in May 2006.

On one level, I understood that I was so broken and needy that nothing and no one could satisfy me. Still, underneath all of my speculation and rationalizations lay a deep hurt and loneliness. It seemed that there was nobody who could be with me in these depths. I imagined that people avoided me, or evaded the subjects of Jonathan and of my grief, because I radiated so much intense hurt, or because I evoked something too painful to think about. When Dan avoided me, the implications for me were much greater. His apparent rejection of me suggested a number of terrifying possibilities: either God didn't care about me, or perhaps God cared but could not help. If even my own rabbi found it difficult to be in my presence and was turning away from me, did that mean there was no balm for my grief? Did it mean that I was not worthy of my rabbi's, or God's, attention and concern? If Dan couldn't face my tragedy, was facing it beyond even God's power? I could not answer these frightening questions, but I knew that I felt cut off, especially from God.

Healing

Dan

Toward the end of my first year in Albany, I began to realize that I was drowning in other people's pain. I continued to try to protect myself by being accommodating but emotionally distant, which was easier than being genuine, a mixed bag of compassion, self-interest, and real feelings. These defenses were beginning to crumble, however, and I was in great pain as a result. I had already learned in my first congregation that I did not need to be perfect. I could be myself and be liked. I could be, myself and be hated. Yet this self-acceptance still felt new to me, and I was confused about how to embrace it.

At the same time, my motivations for my work as a rabbi were evolving. I no longer needed my work to bolster my self-esteem and "score points" with others. My earliest motivations for my calling no longer mattered to me, but I could not yet discern what my new motivations might be. Part of me felt dead, yet I was afraid to explore why. For the first time in my career, I began to confront the emptiness I was feeling. Nonetheless, it would take a full year more for me to begin to reclaim my own spiritual life.

A year later, on Yom Kippur evening, 1996, I told a packed house of worshippers a very personal story about how I had recently reconciled with a close friend. Taking a professional and emotional risk, I shared myself with them, not to play "true confessions," but to demonstrate that forgiveness, reconciliation, and personal growth are needed, and can be attained, by all

of us. I wanted everyone to understand that this is not because people should strive to be perfect. It is precisely because we are not perfect that we are so in need of being kind with one another and ourselves. Following the story I asked everyone to spend a few minutes reconciling with or asking forgiveness of one another for wrongs done during the preceding year. It was an evening of powerful feeling and personal transformation for many people in the synagogue. I later learned that someone in the congregation who had not spoken to his brother for over twenty years decided to speak to him again as a result of my story. Clearly I had done a very good thing that evening, yet out of the corner of my eye, I could not help noticing Rena and Shalom, still grieving and angry, forcing themselves through the motions of wishing others a happy holiday just a few feet away from my speaker's stand. For two years our interactions had been nothing more than forced politeness through gritted teeth, and each time that I tried to reach out to them I badly missed the mark.

The next day, at the afternoon break in services, I saw Shalom and Rena preparing to exit the sanctuary. I knew immediately that it was the right time to approach them, although my decision to do so frightened me. Having learned from hard experience that we clergy are at times the lightning rods for others' primitive and hostile emotions, I should have been even more anxious about this impromptu meeting, but I was not. Perhaps it was the spiritual quality of the day, with its focus on forgiveness and love.

I asked Rena and Shalom to speak with me privately. I told them that I knew our communication over the past two years had been strained. I had always carried with me the disappointing sense that I had failed to reach out and be fully available to them around the time of Jon's death. There was nothing more I could say other than to ask their forgiveness and to try to start over.

I strained desperately throughout that conversation to hear from both of them that I was forgiven and that my role in helping them through the initial stages of grief had actually been positive in some way. I needed to hear simultaneously, "We think that you are a really good guy" and "We are willing to forgive you for failing to help us." Contradictory as they may seem, I needed both assurances because they reflected my ongoing struggle to accept myself as flawed, yet still worthy of love and respect. I recall little of what Rena said to me that day, only that I felt coming from her a strange combination of self-protective reserve and an almost unreal sense of peace. It seemed as if perhaps, like me, she was feeling some catharsis at hearing and saying words that had been long overdue. That afternoon marked a beginning for our relationship and for the badly needed changes taking place in me.

Just prior to Yom Kippur, 1996, we marked the two-year anniversary of Jonathan's death. Sometimes grief still felt new—the shock of Jon's absence hit me daily at unexpected moments—yet I knew that for the rest of the world a long time had passed. For most people, Jonathan's life and death were receding into the distant past. I told myself that I, too, must now turn and face forward. This anniversary, coinciding with the Jewish New Year, seemed a fitting time to turn a corner.

I had recently resumed teaching adult education, was actively engaged in writing and reading, and our family seemed intact, yet I continued to feel hollow inside. Something more than grief gnawed at me. Something else was missing, waiting to blossom. I spent a brief time in therapy, trying to open a door that would help me move forward. A wise and compassionate therapist offered me emotional support, affirmation, and insight. Therapy, however; also did not fill the empty space at the core. Only later would I understand that it was my relationship with God which needed to be healed, that it was my spiritual alienation which blocked me from feeling whole. I sat in *shul* on Yom Kippur, feeling detached from the liturgy and dirama of the day. During the long day of services, I spent several hours reading a book about death and grief by a therapist with a Buddhist orientation. The book resonated with my experience—it suggested embracing the surrender and openness that can come with intense pain and direct, honest confrontation with death. The ideas captivated me, but their Eastern framework was not mine. I needed a Jewish way to embrace and transform my pain. Yet I kept finding that we Jews, instead of learning to accept, always seemed to be fighting back against suffering. I knew that my home was still with my tradition, in Jewish prayer, texts, and ritual. Judaism was my place of solace and connection to God, yet I couldn't seem to gain access to that solace or that connection. I felt shut out. I sat in a traditional *shul*, amid a caring Jewish community, praying in the language of my ancestors, and yet I was spiritually homeless.

By this time, Dan and I had settled into a polite relationship, sometimes even working together on educational projects. At times I still sensed him trying to reach out to me, as when a few months earlier he had invited me to become his study partner. I was flattered, and the prospect of it excited me intellectually. Too many undercurrents of pain from the previous two years still festered in me, so I did not feel safe sharing my spiritual struggles with him for fear of being rejected or misunderstood. I turned down his offer of *chavruta*¹⁰ study and continued to keep our interactions as superficial as I could.

10. A traditional way of studying in pairs.

As the day wore on, I began to feel the spiritual power of Yom Kippur. Hunger and exhaustion wore down my defenses, and I felt increasingly peaceful and emotionally open. In midafternoon, services stopped for a two-hour recess. I was in the lobby when Dan asked to speak with Shalom and me. I followed Shalom into the small chapel, slightly anxious, but curious.

The previous night, before *Kol Nidrei*,¹¹ Dan had related to the congregation a personal story about a reconciliation he had had with a friend. I had noticed something different about him and was glad to see a more genuine side of him. Dan again seemed different throughout the morning service—there was a quietness in his tone that I had not experienced in the two years I had known him.

Now Dan sat in our small chapel, appearing very serious. First, he told us about a positive interaction he had just had with our son David. Then, in a different voice, he said that he wanted to ask our forgiveness for his behavior of two years ago: I had told him we needed a rabbi and he hadn't been one for us. His face was filled with regret. In an instant I felt layers of anger rolling off me, releasing me from their grip. Something radical was happening.

Shalon left with our two boys, and Dan and I continued to talk. I told him how shut out and rejected I had felt in my grief. I told him that I had begun to understand that, as a rabbi, he was a symbol of God's response and concern, and that he had not been that for me. He spoke about having been blocked, unable to be himself and to be present with us. After two years of painfully blocked communication, our dialogue felt like the opening of a dam, water rushing through and beginning to break down some long-standing barriers.

Dan asked how he could now "make things up" with us. Somewhat to my surprise, I heard myself ask that he study with me some Talmudic passages about suffering and acceptance that we had once learned in a community study group. We agreed to meet the following week and talked for the remainder of the recess. When it was time for services to resume, I felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted from me.

Cleansing

Dan

One day soon after Yom Kippur I sat in the office of a fellow staff member. Yom Kippur, and the first congregational evaluation of my perfor-

11. Initial service of Yom Kippur, known by its most prominent prayer: *Kol Nidrei*.

mance, had left me emotionally vulnerable and very tired. Not one to mince words, my colleague leveled with me about the evaluation: "Dan, people generally like you and are happy you are the rabbi here, but you never seem to slow down long enough to speak with us and to make us feel that you really care. We sense in you a certain distraction and coldness when you interact with us. You don't seem to be real. You're there, but you're not there." I was deeply insulted, but I knew that what she was saying was true. I left her office angry and confused, and needing to be alone, I drove out to the nearby Helderberg mountain range.

As I walked on one of the mountain trails, I stopped on a footbridge overlooking a valley. I felt almost glued to the spot and let out a long and anguished cry. As I stood in the silence, I imagined God saying to me, "Don't you see? I can only work through you when *you are you*," showing me what I had struggled to understand for two years, perhaps even longer. It was not that I cared or felt too little, but that I cared and felt too much. As a result, I had pushed myself away from everyone in order to feel left alone and sheltered. I was paying a high price for that, and an even higher price for having pushed God away as well. My being alone had turned into being cut off.

A few days later Rena followed up on our plan to meet again and asked me to drive with her to Jonathan's summer camp in Altamont, a small, picturesque town in the Helderbergs. Normally, I would not meet with a female congregant in an isolated place, but my heart told me that, in this case, I needed to trust my judgment, for Rena's sake as well as for my own. I also had to trust myself to remain open and receptive while Rena prepared to tell me more about my hurtful behavior. I was taking a risk, but I knew that I needed to do so.

When we got there, we walked up to a dry streambed lined with smooth stones near a bench and a log. Sitting with me in the cool autumn air, Rena interrupted the small talk in which we had been engaged. "I need to tell you how I feel about what has happened between us, but I'm not sure that I can," she said. "Rena, tell me what you need to tell me," I replied. In somewhat guarded tones, she told me again how hurt she and Shalom had been at the time of Jon's death, up until this past Yom Kippur. I had not been there for them, they had felt abandoned, and my behavior had had a profoundly negative impact on her that she had trouble letting go of.

Listening with a quiet heart, while suppressing my urge to be defensive, allowed me to take responsibility for the pain that I had caused Rena and Shalom. I could ask forgiveness of her, not out of terror that I was useless or bad, but out of full and loving acceptance of who I was. I could step beyond the strict formal boundaries between rabbi and congregant and be vulnerable. Choosing my words carefully, I told Rena what had happened to me on the mountain path a few days earlier. I began to cry as I explained to her how

my alienation from her family had been part of the larger wall that I had built around myself in order to feel safe. Rena's silence during my weeping felt strange. This was what *she* should have felt free to do in my presence for the past two years, yet I had made it so difficult for her. Now the tables were turned awkwardly. However, in its own way, this reversal of the normal roles of rabbi and congregant was a powerful springboard for what we both needed. Rena needed to know that my humanity and compassion were available to her. I needed to rediscover a piece of myself that I had lost. We both needed to transcend the resentments and misunderstandings of two long years to begin a journey as rabbi and congregant, as friends and as members of a spiritual community.

That day at the camp, my capacity for asking her forgiveness grew in response to her growing capacity to grant it without condescension and with understanding. In the course of our conversations, Rena offered me insight into the significance of what had happened between us and helped me reframe my understanding of the past two years. "Having met Jon only in his death, you represent this new stage in my life from which he is absent. You symbolize his death, not his life." She did not absolve me of responsibility for my errors, yet her words captured the absurdity of the circumstances into which we had been thrust. My only relationship with her child happened after his life was over. Upon Jonathan's death, my interactions with his parents and with my community were intense and painful. Yet there was no context of previous relationship, no treasure of mutual memories that could guide me in taking these mourners through their nightmare.

In addition to providing a compassionate context for my failure, Rena's comment revealed a deeper wisdom about relationships. What we mean to one another at any given moment is influenced by an accumulation of symbols, fantasies, fears, hopes, and heartaches. This is especially true for relationships with clergy. Ministers of the faith are the most potent and immediate representatives of God's love and healing, as well as of our fear of God's rejection and abandonment of us.

Coming home that day I glimpsed what was changing within me. I was once again beginning to feel free to be the spiritual "work in progress" that I am. It would be a few more years before I could feel the impact of these experiences in every aspect of my life. That day, they became manifest to me as God's gifts, even if I barely understood them. They remain God's gifts today.

Rena

The morning of my appointment with Dan was a crisp fall day. The previous day I had learned that a pavilion at Jon's summer camp that was to be

dedicated in Jon's memory had just been completed. I was eager to see the pavilion, although I felt trepidation as well. Every time we remembered Jon with some kind of formal memorial, that memorial was another concrete reminder that he was really gone, that these structures were the only physical presence he would ever have on this earth.

I asked Dan to drive with me to the camp. When we arrived at the mountain top, I stopped short. I was startled to be in this place that I associated exclusively with Jonathan, a vibrant, active, alive Jonathan, now gone for more than two years. I could almost feel him in the air, and the sensation of his presence brought him deliciously to life for a moment. Almost instantaneous with that joyous evocation, however, waves of emptiness flooded me. Without trying to explain my complex feelings, I said to Dan simply, "I have not been back here since Jonathan died." He replied, "Then I feel honored that you asked me to come here with you." I believed him, and his comment comforted me.

We followed the short wooded trails through the camp. I began to describe to Dan times I had felt unsupported by him, but my heart was not really in the conversation. He had already asked my forgiveness, and now, against the backdrop of the vast mountain vistas, my complaints seemed superficial. We shared thoughts on our painful history together, our conversation subdued and careful. I think we were both determined not to exacerbate old wounds or create new ones. While the content of our talk was serious and important, most important was the fact that, after two years, we were finally talking and listening to each other.

We sat on the porch of the main camp building, overlooking the camp's most spectacular view, a grand panorama of mountains and farmland with a crisp city skyline in the far distance. Dan told me about a powerful moment of insight he had had a few days earlier at another beautiful spot in these same mountains. It was my turn to feel honored, as Dan shared his story with me and told me about some of the internal struggles he had faced since his arrival in Albany. In the middle of his story, Dan began to cry. He sobbed quietly for a few moments, while several thoughts and feelings rushed through me. At first I thought that I should react immediately and say something comforting, but all the words that came to mind sounded silly and inadequate. I chose to remain silent, not wanting to say or do anything that might trivialize his emotions. Part of me yearned to open up and cry along with him, something I had never done, but I still could not do it. When Dan stopped I said, "You are lucky you can cry. I am not able to open up in that way."

It did not occur to me that there was anything disturbing or inappropriate about my rabbi crying in front of me. Months later Dan expressed concern to me about crying in front of me. Was it unprofessional, a sign of weakness

that would undermine his authority or ability to offer leadership? Did his opening up to me inappropriately reverse our roles such that I became the caregiver and he the recipient of concern?

Perhaps I am not a typical congregant, and this was not a typical situation, but I told Dan that I had found it profoundly helpful that he had shared his vulnerability. When Jonathan died, my most intimate feelings had been laid bare to so many people, including Dan, a virtual stranger. I had felt exposed and vulnerable, all the more so with Dan because he had seemed so emotionally closed. Now it became easier for me to trust him and to share my vulnerability with him because he had trusted me in this way. I considered it a mark of strength, not a sign of weakness, that he was willing to do so.

Dan's sharing of his struggles with me, and his willingness to move back and forth between the role of comforter and the one comforted, allowed God to enter and take a place in our relationship. Healing began for us both when we acknowledged our shared humanity and our ability to reflect God's presence.

When Dan and I entered a new phase of rabbi-congregant relationship, and I began to feel compassion from him, I also began to experience God's compassion. I felt certain that it had been, in part, Dan's earlier behavior, and my anger about it, that had kept me shut off from God. I realized that I had needed Dan, in his role as rabbi, to be a facilitator, guide, and gatekeeper for me to access the Holy One. Now knowing his own struggles, I imagined how hard it must be for a gatekeeper to fulfill that role for others when he is unable to open the gate for himself.

A Scene That Could Have Been

On the evening after Jonathan's death, Dan sits with Shalom and Rena in their living room. The three of them are wrapped in an uncomfortable silence. The air around them is alive with the buzz of well-wishers, whose lively voices belie the heavy presence of death that hangs over the house.

Rena is mostly numb, as she has been since that morning of horror. While the numbness is unpleasant, it is a blessed relief from the pain that overwhelms her when the feelings come through. To even look at Shalom, and sense their shared pain, causes her defenses to collapse. Instinctively, she and Shalom know to stay quiet with each other, talking only when they need to discuss plans and logistics. Although they hardly know Dan, they are very grateful to have him there, a person to take them by the hand. For both of them, a rabbi is a moral and spiritual authority, someone in whom they can place unconditional faith and trust. He will surely show them how to do "the right thing" for Jonathan, and for themselves.

Dan's head is filled with the discordant noises of the day. He is pulled in so many directions and is already drained by the many transitions in his life. He can't imagine where he will find the resources to face this horrendous situation, let alone help others through it. He closes his eyes and prays: "I don't know what I can offer these people. I feel as if I am walking through a minefield. Please help me to be open to them and to myself."

Dan looks into the weary faces of Jonathan's parents and, after what seems like an eternity, breaks the silence. "I am as new to this as you are. I cannot imagine how this feels for you. I wish more than anything that I could undo what has happened, but I do not have that power. I will not be able to bring back your son, or to take away all of your pain. What I promise to do is to try to be with you in whatever ways are helpful to you. Please forgive me if I do anything that is hurtful to you, and please let me know when I am not being helpful. We can learn together what you need from me, and what I can do for you."

Rena hears him and she doesn't hear him. Nothing that he or anyone says can ease the agony that overtakes her at random moments—nothing, unless someone were to wake her and tell her that it had all been a dream. She wonders in silent desperation, "He's the rabbi. Can't he change all this, make it just go away?" The rational part of her knows that, of course, he cannot, and that is only another reminder that right now this is her terrible reality. Nonetheless, at the edge of her awareness, Dan's voice soothes her, reassuring her that he is present. Somehow that presence cuts into the loneliness that has begun to envelop her. It is true that he will not be able to remove the hurt, but she senses that he is willing to listen, and to speak openly with them.

Dan is not sure what more to say and is terrified that he might say the wrong thing. Should he make suggestions, offer them "advice" or rabbinic words of wisdom? He decides that there is only one appropriate subject he can raise right now. "Tell me about Jonathan," he says, at the same time wondering at the fact that any of them can be having a conversation at all.

They take out Jonathan's photo albums and share anecdotes with Dan as they flip through the pages. Their stories are typical tales of a child's life, the kind of memories that all parents have about their children. It seems important for all of them to share these moments. Dan's presence gives Rena and Shalom an opportunity to talk about Jonathan, who is all they can think about right now. Dan serves as a buffer; they can direct their thoughts and feelings toward him because sharing them with each other hurts too much right now. Dan is gaining a small sense of who their little boy was and how they see him. Tonight's conversation will help him feel more connected to Jonathan and to his parents, and more able to cope with this tragedy and its aftermath.

They close the photo albums and sit in silence for many moments. Dan feels awkward in the heavy air of despair that surrounds them. It is so tempting to find things to say, to attempt to cover the pain with words. He senses, however, that any further words would trivialize the enormity of this situation. The most honest response to this terrible moment is silence. All of them must be allowed the space to feel their feelings, however agonizing they are.

For Rena and Shalom, Dan's presence is a comfort. He is able to be fully with them in their sorrow and not turn his back on them. Although they are not conscious of it right now, he also offers them a reflection of Divine compassion and companionship. At this moment, God is remote from Rena's and Shalom's thoughts, but the fact that their rabbi sits here with them, and will continue to be by their side, lets them know that God sits here as well.

Tonight these three people are bound to one another by tragedy. Horrible events not of their own making have thrown them together. At the same time, the seeds of a healing relationship have been planted. Tomorrow, Rena and Shalom will bury their precious child along with their hopes, dreams, and fears for his future. They will have to rebuild their lives out of loss and sadness, and they will need most acutely this healing relationship with Dan.

The relationship will bring healing and growth to Dan as well. The sharing of sorrow, trust, and humanity will nourish the souls of all three of them. His sharing of sorrow, trust, and humanity will nourish the souls of all three of them. Dan will be challenged to walk the delicate line between struggling with his own doubts and fears and being a vehicle for God's presence with this family. The point at which the three of them have met is where God, the Healer of the brokenhearted, will be waiting.