

Letting Go<sup>i</sup>  
 Rabbi Rosalin Mandelberg  
 Ohel Sholom Temple  
 Yizkor 5778/September 30, 2017

The great British poet, Jane Kenyon, wrote the following poem, entitled 'Eating the Cookies:'<sup>ii</sup>

The cousin from Maine, knowing  
 about her diverticulitis, left out the nuts,  
 so the cookies weren't entirely to my taste,  
 but they were good enough; yes, good enough.  
 Each time I emptied a drawer or shelf  
 I permitted myself to eat one.

I cleared the closet of silk caftans  
 that slipped easily from clattering hangers,  
 and from the bureau I took her nightgowns  
 and sweaters, financial documents  
 neatly cinctured in long gray envelopes,  
 and the hairnets and peppermints she'd tucked among  
 Lucite frames abounding with pictures of great-grandchildren,  
 solemn in their holiday finery.

Finally the drawers were empty,  
 the bags full, and the largest cookie,  
 which I had saved for last, lay  
 solitary in the tin with a nimbus  
 of crumbs around it.  
 There would be no more  
 parcels from Portland.  
 I took it up and sniffed it, and before eating it,  
 pressed it against my forehead, because  
 it seemed like the next thing to do.

I hope you'll forgive me for reading a poem about cookies during the late afternoon on *Yom Kippur*. But I do think they are good words to ponder in this season of uncluttering our souls, casting off those parts of ourselves we no longer need, and starting our lives afresh for the New Year.

Jane Kenyon -- the speaker in the poem -- is engaged in just such a quiet household task -- an act of cleaning out and clearing away. Someone close to her has died. We know from background notes that it was Lucy Wells Hall, the mother of her husband, Donald Hall; we know that the poem is set in March, 1994, shortly after Lucy's death. Jane, the daughter-in-law, has taken on the task of going through her mother-in-law's things; a lifetime of personal possessions; intimate garments she

wore close to her body, documents once important, now irrelevant; treasured family photos; piles and piles of stuff.

It's arduous work – physically taxing, emotionally draining. We can tell this because periodically the poet has to motivate herself to keep going. After each small step in the clearing-away process she stops to reward herself by eating one cookie from a tin of homemade treats sent to her mother-in-law by a cousin in Portland, Maine.

There are some spiritual overtones to this task. The financial documents are “cinctured” in long gray envelopes – a cincture is the cord or sash tied around a long, gray monk's habit. At the end of the work, when all the drawers are empty and the trash bags are full, one cookie remains in the tin, surrounded by a nimbus – a halo – of crumbs. And it's true: this act of clearing away the possessions of the dead is not just ordinary housecleaning. There is an element of sacred service performed, a last duty faithfully carried out by a survivor who sticks with the task, no matter how exhausting; doing the next thing, and the next, and the next -- because it has to be done. It reminds me of the Hebrew phrase “*chesed shel emet* – the truest act of kindness” -- caring for the dead. It is called the ultimate kindness because the beneficiary cannot express thanks or reciprocate in any way.

There's something rather tender about the act of eating the cookies as Jane Kenyon clears away the last remnants of her mother-in-law's life. She is performing her faithful service for the woman who gave birth to her beloved husband; but she is also doing something for herself, treating herself to the cookies her mother-in-law never got to eat. Not great cookies, mind you, but “good enough, yes, good enough.”

The climax comes when the work is done and one treat remains – the last one, for “there would be no more parcels from Portland.” Knowing that it's the end, the poet makes a bit of a ceremony about the act of eating the cookie -- savoring its fragrance, pressing it to her forehead as if to seal the memory there before the last bite is gone. For the sweet memories are what remain now as Kenyon and we struggle to live on without the one we loved.

Each of us here mourns the loss of a special someone, and depending on where we are in the journey of our bereavement, faith may be in short supply; but it is all we have if we are to make our own way from grief. How else will we come out of the darkness? As is the case for each of us during these last hours of *Yom Kippur*, the mourner's work is the work of *teshuvah*, of cleaning out the clutter, of letting go of what we no longer need, of savoring the bitter lessons along with the sweet values, of entering the gates of repentance with all of them, and moving forward into life.

There is the physical work of letting go – exhausting, emotionally wrenching: the paperwork and endless phone calls that confirm, again and again, that he is dead, that she is gone. The cleaning out of closets and drawers; houses full of furniture, piles and piles of stuff. Faithful acts of service to the ones who are gone; the last acts of kindness we can do.

Harder still is the mental work – letting go of obsessive questions to which we'll never know the answers: What did he feel in his last moments of life? Was he afraid? Did she know she was dying? Did she know we were there? Was there more

we could or should have done? Would it have made a difference? Where is he now? Why does it have to be like this?

Arduous is the labor of letting go of all the ways we torture ourselves when someone we love has died. Letting go of sharp regrets that gnaw at our soul – harsh words and stupid squabbles; loving words we didn't say enough, or never heard; the times we turned away; the questions we didn't ask; visits that didn't happen; promises not kept. And how do we let go of all the memories that hurt: her descent into dementia; the terrible sound of his breathing at the end; her panic and terror; their suffering, and ours?

Hardest of all is the spiritual work of saying goodbye: loosening our grip on the ones we've loved so much; letting go of someone who was the ground beneath our feet, our anchor and touchstone; our best friend in the world; our second self to whom we opened our heart like no one else.

Perhaps I relate so well to Kenyon's poem because hers was a May December romance like Marty's and mine. Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall fell in love and married in 1972. He was her professor, a man 20 years her senior, and it was the last great love for both of them -- a true marriage of mind and heart. In 1975 they moved to Eagle Pond Farm in Wilmot, New Hampshire – land that had been in Hall's family for generations. It was a peaceful spot, where they built a life on poetry, their shared passion; the natural world around them; and their love for one another.

In 1989, when Hall was in his early sixties, he was diagnosed with colon cancer; a few years later, it metastasized to his liver. He underwent surgery and chemotherapy, and then miraculously went into remission, though he was given only a one in three chance of surviving for five years.

Around the same time, in 1994, they discovered that his young wife had leukemia. "Eating the Cookies" was the only poem Jane Kenyon wrote during her illness. Despite undergoing aggressive treatment, including a bone marrow transplant, she died at home in April, 1995, at the age of 47.

Donald Hall, now 88, still lives at Wilmot Farm. He has published 15 volumes of poetry and is a former U.S. Poet Laureate. Here's a poem he wrote about his wife; it's called "Her Garden:"

I let her garden go.  
let it go, let it go  
How can I watch the hummingbird  
Hover to sip  
With its beak's tip  
The purple bee balm – whirring as we heard  
It years ago?

The weeds rise rank and thick  
let it go, let it go  
Where annuals grew and burdock grows  
Where standing she  
At once could see

The peony, the lily, and the rose  
Rise over brick.

She'd laid in patterns. Moss  
let it go, let it go  
Turns the bricks green, softening them  
By the gray rocks  
Where hollyhocks  
That lofted while she lived, stem by tall stem,  
Blossom with loss.

The poem is haunted by that gentle refrain – “let it go, let it go.” Perhaps it’s what people have been telling him; perhaps it’s what he says to himself as he tries to move out of the darkness. Let it go; let her go, as you let her garden go. Savor the fragrance, seal in the memories, and then loosen your grip. Only by letting go will you blossom, like the hollyhocks, through loss.

Therapist Francis Weller, author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*, writes: “The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That’s how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I’ll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I’ll become saccharine and won’t develop much compassion for other people’s suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.”<sup>iii</sup>

That is how we go forward, putting one foot in front of another, again and again; doing the next thing, and the next, and the next; walking towards renewal and hope for healing; letting go, when we’re ready, of what we do not need; loosening our grip on what hurts us and holds us back. We go forward in faith, believing there are better times ahead; carrying grief in one hand and gratitude in the other. Going forward is a gift we give to ourselves. And perhaps it’s one last thing we can do for those who have died.

Kim Church, who lost her own husband to leukemia at the age of 46, writes: “Fifteen years later I’m sitting on a porch swing with my friend Koji. It’s spring; a light rain is falling. We’re watching a baby cardinal – “redbud,” Koji calls it – flap around uselessly in a puddle. “Baby redbud have instinct to fly,” Koji says, “but it must practice.”

Koji, with his Japanese accent, is my wisest-sounding friend. He asks what I’ve been writing lately. “Something for my late husband,” I say. “I owe him a eulogy.”

Koji frowns. “Don’t pull on legs of spirits. Send good wish” – he closes and opens his fingers – “and let go.”<sup>iv</sup>

It is the beginning of a New Year. There are soon-to-be changing leaves to savor and cookies to taste and good people who need our love. So let us remember the ones who are gone; and send good wishes, and begin to let them go.

ENDNOTES

---

<sup>i</sup> Based on a sermon by Rabbi Janet Marder, "Letting Go: Pesach Yizkor," *betham.org*, April 17, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Slightly adapted from *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems* (Graywolf: St. Paul, MN), 1996.

<sup>iii</sup> "The Geography of Sorrow: Francis Weller on Navigating our Losses," in *The Sun*, October 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> "Exactly What to Say," by Kim Church in *The Sun*, April 2016, slightly adapted.