

For many years in America, growing up, I watched a cartoon called the Road Runner – I’m not sure if they had it here, or if they even have roadrunner birds here? Little birds whose legs run so fast that they don’t need to fly – they’re amazing to watch. But more amazing was how in this cartoon, the hungry coyote who was always chasing Road Runner would get himself absolutely clobbered, yet always come back to life or recuperate from devastating injury, without so much as an overnight hospital stay. Whether Wile E. Coyote sustained a head injury from a falling anvil he’d set to fall on Road Runner, or the loss of a limb from a slamming door meant to trap the slippery bird, Coyote was always fully intact by the next scene, ready to resume the chase. If his injury was bad enough to end the episode, there he was again the next morning on channel 11, plotting yet another “foolproof” trap for his elusive target.

Coyote’s ability to bounce back never seemed odd to us as kids. We were conditioned by the show to assume there would always be another chase, and another episode. Always. According to some child psychologists, though, this belief isn’t taught to children by television shows; it’s innate. Small children, they say, do not yet understand the *permanence* of death. So in rabbinical school, they taught us that when speaking with young children about a loss, it’s important that parents not expect a child’s reaction to be like our own, even if the child was just as close as we were to the person who died. When you tell them what happened, their sadness is often a response to seeing *you* sad, more than a reflection of true understanding. This is why many children will seem fine in a few minutes’ time, ask what’s for dinner, and resume playing. Children may go in and out of grief, breaking down in tears from time to time, or when the person who was always there in a certain setting is no longer there, reflecting an unbearable break in routine for the child. But even then, they don’t fully grasp that this absence is permanent.

But then children grow into adults, and we assume their comprehension changes. Of course, as adults we know that a person can’t recover from *every* injury or *every* illness. We know that there isn’t *always* another hour of delight waiting for us to tune in the next morning. Some changes *are* final. We know this, on some level.

But when we lose someone we love, we soon discover that there are many more levels than just the one on which we know this. I’m a little suspicious of the presumption that just because we are adults, we comprehend *permanence* that much more fully or instantly than our children, when it comes to a death. Sure, we might “get it” cognitively and recognise that somewhere down the line we’ll expect someone to be somewhere they’re not, and we know this will hurt us deeply. We understand this much. But cognitive understanding is different from the heart’s acceptance, and the soul’s being at peace.

After the death of a loved one, it takes us time to grow accustomed to a “new normal”—to learn, through experience, that life can still be fulfilling, and even joyful at times. We have to live for awhile under our new circumstances, and *grow into* acceptance. It doesn’t happen instantly. It’s a process, and a difficult one that takes time.

We run into trouble when we assume that we’ll grasp permanence *immediately* on all levels. When, thinking we should be “moving on,” we find that we *still* come home expecting to find our loved one waiting for us, with dinner on the stove or the television on. When, after a long stretch of time, we *still* experience the crushing disappointment of waking up alone in the morning, the other side of the bed empty. When we begin to think something

is wrong with us because we forget that it simply takes awhile for our hearts and souls to catch up with what our minds understand. This spiritual lag is normal and common. It just needs us, and the people around us, to be a little more patient, gentle, accepting, and compassionate. The heart and soul don't play by the rules of worldly time. But they will come around, in their *own* time.

In the meantime, we can only exercise faith. Faith that time will heal and that one day we'll hurt less acutely and unpredictably. Faith that our spirit can rebound. Faith that we will not *always* feel the way we do right now. In Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Option B*, she talks about the process of grieving her husband's sudden death, saying that the best advice she received from one psychologist was to change her language and thinking around permanence. Yes, death is permanent, he told her, but our feelings around it are not. He suggested she begin replacing words like "always" and "never" with words like "sometimes" and "lately," so that "I will *always* feel this awful" became "I will *sometimes* feel this awful." "I will *never* be happy again" became "I've been really unhappy *lately*." She said this shift in perspective made her feel hopeful. So as we wait for our hearts and souls come to terms with a new permanent reality, it's important that we not presume our painful feelings surrounding the change will also be permanent—that we will permanently remain in a state of crushing grief or paralyzing anxiety.

The death of a loved one toys with our understanding of permanence. As the people who are fixtures in our lives disappear, we presume that unhappy feelings are their permanent replacement, here to stay. This is a time to cling to faith. Faith that in time the thought of a loved one will bring a smile, not a tear. Faith that in time we will again experience moments of delight. Faith that in time our hearts and souls will indeed make the sacred journey toward acceptance and peace. May God grant us long life, that we may grow to see that day... in time. *Kein yehi ratzon*.