

Sherri Mandell

The
BLESSING
of a
BROKEN
HEART

The Toby Press

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Part one:
The Cave

Chapter one

The Cave

The cave is in the canyon half a mile from my home in Tekoa. Thousands of years of rainwater have carved this opening in the limestone. Facing the Dead Sea with its back to Jerusalem, twelve miles away, the cave can only be reached by a steep climb down craggy paths that shepherds wander, weeds and wild flowers choking the landscape. It is easy to stumble on the sharp stones that jut from the ground. Two thousand years ago, those fleeing for their lives hid here; later, in the fifth century, others chose to live in the wadi for the solitude. Monks hollowed some of these caves and studied and prayed here. But most of the caves are uninhabitable. There is one cave that I am most afraid of—the cave where my son spent his last hours.

A cave is a place of constriction, of darkness, of fear. It is like the darkness from before light was created. The cave is moist, slippery; a hollow that reverberates with secrets and all that has been lost. Moses and Shimon Bar Yochai and Eliyahu all dwelled in caves, and encountered God from the clefts in the rock. They each entered the cramped space of fear, pain, and darkness—in order to find the truths they were seeking.

The Blessing of a Broken Heart

My thirteen-year-old son Koby entered the cave—but he did not emerge. I thought my family and I would be lost in a cave of grief, forever wandering in a labyrinth so dark you can't even see your own hand, but have to trust that when you step, the ground will still be under you.

Chapter two

The Vessel

Koby was my first child, the child who taught me to be a mother. I had three kids in three years, one four years later, and Koby often helped me keep my sense of humor when taking care of children became difficult. Once, when Koby was four, I served soup, and Koby spilled the soup all over the table and floor; then just as I cleaned all that up, Daniel spilled the soup, and when I cleaned that up, Eliana's soup spilled. I started screaming in frustration and was about to totally lose it, when Koby said to me: "Don't worry Mom, it's only chicken soup." He was right. He calmed me down by saying that. He had a way of putting things in perspective.

I could have stayed in bed the rest of my life mourning him. I could have remained broken, resenting my life, my lot. But there is something in me that refuses to be broken, no matter how intense the pain, something that moves toward the light.

This wholeness was demonstrated to me recently when we were on an archaeological dig with ten other bereaved families. We have created a foundation in Koby's memory, the Koby Mandell Foundation, and we run a camp and healing retreats in Israel for family members

of victims of terror. Our intention for the dig was to bring families together to enjoy an activity that at the same time might also act as a metaphor and embody what the entire family sometimes needs to do with grief—plunge into it, together, each in their own way.

We were at the archeological site of Beit Guvrin, not far from the city of Kiryat Gat. Caves scattered throughout the site house ancient olive presses and other artifacts. Our group walked through the rain to a cave and climbed down into the darkness, the kids running, the parents stepping gingerly. We began to dig through the ruins. Over two thousand years ago, when the Hasmoneans conquered, the Edomites were forced to convert or leave. Those who fled left their belongings behind.

The guide explained that we were in the basement of one of the houses that had been abandoned. We took shovels and began plunging in the ground, and then sifting through the buckets of dirt, discovering shards of pottery identifiable as broken handles of cups or bases of vases. We dug for a few hours, the children and the parents all together. And then suddenly, somebody unearthed an entire vessel, about the size of a jug of wine, made of clay, the entire pot intact, whole.

After all the time that had elapsed, all the generations that had died and been born, something whole remained. And the same is true for those of us who feel the suffering of loss. There is something in us that clings to life and refuses to be diminished or broken. We ourselves are vessels, filled with Godliness. And though we may chip and crack, our souls are whole even when we aren't.

I have not come to this belief in the soul easily. Often my belief flies away. But that is the nature of my faith. When God created heaven and earth, the Bible states 'the spirit of God hovered over the face of the water.' Rashi* compares the spirit of God to a dove hovering over its nest. God's presence is like that too: it does not usually force you to recognize it, but is something that covers

*Rabbi Solomon Ben Isaac, the foremost Biblical commentator, who lived in the 12th century in France.

you, and then alights; something that doesn't stay put, but flies off just when you may be looking for it.

Since Koby's death, the spirit of God has hovered over me, flickering and returning. There have been moments of revelation, moments when I felt that God was touching me, pointing me, moving me, hugging me. They are inner moments, windows that open so that I can view my son's death in a different light.

Sometimes I feel as if I'm trying to weave all this loss into something beautiful. To make his absence a presence. The web is fragile and can be broken with a child's pinky. I know that. Still, I feel it is my job to keep weaving Koby's strength and beauty into the world.

I know that my broken heart will never be the same. I will always long for Koby and feel the pain of his absence. But it is possible to build a new heart. Last summer, after going to the camp with other children who lost siblings or parents to terror, my daughter Eliana explained to me why she liked the camp so much: "It's like we touched each others hearts," she said. "We put our hearts together, and we made a new heart." That's what I hope this book will do for you, because many of us live with broken hearts. But when you touch broken hearts together, a new heart emerges, one that is more open and compassionate, able to touch others, a heart that seeks God. That is the blessing of a broken heart.

Chapter three

The New Land

Koby did not intend to die a martyr. What he intended was to cut school with his friend Yosef—the two of them innocent as Tom Sawyer. Mark Twain writes: “Tom did play hooky, and he had a very good time.” Koby and Yosef were also looking for a good time. Instead, they were killed.

A thirteen and a fourteen-year-old boy hiking into a canyon one hundred yards from our home in Tekoa, treading a path that threads its way to the Dead Sea, ten miles away. Sometimes, if the weather is crisp and clear or there’s been a rainfall, you can look out over the Judean Hills and see the tongue of the Dead Sea, gray-blue, visible through a cleft in the mountain. If you didn’t know, you’d think it was a cloud. Instead, it’s a glimpse of the lowest point on earth.

My view has been irreparably changed, damaged. Yet I like to think that Koby is still in my view, invisible for the time being. I have a feeling that one day, the veil separating us will disappear, the clouds will part, and there he will be—strong, brave, and handsome. I will instantly recognize him by the sound of his voice, his smell, and the power of his hug.

The Blessing of a Broken Heart

I have a feeling that though I can't see him, he is hovering over me, like the butterflies in the canyon. The week before the murder, my neighbor Zvi, a computer expert from California, told me he'd been hiking in the canyon and flocks of white butterflies fluttered overhead as he walked with his son. The morning of the murder Zvi and his son were also down in the canyon, a different part, about an eighth of a mile from the boys. Zvi and his son heard nothing except the silence.

Though Zvi didn't hear my son's murder, my son's death did not go unnoticed. About the time of the murder, a deer charged out of the wadi and stole into our village, into the yard of a woman named Zahava, who works in the local nursery school. The deer stepped right up to her window. His coat was muddy, his legs covered in blood. Afraid, she threw a stone at him but he wouldn't move. She didn't understand why he wouldn't leave her yard.

I think he wouldn't go back because he was scared. He had seen the horror that had been inflicted on two innocent children. He was frightened to return to the canyon, the dry riverbed, to his home. He knew that a place that was once pure had been forever stained with the evil human beings can inflict when they are committed to hate.

Hate can steal a person's soul. But I will not let it. Instead, I will learn about the soul, about the new land Koby and I share. I will learn the customs and the language, to translate the signs I might otherwise miss; how to receive the divine messages I have been sent: messages about Elijah, Shimon Bar Yochai, and the Messiah; birds, angels, and the jewel of the soul. My life feels like a spiritual mystery, with symbols that beg to be decoded. Since Koby's death, I have had moments of peering through the curtain of ordinary reality, touching something greater, deeper, more extraordinary. Sometimes I think that God and Koby are in cahoots, preparing these moments for me. I pray to my son, and I can't help but feel that Koby sends me his blessing. And I hope that through telling my story, you, the reader will be blessed, better able to recognize the blessings in your own pain and struggle to lead a life of meaning.

