

Thread of Blue

By Judy Belsky

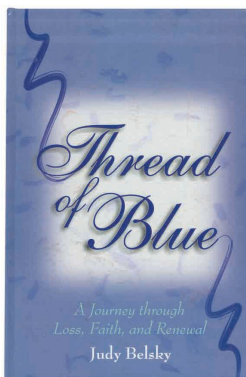
Targum/Feldheim

Israel, 2003

104 pages

Reviewed by Susan

Handelman



This powerful, wrenching and astonishing book is a memoir of the months surrounding the death of Yosef Belsky, at sixteen, one August day in an automobile accident. His mother, Dr. Judy Belsky, is a clinical psychologist, writer and educator now living and practicing in Israel. Her grandparents emigrated from Turkey to Seattle in the 1920s. After growing up in the United States, Dr. Belsky married a prominent American Orthodox educator, Rabbi Hillel Belsky, and bore a family of several daughters and her one son, Yosef.

But her book is much more than a traditional memoir. Subtitled “*A Journey through Loss, Faith, and Renewal*,” this slim volume of just over one hundred pages takes the reader into the most interior and private spaces of the author’s grief, into the vortex of her search for God from the foot of the grave of her son, and on into the long inner journey afterward. We accompany her through the following agonizing weeks and months as she sits shivah, receives comforters, struggles to return to daily life, and goes through the fall cycle of the Jewish calendar ... Elul, Tishrei and on to Chanukah.

Dr. Belsky is also a poet and artist, and this book is written in the form of

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what she calls in the dedication to this new edition, a “poetic meditation, not in easy prose.” This poetic, and sometimes stream-of-consciousness, style takes us to places where normal words could not reach. It allows us to enter her world in a way that more standard prose could not. This perhaps is

similar to the way in which the shift from prose to poetry in the Book of Job, the Biblical book that most deeply explores the anguish of personal tragedy in the Bible, takes us into the whirlwind of Job’s inner world and his burning quest for an answer—and into the whirlwind of God’s poetic response.

In the preface to the 2003 edition (the book was originally published in 1993), Belsky relates that her book has become more and more requested since it was first published. After the events of 9/11 and the cruel ongoing wars of terror in Israel and around the world, there may be a greater need for advice on how to grieve, comfort and overcome loss. But do we ever feel we have the right words to say, that we ever really know what to do in these excruciating moments that life brings to us all? Many observant Jews, at such times, turn to classics, such as Maurice Lamm’s *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* or his recently released *Consolation: The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief*, or Jack Riemer’s *Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning*. These are highly valuable compendia of *halachot*, explanations and readings. Dr. Belsky’s volume is an indispensable addition to these. For it takes the reader inside the heart, soul and skin of the mourner and her journey to light, in a highly personal and intimate way, a way in which the other works do not. It also expresses the special perspective and sensibility of a woman, and of a woman’s sense of the *akeidah* of her son. I can think of no other comparable work except for Sherri Mandell’s equally extraordinary memoir, *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*, the story of her own spiritual journey through the loss of her thirteen-year-old son, Koby,

who was brutally murdered by Palestinians near the Mandell home in Tekoa, Israel.

As Dr. Belsky writes, her own exploration of her loss in the book is part of her striving to connect “to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. In my insistence on delving into my loss instead of detouring from it, I am saying to Him: ‘I do not let You leave me. Be with me wherever I am. Accompany me, let me perceive You even in the depth of bereavement.’”

The title, *Thread of Blue*, is the powerful image and central symbol at the heart of the book. As she writes in the very first pages:

Thread of Blue is a slender, firm thread that binds me to my son who died at the age of sixteen in an accident.

There are no accidents. I was meant to give birth to him, to name him in loving memory of my father. I was meant to know the experience of this son, this only son.

I was meant to lose him just at the age when we could see him emerge into independence....

I was meant to suffer the disruption of life, the shock of his death.

Death shook me. In the storm, I found out how strong are the bonds of love and friendship. How tight are the bonds to the Holy One. So tight, He never let go of me.

The thread is a metaphor for connection, for how we reweave our torn connections with those who have left this world, for how, in the face of unbearable loss, we reweave our connections to God, to our loved ones, our friends, our community; for how we reweave our very identities. And of course, the thread of blue is the *techelet*, the thread of blue in the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, the fringes to be worn on the corners of a garment to remind us of God (Bamidbar 15:38).

As Dr. Belsky opens her memories of the shivah in the first pages of the book, she tells of a friend who comes and relates to her a saying of his own *rebbe* that helped him through his own losses:

The white background of the fringes can be likened to one's ordinary reality—the times in life when things flow in a predictable pattern. The Thread of Blue is the shock that bursts onto the other, ordinary pattern of life, utterly changing and interrupting it.

The book is her exploration of this thread of blue and the background of white, of death and life, sorrow and joy and their intermingling. It is a book that also offers a deeply insightful view of how to perform the mitzvah of comforting mourners. The Jewish laws and customs of grief and mourning give a profound and practical framework for behavior during these difficult times. As we all know, though, it is often still so hard to know what to say, to know what the mourner needs, to feel that we have done or said the right thing and to follow up, especially when the shivah is over and the mourner has to negotiate the ongoing painful return to life. The chapters on the author's experience of sitting shivah, of what hurt the most and helped the most, should be read and reread by everyone before going to a shivah house, and by anyone who is wondering how to console a friend afterward the shivah period:

Better than words are loving looks, you heart shining in your eyes like lights that signal each other in the night. Or outstretched arms, the brief moment of a hand on a shoulder, the melon left at the door when you went shopping and wondered how to bring sweetness to our house.

"A man cannot release himself from prison," Dr. Belsky quotes the Talmud as saying, and only those outside the prison of mourning can help release the mourner to refind herself and her wholeness again. Those who fear the grief of the mourner, who cannot revise their image of her, who after the shivah stay away or call but protect themselves from really entering her loss, cause a double pain in addition to loss, a pain of abandonment, of stigmatization and of silencing.

The second half of the book takes the reader with the author as the season of *teshuvah* and Elul follows the mourn-

ing period, and begins to affect her own reconnection to life. She hears Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld say in a *shiur* that "teshuvah is not about becoming better; it is about becoming different." Dr. Belsky recognizes that she can transcend her tragedy through a transformed self, but not through her former self, which she has to give up—for she is a different person.

The mother of Yosef, the one who bore him, and nursed him, and worried for him and took delight in him was not constructed to bear and accept the tragedy.... She is constitutionally incapable. She IS mother to the boy. This defines her. She cannot be released ... I am changed ... I am not the same person....

The potential that allows for *teshuvah*, for a *ba'al teshuvah* to shift and put God at the center, also lives in her, she realizes. And this begins to release her. As her son is in a different place, she understands she must be too.

She describes how the cycle of the Shabbat and the Holy Days also awakens in her a living stream of life that connects her to all the sorrows and joys of Am Yisrael and to the light of Torah. And then a first trip to Israel helps her connect with "all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

She writes, "In our longing, Jerusalem lives. Jerusalem is a place in which to grieve. Grieving for what has been lost, helps us to yearn for the future. This grieving in Jerusalem is redemptive." And: "Here I gain a context for a grief-stricken mother. Here I am with Rachel, Mother of Israel. And all the Rachels who have lost sons. Here I am waiting for the promised return of sons to Jerusalem. The promised return of the Shechina."

The book ends with Chanukah, with kindling light in the darkness, and Chanukah is also, ironically, the anniversary of her father's death and her son's birth. The final pages of the book are entitled "The Gift" and relate the story of a woman Dr. Belsky never met, but who called to offer consolation, knowing well this grief—for this woman's own sixteen-year-old son had died in a skiing accident. She shares

with Dr. Belsky the most helpful comment made to her during her own worst time of mourning: "Your son brought you many gifts during his life. He will continue to bring you gifts after his death."

Dr. Belsky uses this insight to further reframe her widened perception of life, her ability to receive the pain and loss of others, her acceptance, her cycle of dying and living again. She sees the gifts of love of family and friends as also gifts from Yosef, as all part of a wider circle of giving from one human to another, emanating from the very "heart of mankind."

So the thread of blue finally connects her to earth and heaven, to the human community and to the Divine throne. She notes the famous midrash (Rashi on *Menachot* 43b) that the special blue color of the thread the Torah commands us to put on the corner of our garment is the color of the ocean, and the ocean reflects the blue of the sky, and the blue of the sky is a reflection of the Throne of God. For Dr. Belsky, the ocean is "the realm of the Interpersonal. The Interpersonal, the hallowed human relationship, receives and reflects the Vertical, the Godly, the very Throne of Heaven." The gift of the thread of blue, at the end of the book is finally "all the pain and all the privilege we can find in living." This new edition is visually and physically designed to embody the central image. Its pages are a soft blue-gray color with a faint background design of fragments of thread, fringe and ribbon.

This book is a gift to all of us, whether we are in the white space of ordinary life, or struggling with the shock of that blue thread of pain and loss. It should be on every bookshelf to be read and reread, and lent to others. Dr. Belsky now lives with her family in Ramat Beit Shemesh, and works with many individuals and organizations to bring aid and healing. May she continue to give the gifts that Yosef gave to her, and that he is still giving to her, to the world. 