

THE STORY MUST SUFFICE: YOM KIPPUR YIZKOR 5776

It is told of that the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Hasidic master, that whenever his community was deeply in need, he would go to a certain place in the forest, light a fire, and say a special prayer. And, it seemed, always a miracle would occur.

(Niggun)

Recently, I turned to Ben and said: In 5 years...in 10...in 20...are we going to remember the sound of Kobi's voice as it sounds now? Will we remember the particular way he pronounces tomato, or koala, the particular cadence of his voice when he solemnly says yes? Beyond the digital record, will we remember?

The way Dad smelled when he would come in the door and hug us?

The way Grandma pronounced everything to be bee-you-tee-ful?

The way his hand felt in yours; the way her eyes crinkled when she smiled.

And—the constant refrain---that we don't always appreciate it when we have it. Ugh, Dad—you're embarrassing me. Grandma, the food was terrible....why do you keep saying how beautiful it was?! Why oh why oh why won't he ever sleep? Why does she keep nagging me?

As most of you know, my beloved grandmother died almost 2 years ago—at the age of 89—just weeks after Kobi was born. At her funeral, I shared these words—which only become more true as the months pass:

I recognize that there is a certain luxury in eulogizing your grandmother at my age. I am ever more aware that there has not been a single important moment in my life—from graduations to ordinations, my wedding to Kobi's bris—of which my grandmother was not a part. There are no words to describe the gratitude that I

have for the fact that my last memories of her are of her holding my newborn son. But I think I am still, at my age—and knowing she lived a full life—in shock that there will be moments, too many moments, in which she won't be there physically.

A picture of her watches over Kobi's room.

I still can't bring myself to throw out the last kugel she ever schlepped from Florida, though it is taking up precious freezer real estate.

Her last voicemail, probably a call I did not return, is still saved on my voicemail.

But she's not here. He's not here. They are not here.

(Niggun)

In the later times, his disciple, the Maggid of Mezritch, would respond to his community's needs by going to the same place in the forest and saying "Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the fire, but I can say the prayer." And again, it seemed, a miracle would occur.

I suppose it is no coincidence that, as we prepare for and go through Yom Kippur, the day that we are taught is a rehearsal of the day of our death, we are centered at the end of the Torah, reading the *parshiot* leading up to Moses' death. Teaching on Shabbat Shuvah, I mentioned that the *midrashim*, the rabbinic stories, on these sections are among the most powerful to read—they are poignant and painful, they are honest and difficult wrestling with mortality, with legacy, and with memory.

And so, buried in a little known—and less quoted—tractate of Talmud is this story, this rabbinic reimagining of what happened when Moses dies, as told by Rabbi Bill Berk:

The basic story is simple—when Moses died 3,000 laws were forgotten.

The people panic. They run from leader to leader to try to reconstruct what was lost and it's to no avail.

It's especially poignant when they run to Joshua. Joshua himself had been asked by Moses before his death—is there anything you want to ask me. Joshua says, “No—I got it—I’ve been with you the whole time—we’re good to go.” (Meyad tashash kocho...venishtachachu memenu shalosh maot halachot, ve-noldu bo sheva maot sefaykot, ve-amdu kol yisrael lehargo). Immediately Moses’ strength failed him and Joshua forgot 300 laws and there arose in his mind 700 doubts about laws¹.

Life is, in the words of Paul Simon, a dangling conversation. When our loved ones dies, we sit with our regrets, our could have/should have/would have, our unanswered questions. We sit with the questions we wish we had asked, and the I love yous we wish we could have said. And too often, we sit with grudges unforgiven, holes never mended, gulfs never narrowed. Every once in a while, I have the honor of sitting with a family in grief who can honestly say: We said everything we needed to say. I have no regrets. But even then, there is a story untold, an anecdote unshared, or a question unasked.

Rabbi Don Rossoff has very few memories of his parents. Both died of cancer; his father when he was not even two, and his mother before he turned four. He writes:

Of course, I am their progeny, genetically 50% of each, and I know each of them left an early imprint on me, in their presence and in their absence. But with little or no memory of them, not knowing how they did this or what their opinions were about that or knowing what made them laugh or cry, there is not much that is of the heart to connect with them. I don't even remember what their voices sounded like, although I was told once that I talk like my mother.

¹ Rabbi Bill Berk, “More Than Memories: Yom Kippur Yizkor 2013,” TempleChai.com (http://templechai.com/Worship/Documents/5774/Berk_YomKippur5774.pdf)

I had heard stories about them, although fewer than you might imagine; my grandparents coped with their losses with a '50s philosophy of not looking back: You don't talk about death, especially not with children.

So along with a handful of stories, what is left of my parents in my life are those fleeting memories of my mother, their wedding album and a number of assorted pictures, a couple of letters somewhere, my father's Army discharge papers, perhaps 2 or 3 minutes of home movies (silent of course), a watch and two name bracelets, some silver plate and some steak knives — wedding gifts they never used — their death certificates, their genes, their graves... and the Kaddish.

For him, he said the ritual moments—the yahrtzeits and the Yizkors, the requirement to say Kaddish, has been an essential way of experiencing the fact that they lived at all.²

Because my son will never know what Grandma Roz's voice sounded like, how her perfume smelled. Because your younger daughter will never know how it feels to be tackled by your older son. Because your grandchild won't get to play catch with your husband. That is why we are here, right now. That is why we will stand, in witness and in memory. Because these moments of memory, sitting next to generations past and generations future, are essential ways of experiencing the fact that they lived at all.

(Niggun)

Generations later, after the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezritch were no longer, their disciple, Moshe Leib of Sasov, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Lord of the World, I do not know how to light the fire or say the prayer, but I know the place and that must suffice." And it always did.

Each year, Monarch butterflies make a 2500 mile journey from Canada to a small plot of land in Mexico, where they spend the winter. Each spring, they

² Rabbi Donald Rossoff, "Confronting Kaddish Deficiency Syndrome: Kol Nidre 5771, RabbiDonaldRossoff.com (<http://rabbidonaldrossoff.com/2010/10/>)

being the long journey back north, back home—but it takes three generations to do so. And so, no butterfly making the return journey has ever flown the entire route before. Scientists ask: How do they “know” a route they have never learned? Their answer: It has to be an inherited GPS-like software, not a learned route.³

Neuroscientists call it epigenetic inheritance; it is the idea one person’s life experience can affect subsequent generations, even on a genetic level.

Returning again to Torah, returning again to this morning. *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem*—You stand all of you today. You stand, men and women, grandchildren and grandparents, in covenant, together. I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day. This covenant, this experience, this story—it is imprinted on us, but not only on us. It is imprinted on our children, and our children’s children—the ones we know and the ones we will never see. Our stories and experiences are not our own; our traumas and our triumphs, our challenges and our celebrations, our failures and our fantasies—they change our perspectives, our futures, and our destinies. And they do the same for our children. And for their children.

Many generations later, when the leader of the community needed Divine intervention, he would say: " Holy One of Blessing, I no longer know the place, nor how to light the fire, nor to say the prayer, but I can tell the story and that must suffice." . . . And it did.

There is an e.e Cummings poem, read often at weddings and at funerals. Written, of course, in lowercase letters, it reads:

*i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere
i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done
by only me is your doing,my darling)*

³ Darold Treffert, “Genetic Memory: How We Know Things We Never Learned,” *Scientific American*, January 28, 2015, Blogs, Online edition. (<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/genetic-memory-how-we-know-things-we-never-learned1/>)

i fear

*no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you*

*here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart*

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)⁴

In Greek myth, the chimera is a fire-breathing lioness with the head of a goat rising up from her body and the tail of a serpent. In ancient mythology, she was an omen of storms and natural disasters. In science, microchimerism is the phenomenon in which women harbor residual fetal cells from their children long after they've given birth, even if they never get to give birth.⁵

In the 1990s, scientists found the first clues that cells from both sons and daughters can escape from the uterus and spread through a mother's body. They become a part of who we are; we became part of who they are. Some, it seems, actually become beating heart cells⁶.

I carry your heart. I carry it in my heart.

⁴ E.E. Cummings, "I carry your heart with me," in *Complete Poems: 1904-62* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1994).

⁵ Vanessa Hua, "Your Baby's Leftover DNA Is Making You Stronger," *The Atlantic*, October 20, 2014, Health, Online edition. (<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/10/your-babys-leftover-dna-is-making-you-stronger/381140/>)

⁶ Carl Zimmer, "A Pregnancy Souvenir: Cells That Are Not Your Own," *New York Times*, September 10, 2015, Science, Online edition. (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/science/a-pregnancy-souvenir-cells-that-are-not-your-own.html?_r=1)

The second faint line—it was there. The doctor saw it. I saw it (you), too. You were there, little more than a shadow. But you existed. You were a flicker.

I felt you both. A mother of two! My kids: one holding my hand, both holding my heart, and you, a great unknown still.

And then, just like that you were gone. The last weekend of summer was the first and only weekend we had with you.⁷

All of us sitting here today are sitting here with a hand, with hands, holding our hearts. They are the hands of the people who came before—our mothers and our fathers. They are the hands of the people who walked by our sides—our husbands and wives, our partners, our best friends. And they are the hands that should be sitting next to us—our sons and our daughters, the ones who lived for not enough time on earth, the ones who lived only in our hopes and dreams.

The way Dad smelled when he would come in the door and hug us?

The way Grandma pronounced everything to be bee-you-tee-ful?

The way his hand felt in yours; the way her eyes crinkled when she smiled.

I carry you with me. I carry you in my heart.

I smell your smell and I hear your voice, I feel your hand and I laugh your laugh. And I tell your stories.

I no longer know the place, nor how to light the fire, nor to say the prayer, but I can tell the story and that must suffice.

And it will. And it does.

(Niggun into silence)

⁷ Liz Curtis Faria, "I'm Glad We Knew About You," ScaryMommy.com, <https://www.scarymommy.com/im-glad-we-knew-about-you/>.