

Rabbi Daniel Berman

Yizkor 2017

Kehilat Reyim 5778

Four years ago, moments after running a road race in Portland, Maine on a particularly hot day, I lost sight in my left eye. Obviously scared, I went immediately to the emergency room, where I spent the night.

Over the next many hours, the medical team ran a series of tests, ruling out all of the most serious possible causes. But for the next couple of weeks until it resolved, we still didn't know why this had happened, or its potential long term impact.

If you had told me one day before the race that I'd have a trauma to my eye, and I'd lose my sight, of course I would have panicked. But when I woke up in the morning after finally falling asleep that night in the hospital, there couldn't have been any better news. Sarah and I called our kids, who were staying with my parents. "I'm totally fine," I told them. "*At worst*, I won't see out of left eye." They were confused, but trusted us that good news is good news. They were comforted by our tone and promises that I was fine, that we'd all be fine.

It's amazing how quickly we shift our perspective when we begin to imagine what might have been. What a strange feeling, that rush of gratitude for so many things that, until that moment, I had never thought about: full movement of my limbs, in-tact cognitive ability, a healthy heart, all of which was affirmed for me that night.

For years I struggled to understand that Passover song, *dayenu*.

While I was a rabbinical student, my teacher Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld shared a d'var Torah that asked this question: How, *exactly*, would it have been enough to have been liberated from slavery in Egypt but then not cross the sea into freedom, but die by the shore? How *exactly* would it have been enough to cross the sea but then die in the desert?

I finally got it. If I only have a beating heart, and the ability to hear you and feel you, my children, even if I can't see you, *dayenu*, that would be enough. More than ever, I felt that everything I ever had was a gift.

Our lives may look quite different than what could have been, or what we imagined. They probably do. But every moment we have to love and be loved is a gift.

Over the course of many years counseling people who have experienced loss, I have found this to be the only insight that allows us to endure the unbearable work of burying the people we have loved, returning them to the earth. When we suffer loss, we try our best to remember the gifts of having known this person, hoping, praying we can say: the time we had, *of course it was not enough, there is no true dayenu when it comes to losing the people we love, but* it was a gift, and for that gift, we are so grateful.

Truthfully, even if we can only occasionally feel this way, we will have done ok.

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There is much ancient Jewish wisdom about *our lives as gifts*.

Our rabbinic and mystical traditions teach: the world's greatest gift is the *neshama*, the reflection of the Divine that dwells in each person. The Hebrew word *neshama* comes from the word *linshom*, to breathe. The *neshama* is the breath that God breathes into our bodies, animating our being. It is an eternal breath,

never extinguished. Just being alive is an expression of God's *chen* and *chesed*, sacred gifts of grace and loving kindness.

This theology associating and linking our lives with the giving of gifts is central to Jewish customs of death, burial and mourning. During Yizkor, as we recall the names of family and friends, we pledge *tzedakah* to help preserve and cultivate the ideals that were important to the person we are remembering, and pray that through our generosity, the neshama of our loved one will be held tightly within God's embrace.

Other burial and mourning cultures around the world share similar qualities with the Yizkor prayer. A common custom, historically, was to place a coffin outside the house of the person who has died, by the door. Taking great care to be immediately by the coffin, a relative of the person who died would distribute bread and food, sometimes with money inside, to the poor, who would have earlier gathered flowers and herbs to grace the coffin. (*The Gift p .51*)

These customs offer us an insight into the experience of loss: it is bearable only when we endow it with a sense of gift and generosity to others, *for the life itself was a gift to us.*

We do not earn these gifts, and we do not own them. All we can do with gifts is receive them and give them over. There are no final landing spots for chen and chesed. The blessing of the lives of those we have loved and lost is not that we get to keep them; it's that we have learned, more deeply, how to live, how to endure, how to find joy, how to stay strong, and how to be true.

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This insight is the subject of a beautiful poem called *Sweetness*. I have tried during these High Holy Days to weave poetry into my sermons. What I love about the poet Stephen Dunn is his commitment to offer ideas with clarity, but only in the service of complexity. I love that sentiment. (Very Jewish!)

His poem, *Sweetness*, goes like this:

Just when it has seemed I couldn't bear
one more friend
waking with a tumor, one more maniac

with a perfect reason, often a sweetness
has come
and changed nothing in the world

except the way I stumbled through it,
for a while lost
in the ignorance of loving

someone or something, the world shrunk
to mouth-size,
hand-size, and never seeming small.

I acknowledge there is no sweetness
that doesn't leave a stain,
no sweetness that's ever sufficiently sweet

Tonight a friend called to say his lover
was killed in a car
he was driving. His voice was low

and guttural, he repeated what he needed
to repeat, and I repeated
the one or two words we have for such grief

until we were speaking only in tones.
Often a sweetness comes
as if on loan, stays just long enough

to make sense of what it means to be alive,
then returns to its dark
source. As for me, I don't care

where it's been, or what bitter road
it's traveled
to come so far, to taste so good.

Dunn sharpens the tension we experience in love and loss. The sweetness of life - and particularly the sweetness of loving relationships - makes what he calls a “stain” - it leaves a mark, sometimes in ways we don’t anticipate or even want. That sweetness is never sufficient, but it stays long enough to help make us sense of what it means to be alive. We experience that sweetness as if pure, unbridled, a gift to us, as if on loan. It’s ours for a bit; then, Dunn writes, it *returns to its source*.

This idea of returning to the *Source* is of such central concern during these High Holy Days, particularly as we prepare ourselves to say Yizkor. In our beautiful and haunting central prayer of the High Holy Days, called the *unetannah tokef*, we are reminded: *Adam yesodo me’afar v’sodo l’afar. B’nafsho yavi lachmo*. A person’s origin is earth and will return to the earth, having spent a lifetime seeking sustenance and meaning.

The *process* of a Jewish burial affirms this severe reality. After calling out in prayer, “El maleh Rachamim, God, full of compassion mercy,” we cover the casket, slowly, deliberately with earth. The sound of the earth first landing upon the casket is particularly painful, forcing our confrontation with the reality of the loss.

In that moment, perhaps more than any other I know, we know that the earth is not an unfeeling matter. Though we often approach the earth with what the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber calls an I-it relationship - as a resource that we are completely separate from, and can rationally understand, solve, and control, the earth is actually a living being, sacred ground to which the gifts of our lives return. To begin to heal from loss, and the pain of burying people we love, we need to address the root of our image and feeling of separateness from the earth. The deepest part of that separateness lies in our forgetfulness of the earth’s sacred nature, which is also our own sacred nature. Gifts return to their Source.

Walt Whitman writes in a *Song of the Rolling Earth*,

The song is to the singer, and comes back most to him,

The teaching is to the teacher, and comes back most to him...

The love is to the lover, and comes back most to him,

The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him—it cannot

Fail.

As we approach Yizkor, we'll soon call out in prayer, Makor Habracha, God, Source of Being: for my parents, my wife, my husband, my children, my brother, my sister, my friends - thank you for our time together. Thank you for these gifts.

This is the magic and mystery of Yizkor: we are together now with the *neshamot* of those we have loved and lost. As we say kaddish, we become their loving companions, shepherding and guiding them back to their Source. We take care of them, give to them, as they have always given to us.

There will be a chorus of names chanted all around us, everyone praying: thank you, thank you, thank you for the gifts of the lives of these people whom we have loved.

We won't feel their time with us was enough; but the thing about gifts, they leave a mark, and when we're lucky, those marks stay with us long enough to help make us sense of what it means to be alive.

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This has been a hard year for our loving community. We sustained many losses. I pray we can imagine our loved ones reaching out to us from their Source, seeking companionship, as we continue to shepherd their *neshamot*, their souls, to a place of peace.

We remember:

Estelle Solomon

David Solomon

Sylvia Levitt

David Kornblatt

Louis Adamsky

Barbara Cohen

Elaine Goldenberg

Sherman Plotkin

Otto Katz

Marcia Fargotstein Goldberg

Harriet Filler

Edna Karlin

Evelyn L. Wolff

Edith Ratner

Phyllis Salvin

Joan Smoller

June Tankel

Richard Freudberg

Don Habelow

Linda Baker Bojarczuk

Frances Schockett

Jossie Bortz

Bernice Lichtblau

Sylvia Kaufman

Allan Shade

Albert Schindler

David Grossack

During this Yizkor, may all those you are remembering be a blessing for strength, for healing and for meaning. May you be enriched by their memory, even as you live with the pain of their loss. May their *neshamot* continue to echo through our lives and this sacred space.