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Temple Reyim
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Coming Home

Lshanah tovah and gmar chatimah tovah.

May we all be sealed for a year of blessing, healing and strength.

I have an old friend. I met him while studying at Hebrew University in Jerusalem during our third year in college. He had grown up in New York but he decided to stay and live in Israel after graduating. He was there three months when his mother became sick and died quickly. He was just 24 years old.

He used to write me letters from Jerusalem, in those days before email and facetime. I remember thinking how striking it was that loss could show up in handwriting, the letters of his barely legible script somehow looked like panic and despair turned to mourning and loneliness.

It was painful for him to be away from his family. There was no place he'd ever felt more genuine or alive than Israel. Jerusalem in particular gave him a language and culture and context that he had never experienced before. Yet even with friends supporting him, saying kaddish with him, bringing meals to his small apartment outside the Old City, after this loss, he longed to be home.

He ended up moving back to New York. I remember how worried I was about him. I knew how vulnerable he'd be back home, not just from the loss, which was devastating to him, but also because he was going to have to confront, again, the questions of identity and authenticity that he struggled with before deciding to move to Israel. Home was a very hard place.

A number of months after the loss of his mother, I took a trip to New York, and we went for a walk. I don't recall much of the content of our conversation, but I do clearly remember his sense of despair. I remember his eyes, which seemed to have been stone-washed and faded.

During that year of mourning, we talked quite a bit, almost always coming back to a single question: where was his home?

He simultaneously yearned for what felt like conflicting needs: being home and being away. At this point, however, he didn't know which was which. His mind and heart felt in alive in Israel, but he longed for a different kind of intimacy.

I thought of my friend this past year when this question came up again:
What does home feel like? How do we know when we're home?

I was participating in a multi-faith gathering for clergy serving congregations. We came together to study text and learn from each other.

One of the sessions was a panel of three older members of group. It was modeled after a town hall meeting, an open floor for questions. There was one very special question I remember clearly. A young rabbi asked: how do you know if the community you are serving is the community you were meant to serve?

I loved the question. It wasn't about organizational leadership and vision. It wasn't really even about a rabbi or clergyperson and his or her congregation. It was a question about my friend; about a life of a **person** being interwoven, even bound up, with a community of people. He was essentially asking: how do you know when you're home? It was a question about spiritual purpose.

Just weeks after that gathering I waited for a Reyim family at Lindwood Memorial Park, the cemetery in Randolph where Reyim has a community plot. We met at the graves of their mother and father who were buried side by side many years ago. We sang Esah Eynai, we prayed El Maleh Rachamim, recited mourner's kaddish, and we talked about their parents. We placed rocks on their headstones and stood silently.

After the family left I returned to cemetery. I find cemeteries peaceful, and solemn - I think they help me remember the shortness and sweetness of life.

As I walked along the paths weaving through the cemetery, I realized that I knew many of names on the headstones. Some were grandparents or parents of Reyim members. Others were themselves Reyim members who died in the last few years, and I had stood at their side as we lowered them into the earth.

“Isn’t this it?” it occurred to me. Isn’t this how we know we’re home?

When we know the names carved into the headstones.

When we can say: “I knew the loved ones whose names you are chanting during Yizkor on this Yom Kippur morning.

When we have helped bury our loved ones, placing them into the earth, and then earth into the grave, and therefore know where we have buried our dead - that’s the moment of discernment, I think. It feels like we are truly in this together. We are going to do everything together now. Pray together. Sit low on the floor together. Eat together. Stand next to each other during kaddish together.

Togetherness is an ancient Jewish spiritual practice. Its beauty and its magic is its insight into human response to loss. After losing someone we love, we so deeply yearn for contact, for signs that a relationship is still somehow alive and meaningful.

We know this experience not only from loss but also from love. When we love another person, our hearts yearn for that love to be returned. When we miss someone, we want to know - we need to know - that they long for us as well. We want a shared experience - to love and to be loved, to share and to receive.

Our ancient tradition understands the rupture, the terrible gap that occurs after a loss: the sudden absence of a person to receive our love and offer it in return. And it offers us a response: at the very moment we feel the most uprooted, having just lowered our loved one into the earth, we immediately turn to a prayer and text, the kaddish, as our primary language. It is sometimes our only possible language.

Kaddish is a shepherding ritual. We guide the the neshama, the reflection of the Divine in each person, to a place of comfort and peace. We say kaddish to maintain our relationship with the person we have lost.

What's so stunning and beautiful about Judaism's response to loss is that it also imagines that the soul of the person who has died longs for that connection as well. Kaddish gives those who have died a way to stay with us. Even in death, we yearn to stay connected with the living. We long to be close to those whom we have left behind, wishing we were there to comfort and hold them, and help heal their broken hearts.

I know that this possibility - that in death we still seek closeness with those we have left behind - stretches our imagination.

But as I shared last night: Yom Kippur is a special time for us - to wonder, to ask questions, to be open to mystery.

We can imagine the person we have lost, not yet at rest, not yet in shalom, yearning for the loving touch of a shepherd who is not a savior or prophet but present, still, lifting up the soul and dignifying it by calling out the words of kaddish: *yitbarach vyishtabach*, praised and blessed and glorified and raised up, exalted and honored and uplifted and lauded. We can imagine our loved ones calling out these words back to us. In saying kaddish, we not only keep the memories of our loved ones close to us, we also offer them faithful companionship.

I have felt this shared, reciprocal sense of yearning very personally. Every couple of years I have a dream at night, a dream that shakes me. I almost always wake up altered and confused. In the dream, I am sitting with one or more family members I have lost. We're just together, talking, typically in Hebrew. Everything is precisely right, vivid, and clear: faces, intonation of voice, and smells. We are in a full embrace, holding each other tightly, unwilling to let go.

For many years, I understood these dreams as a form of very intense mourning. In time, I came to experience them differently. When I woke up, it felt like we had actually been together. As if I had

not merely dreamt of their memory; rather, they had visited me - touched down, spent time together. When I awaken, I take a moment to say good-bye. For now.

Being together is our tradition's response to this longing of the human heart - for those who mourn and for those who have died.

There is yet another texture to this practice of togetherness. The possibility of staying connected, of feeling at home, offers strength, healing and peace to those who are dying.

In ancient Israelite burial practices, we see the desire to maintain contact with community through burial in one's native land at least, and if possible, with one's grandparents and parents.

Perhaps the best known example is the story of Jacob. Many years after Jacob's son Joseph was sold into slavery, Jacob settles, together with Joseph and his brothers, in Egypt. Jacob lived there for 17 years, and he was 147 when the time came for him to die. He called for Joseph and said to him, "do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your loyalty. When I lie down with my fathers, bury me in their burial place."

This is an amazing description of dying: lying down with one's fathers and mothers.

"*v'aseeta imadi chesed v'emet*," Jacob tells Josef. What's translated generally as pledge of loyalty is not a simple legal matter. *V'aseeta imadi chesed v'emet* means: show me compassion and truth.

Joseph replies, "I will do as you have asked."

Jacob repeats, "swear to me."

Joseph takes his pledge of loyalty, his commitment to compassion and truth.

Jacob bows at the head of the bed.

As Jacob is dying, he recalls his beloved wife Rachel, whom he personally buried at such a young age.

Just before breathing his last breath, he again asks to be buried with his fathers, in the cave that his grandfather Abraham and grandmother Sarah were buried, where his parents Isaac and Rebecca were buried, where he buried his wife Leah.

When Jacob finished his instruction to his sons, he drew his feet into his bed and, breathing his last breath, he died. In describing Jacob's death, again the Hebrew is so instructive: *va'yay'asef el amav*. He was gathered to his people.

This was the wish of everyone in ancient Israel, community members, prophets and priests - to die in their own city, and to be buried by the grave of their fathers and mothers. To be gathered to their people.

In perfect harmony with this desire, the tomb most typical of the Israelite period is a natural vase or a chamber cut into soft rock. As generations of the same family died, space was made to bury family together. This tradition of family burial - though not universal - was practiced widely enough that it gave rise to the Hebrew language of dying: to sleep with one's parents, and to be gathered to one's people.

As we approach the end of our lives, we look for a next home. Just as we build homes during our lives that are close to the people we love, so too, as we approach the next world, we look to be near the people whom we have loved and lost.

This, I suggested to my friend when I spoke with him recently, is home. Finding ways to be together when our hearts yearn the most.

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

With each of them, we are now together. We remember:

Sylvia Nierman

Myron Idelson

Edith Sobol

Marshall Cohen

Gertrude Epstein

Sidney Brunell

Myron Wolf

Martha Raider

Sidney Nicoll

Phyllis Frank

Elaine Dubin

Herbert Spatz; and

Leroy Crawford

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.