

Empty Rooms
Yizkor Reflection
Yom Kippur 5781
September 28, 2020
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Yizkor 2020 – a service of loss amidst a year’s litany of losses. A space for grieving in a year of too much grief. Sometimes this hour we share is a tranquil, shaded courtyard. This year, Yizkor is harder - it feels like a busy city intersection, where personal loss, national grief, international suffering all cross paths in a clamor of woe.

And every one of those losses has been made more difficult by the deaths and isolation caused by this pandemic. People we love who succumbed to the virus. We ourselves who were unable to travel to be with loved ones who were ill, or to spend last moments with them in the hospital. Rituals of mourning suspended or limited - people who grieved losses without circles of friends to embrace them at graveside or bring them a plate of food in a house of mourning. Yes, our Zoom gatherings have been a source of great comfort. But it’s just not the same as a hug and a doozie.¹

Usually, Yizkor is public – it is both difficult and healing because it takes the grieving we so often do in private and gives us permission to grieve in community, to shed all the day-to-day strategies society encourages us to employ: like crying only when we’re alone; or making sure not to burden friends and family with our heartbreak; or filling a calendar with distractions so we don’t dwell in our sadness. There’s no sin in any of that – it’s sometimes the only way to make it through the day.

¹ Dallas Jewish comfort food: a multi-layered sandwich (with lots of mayonnaise) commonly served at shiva meals here. This is likely the first (and last?) time it has ever appeared in a footnote.

But then along comes the painful beauty of this hour to give us permission to hurt when we need to, to weep when we must, to hear and speak words that bring relief and release to our burdened spirits. “Give sorrow words,” Shakespeare wrote, “the grief that does not speak whispers the o’erfraught heart and bids it break.”² At Yizkor our breath gets a little ragged together; our voices crack together. The Olan Sanctuary has been home to some glorious music and beautiful sound, but I confess that the most moving of all to me is the communal snuffle that normally fills this space at this time on Yom Kippur afternoon – it is a whisper of the human soul, the essence of truth and pain and love.

But not this year. This year we are in our homes, some of us alone. And while that may bring some relief (not having to get dressed up, or put on mascara that will run anyway), I’ll tell you that of all the powerful communal moments we usually share at this season, this is the one when I most miss our being together. As a rabbi, it is a profound privilege to be able to look out on your faces at Yizkor and feel a sense of solidarity on the path we all walk. But the community that is a source of emotional strength by being physically present is dispersed this year. At this moment, I am standing before an empty sanctuary, and there is not a snuffle in sight.

But then it occurred to me – that is what many of us do on this path of mourning anyway: we speak to empty rooms. Sometimes the room is the kitchen at the beginning of the day, or the bedroom at the end; the closet where a daughter fingers a mother’s scarf, or a son a father’s watch; or the room with the cabinet that holds the years of birthday cards, some in a child’s hand.

And we speak to them there, sometimes out loud, sometimes in our hearts, because the grammar of love permits the second person “you” whether they still walk the earth with us or not. On some days the room is too tough to enter, but as healing comes, those rooms manage to

² William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV, iii, 209-210.

be empty without being desolate; to tell the truth of love at least as strongly as they tell the truth of loss.

And of course, our loved ones' words are there too. The jokes they loved to tell and tell again. The trusting confidences and quiet fears, the worrying (or kvetching) about kids or parents, a question at bedtime. The bickering and the laughter; what we forgave, even when it was hard to forgive. The words of anger that once wounded us. The words of peace we shared then, or hoped to; the healing that can still happen now.

The poet Victoria Chang writes that grief is “not actually a noun but a verb ... it moves.”³ And it does, in part because we carry it with us; the poet Natasha Trethewey quotes a Korean folk saying: “One does not bury the mother’s body in the ground but in the chest.”⁴ We carry our losses with us, at first as suffocating weight, eventually as beam and ballast integrated into the heart of who we are.

Grief moves because love moves. Just as love does not stay under the chuppah, grief does not remain at graveside. Because everywhere we loved them, we remember them: at the kitchen table and walking into the house from the garage after dinner with friends; before a piece of art that once brought vibrant color to their home and now brightens ours; wherever they made us laugh.

I confess that I still get choked up walking past the post office in Great Barrington, MA because I know how much my dad loved to go there to drop off the mail on his way to the bank to do whatever you do at a bank in person by actually walking in the front door of the bank. But - and I’m guessing you know it too - it’s a smiling and grateful sort of choking up. Because I just

³ Victoria Chang, *Obit: Poems* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2020), p. 18.

⁴ Natasha Trethewey, “Imperatives for Carrying On in the Aftermath,” in *Monument: Poems New and Selected* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), p. 2.

love the fact that my dad was the kind of guy who liked going to the post office and then to the bank. A day without errands was a day without sunshine. Love moves, and grief moves, and healing moves too, even to the post office and the bank.

And all that movement moves us, nudging us forward into this new year. Sometimes we go kicking and screaming, sometimes with a once-heavy step made lighter by new joy, new life, a word of comfort or a glimpse of beauty.

The new year will have its own architecture, its own rooms that will sometimes feel achingly empty, because we are mortal beings who experience great love and great loss. But there will be other rooms too – for new laughter, or laughter that echoes still; for the inspiration to emulate the best of who they were, or the courage to do what they would have done; for a sense of God’s presence; for gratitude; for sustaining love.

May God give us comfort in this hour of memory. Across all the miles and all the screens, may we sense each other’s presence on this shared and sacred path. And may the architecture of memory, in all its shadow and light, help us build for tomorrow. May God bless this house we call the new year 5781 – that its rooms might be for all of us a source of healing, purpose and peace. Amen.