

Community Memorial Service Words by Cantor Mary Rebecca Thomas

September 20th, 2015 – 5776

Let me begin with a poem by Rabbi Donald Rossoff –

If every life were like a drop of rain –
each of us a small, solitary self –
then death would be for us return, back to the ocean whence we came...

Some raindrops soft and gentle as the showers of spring;
others hard and raging like summer storms of hail and thunder.
Each life a separate journey back to the beginning, and back to God.

Picture God as a great ocean,
teeming with life in the ebb tide and flow,
where each raindrop begins and ends
and begins again
and again...

In the dance of waves we dance forever –
not I as I, nor you as you,
and yet together
rising and falling
soft and peaceful, hard and raging –
a dance we only dimly see to music we but faintly hear,
together and forever...

And if all this were so –
if God were like the ocean
and each of us like rain and mist –

Would my heart not break at losing you?
Could the ocean contain my tears? (Mishkan Hanefesh, Yizkor service)

Rabbi Rossoff paints a magnificent picture of what we might imagine of God and of souls – we might be a flowing ocean of rain and water, commingled drops of holiness returning to our Source. But even in his belief, Rossoff knows that despite all of the beautiful thoughts and beliefs of our people, that for each of us there will inevitably be depths of pain that will come with loss.

As Jews, our traditions are not meant to blunt the pain of loss or dull the ache of missing, because they simply cannot. No shiva minyan or year of kaddish said can mend a broken heart or alleviate our sorrow.

What our beliefs do is hold our hand and guide us on a path toward health and healing. Our practices give us the opportunity to stoke the coals of our memory, keeping our loved ones alive within us.

Neuroscientists now understand that when we remember something from our past, we are actually remembering the last time we remembered the event, not the event itself. So, let's say you recall the moment you stood beneath the chuppah at your wedding, you are actually remembering the last time you thought about it – maybe on your fifth anniversary or on your twentieth or watching your own children marry. With each recall of the same event, it is stored anew in your brain and the brand new memory is there to be recalled in the future.

The implication of this is that our memories are like playing the childhood game of telephone. You sit in a circle and say to your neighbor, “the sky is blue”. They in turn whisper the message to their neighbor and by the time it works its way around the circle, the messages has been instead become, “the grass is purple.”

Each time we access our memories, there is the potential to bring other information to bear on the memory itself. In this way, our memories are like living documents of our experiences – this is how we write the Torah of our lives, returning to the same material over and over again, layering on who we are at the moment we remember.^[1]

In the days immediately following a loss, we tell stories of our departed. In eulogy and during shiva calls, we bring forward every detail that we can of their lives. We are flooded by memories and in the sharing and telling, we are reinforcing a scaffold of memories upon which to build our future with our loved one.

After the earliest days of mourning are passed, tradition gives us opportunities throughout the year to purposefully remember our loved ones. At a Yartzheit and Yizkor we are ensuring that we will not let too much time pass between our remembrances.

So we think of them and we access our memories again. Except, **w**e are different now than we were the last time we said Yizkor – we are different now than we were on Shavu'ot and will be more different still at Sukkot or Pesach next. Who has been born? Who has died? Who has known good fortune? And who has struggled? Who by fire? And who by water?

The person that we are on the day when we remember comes to meet the memory of our loved ones and it is as if we are in conversation again. It is as if we sit at the kitchen table and catch up on the day's news.

And we know what they would say. We know when they would say, “Dear, you will be alright. Or, “my, look at how they've grown.” We know that they would say, “take good care of your mother for me.”

We cannot touch them. We cannot see them, yet they live within us anew each time we remember them.

As the sun was setting on Rosh Hashanah, I overheard a conversation between my two children.

Johannah, who will be five said, “You know, Ezra, there is a little piece of God inside your heart.” She placed her palm on her chest.

“In your heart?” Ezra, who is two, asked. He pulled his shirt away from his body, looking for the piece of God in his heart.

“No, silly! You can’t see God!” she replied. “God is in your heart and your heart is in your body. You can’t see inside your body.”

My heart nearly burst from the profound gratitude I felt to God in that moment. *My heart* nearly burst knowing that my two little ones were learning that – that which is most important can rarely be seen.

The memories of our loved ones, like God, are as near to us as the air we breathe, yet somehow as far as the most distant star. We cannot touch them. We cannot see them, yet they live within us anew each time we remember them.

And when I read Rabbi Rossoff’s poem, and he asks – despite all I know and believe and trust in God, “Would my heart not break at losing you?” Of course it would break. Because when we truly allow ourselves to experience the heights of love, we know that the depths of our loss will exceed the darkest recesses of the deepest ocean. Yet, it is possible to live with a broken heart, because the heart becomes less fragile with time as we remember them.

Our relationships endure. They endure long beyond the moment of loss or of grieving. Our loved ones live on in our memories not just as they were, but as we need them to be today and as we move forward in our living.

We cannot touch them. We cannot see them, yet they live within us anew each time we remember them.

In this season of introspection, may we remember them as they were and as they continue to be.

G’mar chatimah tovah.

^[1] <http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2012/09/your-memory-is-like-the-telephone-game.html>