

Magical Thinking: Yizkor 5779

A recording from my late father still greets callers on the answering machine of the home in which I grew up back in Massachusetts. I know that some people find this fact macabre or unsettling or somehow indicative of an inability to move forward, but my family and I find it strangely comforting to hear the warm, rich tones of my Dad's voice every time we go to leave a message. For my brother Scott it wasn't an answering machine but rather my father's number in his cell phone that he couldn't quite bear to erase, keeping it in his digital address book for months after my father had died. And for me it is the 12-year-old Toyota Corolla that my parents bought me as a graduation gift from rabbinical school, my Dad carefully selecting a safe, reliable vehicle that would last a long time for his driving-challenged daughter, the newly minted rabbi. The two of us went car shopping together just after my father received his diagnosis of leukemia and I remember wondering if this safe, reliable vehicle would ultimately outlast my father himself. Now that it has, I kind of want to drive it forever.

Deep down, I know that there's something a little bit irrational, maybe even superstitious, about all of these practices. My father will never hear the voice mail messages on our family's answering machine; he won't be insulted to know that he's been deleted from Scott's address book; he could never cease to remain in my thoughts each day, even if I eventually give up the car that he picked out for me. And yet, when so very many things have been taken away – the sound of his laughter; the feel of him next to me on the couch watching TV; the sweet, moony way that he used to look at my mother - those that remain somehow become all the more precious. Maybe it's precisely because I can't pick up the phone and call my father or give him a hug or ask for his advice that I like feeling the nearness of his presence every time I get into my battered, beloved Corolla. How very hard it is to let go of those whom we love.

Of course, it's not just us, the mourners, who engage in some pretty strange behavior. On the opposite end of the grief experience is Amy Krouse Rosenthal, a filmmaker and children's book author who became famous, upon her death-bed, for writing a *New York Times* column entitled "You May Want to Marry My Husband." Faced with a sudden diagnosis of terminal cancer at age 51, Rosenthal quickly turned her attention to creating what was essentially a dating profile for her partner of 26 years in the hopes that he would eventually go on to find new love and happiness after her passing. "If our home could speak it would add that Jason is uncannily handy," writes Rosenthal. "[And] man, can he cook. After a long day, there is no sweeter joy than seeing him walk in the door, plop a grocery bag down on the counter, and woo me with olives and some yummy cheese...Jason loves listening to live music; it's our favorite thing to do together. I should also add that our 19-year old daughter, Paris, would rather go to a concert with him than anyone else."¹

Rosenthal is giving her husband the incredible gift of permission, freeing him to love again after she is gone, and she's also exhibiting a sort of desperation borne out of grief and devotion, manically attempting to maintain control over a situation when all control has suddenly and completely been ripped away. The poet Joan Didion calls this phenomenon "magical thinking," the comforting (although ultimately delusional) idea that if we hope for something enough or perform the right actions that an unavoidable event can be averted or even reversed. In Didion's memoir, which recounts the devastating period following the death of her husband and simultaneous hospitalization of their only child, she describes being unable to give away her late husband's shoes for fear that he would need them one day when he came back. A friend of mine recently confessed to keeping her growing, six-year-old daughter in a toddler bed because she can't stand the idea of her baby growing up. And someone else I know

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/style/modern-love-you-may-want-to-marry-my-husband.html>

copped to keeping parking tags to the condo that her late mother no longer even owns because she might want to go back sometime and sit in the garage just to talk. Such are the realities and heartbreaks of the human spirit. They make us just a little bit crazy to maintain connection with our loved ones no matter what.

This morning we gather together for Yizkor, Judaism's sacred hour of remembrance and honor. In certain ways Yizkor, too, has elements of magical thinking embedded within it - for while we know that we can connect with our loved ones now departed at anytime and in any place, there is something about this particular pocket of space carved out by collective grief, and community, and the rhythms of the Jewish year that make memory suddenly feel more urgent when we reach this part of our service. Particularly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as our families gather together for the holidays, we feel so strongly the absence of those who are no longer here to join us. Particularly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as we mark the passing of another year, we wish so much to tell our loved ones about all the things that they have missed. Particularly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as we feel the weight of tradition passed down from one generation to the next, we hope that those we remember today would appreciate our reciting these iconic prayers for them, just as we once saw them recite identical words for their own relatives and friends now long gone. We hope that those who sit beside us this afternoon will one day recite these words for us.

Indeed, Yom Kippur is not only a day of recalling the lives of others, but it is also a day of reckoning with our own human frailty and mortality. We dress ourselves in white kittles that mimic burial shrouds; we

deny ourselves life-sustaining food and drink; we recite confessional prayers similar to those that are recited upon the death bed and ask “Who will live and who will die?” For many of us, these words just quoted from the *Un'taneh Tokef* prayer, followed by a detailed list of all the many and different ways we might perish in the year to come, are amongst the most difficult words of the High Holiday liturgy; sometimes they are the reason individuals can't even bear coming to High Holiday services in the first place. They seem to indicate an interventionist God making decisions about each of us one-by-one, allowing this person to remain and condemning this one to pass on. "*U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roa hag'zerah*" the prayer concludes, "Repentance, prayer, and righteous giving can avert the severity of the decree." If only we are good enough – with our apologies, with our worship, with our philanthropy – we can turn back whatever fate has ultimately been handed to us.

We notice, of course, that this, too, is magical thinking par excellence; the idea that turning our hearts towards forgiveness, or opening up the pages of the *machzor* (prayer book), or giving money to just causes can somehow forestall accident and illness and all other means of calamity simply does not accord with the world as we know it, where good people suffer and cruel people prosper, where “reward” and “punishment” seem to be doled out haphazardly at best. “How can I believe in a God such as this?” I have heard from countless grieving souls. “Why would such a God choose my daughter to die so young?” “Why would this God cause my wife to suffer so much before she passed?” I remember reciting the *Un'taneh Tokef* during the year in which my father had had a bone marrow transplant just days earlier, the Rosh Hashanah during which his life quite literally hung in the balance, and clinging to this prayer almost like a talisman, knowing it to be false and yet willing it to be true – if I just repented and prayed and donated my heart out, I could make my father well. Sadly, of course, it does not work in quite this way.

Magical thinking is magical because it doesn't necessarily accord with reality, but magical thinking is also magical because it does something that we can't quite explain – it provides hope and comfort and connection at those moments when such virtues are most desperately needed. My father's spirit is probably not rattling around in my old Corolla with the busted muffler, but driving my car each day helps me feel just a little bit closer to him. *Teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah* are no guarantee against human tragedy, but taking responsibility for one's actions, connecting to God and community, and giving back to others seem as good a way to organize a meaningful life as any – and if they make us feel just a little bit more in control of our destiny than all the better! As many of us will know, our High Holiday prayer-book, *Machzor Lev Shalem*, actually translates this final verse of the *Un'taneh Tokef* as "*Teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah* have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny," indicating that these tools are not enchanted amulets that automatically reverse the Divine decree but rather spiritual resources that can help us better contend with the circumstances of our lives, whatever they may be. The "magic" in magical thinking lies less in what these words and rituals cause to happen in the world, what physical events they work to create or prevent. The "magic" in magical thinking lies rather in what these words and rituals cause to happen in our own hearts, minds, and spirits.

Ironically, I was reading Joan Didion's "The Year of Magical Thinking," in the spring of 2006 just before my father was diagnosed, a few months before we'd buy that now infamous Corolla, and had brought the book home with me to Massachusetts while visiting my parents. My Dad asked me about it, and then asked if he could read it when I was done, at a time that he, a doctor, highly suspected himself to be very sick but had not yet shared that information with the rest of us. I wonder if he was engaged in his own magical thinking – if I specifically read a book about mourning and death, I'll be able to prevent that kind of misery from ever visiting my own family. Or, more likely, he was probably just being his

usual smart, practical self – trying to learn from the grief experiences of others in order to better understand, and ultimately help our family prepare, for the heartbreak that was eventually to come. It's often that way with those whom we love -- while we're worrying about them, they're worrying about us.

I'm not sure that I believe in magic, but I am deeply grateful for magical thinking. It has kept me connected, through its charms, to people whom I love.

Zichronam livracha – may the memories of those we recall today be for a blessing. Please rise as we begin the Yizkor service together on page 290.

