

Blessed is the One Who Restores Life to the Dead

Yom Kippur Morning/Yizkor

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The cabin of our mini-van, when fully occupied by two teenage girls, a ten year old boy, Sari and me...and sometimes the dog is, let's face it, not a quiet place. Everybody has stories to tell and observations to make; sometimes a song comes on the radio and the back of the van becomes a veritable performance space, with everyone singing at the top of their lungs as if they were on the Voice or America's Got Talent. Sometimes the playful giggles among siblings devolves into nitpicking, punching and the inevitable tears, and then, mysteriously, back to laughter again. So you could imagine my incredulousness when the typical raucousness of a family car ride went utterly silent for about 30 seconds, and then resumed again, right where it left off. It was like losing the radio frequency for a short time while going through a tunnel, and then once you emerge on the other side it comes back on again. "What just happened?" Sari and I asked the kids, wondering about the secret to a few precious seconds of blessed silence in the car? As I turned and looked over my shoulder at the kids in the back of the van, they all exhaled, and then gasped for breath. "What's going on?" I asked. "Were you holding your breath?" "Yes, Abba," they explained, "didn't you see, we just passed by a cemetery." Now, I have undergraduate and graduate degrees in Jewish Studies...I spent six years of my life immersed in the full time study of Jewish civilization and sacred texts at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and Jerusalem. By no means do I know everything there is to know, but I thought I was relatively fluent in the major contours of Jewish belief and practice. So I said to them, I'm not familiar with this particular *bubbemeise*. Can you explain it to me? My middle child, bless her heart, told me that she always holds her breath when passing a cemetery because if the dead can't breathe then it's not respectful for us to breathe in their presence. I explained that as a rabbi that would be very hard custom for me to observe, seeing as that part of my job involves officiating at funerals and unveilings. According to my daughter's interpretation of this particular superstition, rabbis have a dispensation due to occupational hazard...oh, and people attending funerals too. But everyone else should hold their breath when passing a cemetery in deference to the inability of the dead to breathe.

I did some cursory research into this *mishegos*, and found that it is not really a Jewish superstition. However it is not altogether inconsistent with the very Jewish idea that certain things we do not do in a cemetery so as not to draw attention to the fact that we are capable of doing things that the dead are not. For example, the Talmud teaches that it is not appropriate to wear tefillin or read Torah in a cemetery, because it is *lo'eg l'rash*, it's considered to be mocking the dead.¹ The Rambam goes so far as to say that if you recite the daily *Sh'ma* or *Amida* in a cemetery, it doesn't count...you haven't properly fulfilled the mitzvah, and you have to repeat it once you leave the cemetery.² Again the idea is that we don't dishonor the dead by performing *mitzvot* that are not related to them while in their presence. *Lo ha'meitim yehallelu yah...*the dead cannot praise You said the Psalmist,³ so we refrain from doing so as well.

I was a little concerned about my kids inhaling and exhaling when I told them this summer that in our travels we would be stopping by a cemetery to visit the graves of some of their ancestors. I warned them that they may want to reconsider holding their breaths just this one time, because we were going to a cemetery where there were a few generations interred, and we were going to spend some time finding their graves and paying our respects. I have to admit that the idea of detouring from a family vacation to go to the cemetery was not exactly what they had in mind. Cemeteries are mysterious, potentially scary places and it wasn't immediately clear why we were voluntarily visiting one. We weren't going to a funeral; it wasn't anyone's yartzheit. We just happened to be in a city where many relatives were buried, and we felt that it was important to pay our respects.

Now there is certainly a Jewish taboo about children in cemeteries. I recall, almost fifteen years ago, when we brought our infant daughter to the cemetery for Sari's grandmother's unveiling. I remember some of the grimaces and glowers of disapproving relatives. How can you bring a baby into the cemetery? It's bad luck! We didn't have much of a choice, and today she's a class president, varsity athlete, and all around great kid...*poo poo poo!* So we pulled into this old cemetery, established in 1892. Over 50,000 people are buried there, including all of Sari's grandparents, and many other relatives as well. It was a positively beautiful day, and a cool

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 18a

² *Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Kriyat Shma* 3:2, *Hilchot Tefillah* 4:8

³ Psalm 115:17

breeze made it especially pleasant as we piled out of the car and began to explore, and search for family gravestones. And then something very special happened. My children and my 6 year old nephew Avi began to ask questions about the people buried there. Who were they? How long did they live? What were they like? They saw couples resting in peace side by side, and inquired about their lives. They tried to decipher the Hebrew on the tombstones, and began to realize that they were named for some of those very same people. They also noticed the piles of rocks and pebbles on top of their great-grandparents' graves. Who put those there, they wondered. We explained this time-honored tradition, and how it accomplished precisely what it was meant to. We were comforted by the evidence that other people had come to pay their respects to our relatives just as we were. And they scoured the grounds for enough rocks so that they could add to their own to the graves of their ancestors.

I'll tell you what did not happen there...First of all, nobody held their breath. And nobody, not for one minute, felt that they were in a scary place, an eerie or morbid place. It didn't seem to occur to them to even be frightened of death itself. Rather, without Sari or me having to say or explain anything, they instinctively knew that the cemetery was a place of peace; a place of honor, and a place of sacred memories.

Many people don't realize that there is actually a *bracha* to be recited when you enter a cemetery, provided you haven't been there in at least 30 days. And it's not a blessing for placing a rock upon the headstone, or washing your hands when leaving, or any other ritual or custom...It is simply a blessing for standing on that hallowed ground. It sounds kind of like a High Holiday prayer with all its references to judgement... It goes as follows: "Praised are you, Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who created you in judgment, Who maintained and sustained you in judgment, and Who brought about death for you in judgment; Who knows the deeds of every one of you in judgment, and Who will hereafter restore you to life in judgment." And then it concludes: *Baruch Atah Adonai, Mechayei ha'metim*. "Praised are You God, who restores life to the dead."⁴

⁴ Lamm, Maurice. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, pp. 246-7

I thought about that prayer, especially that last line, as my kids and my nephew were running from one ancestor's burial place to another's, asking all their questions, placing stones on the monuments, and frolicking among the graves on that beautiful summer afternoon. *Praised are You God, who restores life to the dead.* How remarkable that great-grandchildren have come to pay their respects to their ancestors. Doesn't this very act of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren returning to their graves several decades after their death restore life to dead in some way? Does it not renew their memories and keep them alive in the hearts of people who may not have even known them in this life?

These questions resurfaced just this past weekend, as many of us gathered at the Har Shalom cemeteries, for the annual ritual of visiting the graves of our loved ones during the High Holiday season. I walked from grave to grave with several of you, reciting memorial prayers, listening to you reminisce about your parents, siblings, and spouses, of blessed memory. And again I thought, *Baruch Mechayei Ha'Meitim...* Blessed is the One who restores life to the dead. It occurred to me that the verb *mechayei*, is in the present tense...*Blessed is the One who continually, repeatedly, constantly restores life to the dead.* I do believe that the soul lives on after the body dies, but I do not claim to know what that means. What I do know, is that for those of us who survive the loss of our loved ones, they continue to be alive for us in so many ways, including while standing in the one place in this world where their memory will forever be enshrined.

As I walked from grave to grave at Judean Gardens on Sunday, I took special note of what was written on the monuments. "Beloved husband, father, grandfather." I saw symbols of people's professions like the caduceus...the two snakes wrapped around the staff that represents the field of medicine. I saw the pair of hands representing *kohanim*, the laver and basin that is traditional for *levi'im*; I saw images of musical instruments, books, stars of David, candelabras...and I thought, 'How would I be remembered?' What would be written on my *matzeiva*, my tombstone, so that someday when my great-grandchildren God-willing come to visit my grave they will get a sense of my values, the kind of life I strived to live, what I stood for and cared most about. I think this is part of the reason for going to a gravesite at this time of year. It's not only to pay our respects at the beginning of a new year or to ask the dead for forgiveness. I

believe that at the very time that we are engaging in self-examination and self-scrutiny; when we are asking ourselves what kind of life do I aspire to in this new year, that coming to terms with our own mortality should jolt us into thinking about the kind of legacy we want to leave in this world when we are no longer physically here. After all that's why we are fasting today, depriving ourselves of food and water and bathing, wearing white like shrouds...Yom Kippur is a stark reminder of our mortality, that we cannot live forever, and that this is the time, right now, today to set the best course for our lives, at least for the coming year. I know what I hope my headstone will say about me...but hoping is not enough. I have to live those values every single day.

The Talmud says that this world is like a wedding: *Hai alma ke-bei hilula damya*...This world is like a wedding,⁵ where two souls are united, and together they bear the seed of the future. Eventually the two partners pass on, but the seed of life continues to grow and germinate, and life conquers death. As we turn in just a moment to the Yizkor service, it is this power that we connect with: If life conquers death, then our loved ones have never really left us. We are the seeds, the saplings of their lives, and their life-force continues to pulse through our hearts and our souls. *Brauch Atah Adonai, Mechayei Ha'Meitim*...Praised are You God, Who continually restores life to the dead and makes it possible for us to never, ever lose them.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54a