

Shavuot Wind Telephone
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(opening taken from Atlas Obscura Article)

“When Itaru Sasaki Lost his cousin in 2010, he decided to build a glass-paneled phone booth in his hilltop garden with a disconnected rotary phone inside for communicating with his lost relative, to help him deal with his grief.

Only a year later, Japan faced the horrors of a triple disaster: an earthquake followed by a tsunami, which caused a nuclear meltdown. Sasaki’s coastal hometown of Otsuchi was hit with 30-foot waves. Ten percent of the town died in the flood.

Sasaki opened his “wind phone” to the now huge number of people in the community mourning the loss of loved ones. Eventually word spread and others experiencing grief made the pilgrimage from around the country. It is believed that 10,000 visitors journeyed to this hilltop outside Otsuchi within three years of the disaster.

The phone is, of course, meant as a one-way communication. Visitors dial in their relative’s number and catch them up on their current life or express the feelings necessary to move on. Some find comfort in the hope that their relative might hear them. As the residents of Otsuchi faced the slow progress of rebuilding their city, this little phone booth has helped to slowly rebuild their own lives as well.”

I don’t know about you, but I’ll never forget the last phone call, the last two-way conversation I had with my mother of blessed memory. She was upset about something that had happened at work. I told her I loved her. Reassured her. That the people at work didn’t know what a gem they had. Daniel, she said, I have to get off the phone. You’re making me cry before I walk into the Wawa.

My mother passed away a week or so later. There was no opportunity to have another two-way conversation. Thank God, I told myself at her funeral, I had said what I had really felt. I didn’t tell her I was too busy and had to get off the phone. Or that I had other matters to attend to. I felt I had been present for that last phone call.

Yet over the years that I have encountered death in my everyday life, I think about all of the people who never had an opportunity for that last conversation, and in particular the times in which we live right now. There’s no greater sense of sadness than words that are left unsaid. Here’s a secret no one will tell you: to have a death where your family is at your bedside singing your favorite melody, holding your hand, is a rarity: if it happens at all.

Yet even for those of us who were able to have those final conversations and to have a sense of peace at the death of our loved ones, there are still so many conversations that we would like to still have. A few years ago, out of sheer curiosity, I called my mother’s phone number. The operator said it was disconnected. Boy, what an appropriate metaphor, for my feelings at that moment. Disconnected. If I could, I would tell my mother about her grandchildren and how they are thriving. I would want her that our family is healthy. I want to play Jewish geography and tell her about someone I met in Georgia

who is somehow connected to her. I want to hear her complain about how she can't figure out Zoom, but then when she finally did after playing with fakakta computer, to see her face once again. And yes, I'd want to kvetch to her that there is no Wawa in Georgia, and how I've had to make my peace by settling for a far inferior QT.

For some, the idea of a wind telephone to talk to our loved ones in the afterlife might seem peculiar. A little macabre even. A little spiritualist. But there are moments where after reading that article, I thought to myself, if I could get on a plane to Tokyo tomorrow and take a nine-hour drive to Ostuchi, I would.

Until I realized that as a Jew, that we don't need a telephone, although if it helps, you can certainly take out your cell phone and pretend. Because we have a space for connecting with our loved ones. It's a direct call. It's called the Yizkor service.

The first time I led a Yizkor service, I'll never forget when an older woman came to me and said, Rabbi that was lovely service, but you didn't leave enough time at Yizkor. I thought about it for a while. I hadn't lost my mother yet. Sitting in an awkward pause for three minutes seemed like a lot of time. But then a few years later I realized, that when you are having a one-way conversation, when there are so many words that have been left unsaid, it never seems like it's enough time.

A friend once told me that she goes to the cemetery each week to talk to her husband. It's now been a decade since his passing. But she finds it therapeutic to have that one-way conversation. She tells him about what she is doing, about their grandchildren, much like they did every night that they spent in bed debriefing with one another. It gives her a sense of peace.

As we begin the Yizkor service, I am reminded that God is called Elohai HaRuchot, the God who is the master of the wind. Why? You might think it's because when we come to Yizkor, we are reminded that we are given the opportunity to talk into a Wind Phone. But it's also because the same word in Hebrew for spirit, ruach, is the same word for wind. This is hardly by accident. Because those of us who have been outside and felt a summer's breeze in an otherwise brutal Atlanta sun experience a brief moment of divinity. As we feel the wind brush by, we may even feel like we've encountered the spirit of our loved ones passing by. Perhaps, if we listen carefully, that wind may carry some passing message for us, if we are willing to listen.

This Yizkor, I want to encourage you to pick up the phone (but don't use it) and make that one-way call. Have that conversation with the wind.

There is no question it will be disappointing. There will never be enough time. But you're not just spitting into the wind. Jewish tradition teaches us that someone is listening. Yizkor: You're pouring out your heart, listening, and moving forward.