

**Transcending the Physical:  
On the Loss of Aunt Marilyn's Wedding Ring  
Yizkor Sermon 5779  
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Glen Rock Jewish Center  
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It was the winter of 2010, nearly 8 years ago. I was on vacation when I received a phone call from my cousin. “Did you hear the bad news?” he asked. “No, what bad news?” I replied. “About Aunt Marilyn. She died.” “She what? What happened?” “Well, apparently, she was diagnosed with cancer and she didn’t tell anyone.” I thought to myself that this sounded like Aunt Marilyn.

Aunt Marilyn was technically my father’s aunt, by marriage, so my “Great-Aunt.” She had no children of her own, so when she married Great-Uncle Joe, my father and uncle sort of became like sons to her, which meant I was kinda like her granddaughter. Aunt Marilyn lived in mid-town Manhattan, on the east side, so when I was studying in rabbinical school in the city, we reconnected. Aunt Marilyn always wore the largest glasses or sunglasses that I have ever seen. Her hair was also pretty large, as well as her nails. When she dialed a phone – whether an old rotary phone or a touch tone phone, she used a pen or a pencil. God forbid she break her nails. I say all of this by way of introducing the fact that she was the most vane woman I have ever met. She had no qualms whatsoever telling me after looking at my engagement pictures at my then-ripe old age of 28 – that I needed to get a Botox treatment. I began asking some logistical questions of my cousin, thinking of course that I would officiate at the funeral.

“So when’s the funeral?” I asked. “Um, it was about four weeks ago,” my cousin responded. “Well, what do you mean – four weeks ago?” “I mean...it was four weeks ago. “You mean, we weren’t invited, we weren’t even there?” “Nope, you know Aunt Marilyn. She probably wouldn’t want anyone knowing that she was in a vulnerable state. I think if you call her phone number, it will route you to the executor of her estate.”

And so I did. I was connected with a man named Stuart. I had no idea who Stuart was, nor had I ever heard of him, which surprised me, because I had just spent some time with Aunt Marilyn in the months leading up to her death. Stuart lived in Chelsey in Manhattan and he was thrilled to receive my phone call. He said he was hoping that someone would call because he had saved some of her belongings: old photos, Uncle Joe’s POW medals, among a few other things. I told him I wasn’t interested in her money – she had already told me months ago – before her diagnosis – that she was going to donate all of her money to three Jewish charities. Mainly, I called because I thought she must have so many family pictures – and without having children – I wanted to see that those pictures remained in the family.

So I met up with Stuart in his beautiful Chelsey apartment. And he greeted me with a strange looking object, a vessel. “Your aunt’s ashes,” he said to me. I think I turned ghostly white before I noticed a smile on his face and realized he was actually joking. He explained to me how they met; he

confirmed that her money was in fact going to those three Jewish charities she had shared with me months prior, and then he began to bring out all of her stuff. Fur coats, scarves, some tacky sequined but very-Aunt Marilyn leather moccasins, old photo albums and so much more. And then he came out with something very small in his hand.

“This is your Aunt Marilyn’s wedding band. She wanted to be buried with it, but the rabbi wouldn’t let her. Would you like it?”

Would I like it? I thought to myself. I would love it. I would be so honored. And from that point forward, I promised I would wear it every day and I would think of Aunt Marilyn every time I looked at it. And I would be reminded of her stories and her crazy vane ways. I was so humbled that in lieu of the children she never had, that I would be the one to receive something that was so precious to her that she wanted to be buried with it. She was so madly in love with Uncle Joe, that I know this ring was so special to her. Wearing it in her grave, I could only imagine, was a way of bringing a piece of Uncle Joe with her. I humbly accepted the ring. And I wore that ring every single day. I wore it on my right hand, so people would not be confused that it was my own wedding band. And the only finger that it would fit on was my middle finger. But I didn’t care. There was no way I was going to alter her ring. I would keep it intact forever. Until about 6 weeks ago...

Our Torah portion that we read this morning might be considered strange to some. You might even think it’s barbaric. As I mentioned earlier it describes the ritual process of sin purification conducted by Aaron, the High Priest. Aaron is asked to sacrifice a bull to atone for himself and his household. He also sacrifices one goat as a sin offering for the people. Blood from these animals is sprinkled all over the curtains and the covers to the Tent of Meeting. In addition, Aaron places his hands upon a second goat – as if to place all of the sins of the Israelite people on the goat, and then the goat is sent off into the wilderness. Now tell me, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what is the value in reading these ancient stories? Just what is the importance of these offerings, these bloody sacrifices, these ancient rituals?

Remember the tsunami in Japan in 2011? This devastating tragedy killed over 19,000 people with thousands of others still missing. That’s six times as many people as those who died in 9/11. Many are still without homes. One town that was completely wiped out is the town of Otsuchi. A year before the tsunami hit, there was a man named Itaru Sasaki who was dealing with the loss of his cousin in this town. He was having a hard time grieving and so he came up with a way of coping with his loss. He went out and bought one of those old-fashioned telephone booths, you know, the ones that look like they are from England. It had an old rotary phone in it, which connected to...nothing. Itaru decided to put this telephone booth in his garden at his home and whenever he felt sad about missing his cousin, he would go into his telephone booth and call his cousin on the phone. Well, word spread about this telephone booth and after the tsunami, people from all over Japan would come and cope through their loss by communicating with their loved ones vis-à-vis this telephone that did not even work.

You think that’s a little off?

What about the person who shared with me how he put a cell phone in the coffin with the body of his loved one - just so they could call him? Could you imagine walking by his grave and hearing a cell phone ringing from the ground? There are plenty of people who want to put other items in the coffin with their loved one – golf clubs and football jerseys, favorite foods and baseball cards. Similarly, recently, I've noticed an increase in the number of testimonials and messages that people put on the Facebook page of someone after they die, writing to them, as if they are still here. Traditionally, Judaism does not support putting items in a coffin, for we are meant to return to the earth as we came into the world, pure and with no earthly possessions. We also feel that doing things like this is a way of ignoring our loss, as it's a way of treating the person as if they were still alive. At the same time, I see how doing things like this might bring people comfort. But nonetheless, I ask you, my friends, are these behaviors that much different than the ritual of the two goats?

It was August 2<sup>nd</sup> of this past summer. I was asked by Hilarie Kay, the director of our Nursery School, to twirl baton for the campers during their carnival day. "Fire, or no fire?" I asked Hilarie. And she laughed. I think by now most of you know that I do twirl fire batons. If you didn't know, please join us on December 8<sup>th</sup> for our Chanukah "Light Up the Night" celebration for my third annual fire-twirling routine. So anyway, I agreed to twirl fire and I got ready the way that I always do. Tried to wear all-black, just in case I singed my clothing. I put on my sneakers, my hair up in a ponytail. You know, typical baton-twirling rabbi attire. I took some lighter fluid, doused my batons in them, brought a plastic kiddie bucket of water, just in case. And then, before I began, I realized that I was still wearing Aunt Marilyn's gold wedding band. It's difficult to twirl with rings on my fingers. So I took it off and I put on the ground, right next to all of my other stuff. And I began twirling for the campers. I twirled one baton, a flag baton, juggled two batons, before I lit one, and then two of those flaming fire batons. And after a round of applause, I collected my things and went on with my day.

I had a coffee meeting with someone later that day. And in the middle of my coffee date, the person started talking about jewelry, and instantly, I looked down at my finger and remembered that I hadn't picked up Aunt Marilyn's wedding band. It was somewhere in the shul parking lot. I thought about calling Michelle in the office, then I figured...come on, what are the odds that it's gone? It's small, but it's got to be there somewhere.

So when I got back to shul, I searched the parking lot high and low. It was pouring rain. I walked all over every inch of the area where I twirled earlier that day – and then some. I retraced my footsteps. I searched the periphery of the parking lot. I moved the barricades to see if it was under them. Nothing. People heard of the news and they started searching with me...up and down, back and forth. Hilarie even sent out an email to the campers' parents saying: "we know it's a long shot but one of our parents lost a gold wedding band, so if you could please check your tires to see if it got stuck in there, we would appreciate it. Yes; that parent was me. It rained for days after that. There I was, standing outside with an umbrella, pacing back and forth. At some point, I had to call it a day – a night – and then a weekend.

I came home and as soon as I approached the steps to my door, I burst into tears. This ring meant so much to this woman and I, I just lost it in the parking lot – while twirling flaming batons? I felt so guilty, I felt so irresponsible. I felt so disappointed in myself.

“Why are you upset, Mommy?” my daughter asked me.

“Because I lost a very special ring, Aunt Marilyn’s wedding ring.”

“Well, Mommy, the good news is that at least it’s not your wedding ring.” (I’m divorced).  
Kids!

I am going to guess I’m not the only one in the room who feels a special connection with someone who has passed vis-à-vis a physical object or family heirloom that once belonged to them or one perhaps that they gave to us.

What is the value in reading these ancient stories? Just what is the importance of these offerings, these bloody sacrifices, these ancient rituals?

These ancient sacrificial rituals mean nothing if we don’t begin to find what it is that we gain from these rituals and my friends, I really don’t think that they are so far off from how we continue to connect with our departed loved ones today.

Ancient sacrificial rituals were a way of transforming the physical into the spiritual. They provided us with a physical, visible manifestation of acknowledging our sins and emotionally moving beyond them. And when it comes to our loved ones who have passed, so too, the physical acts, the tangible objects become ways of connecting with their spirits, with their souls.

That is why people from around Japan came to Itaru Sasaki’s telephone booth.

That is why people want to put physical objects in the graves with their loved ones.

That is why I was so sad that I lost Aunt Marilyn’s wedding ring.

Let’s be honest, there is still a part of me that would love to find it. Who knows? Maybe I will recruit some help in getting a metal detector out there and searching for this gold band. And if not, perhaps the irony is that Aunt Marilyn’s ring gets buried after all. Not exactly where she wanted it, but somewhere back in nature, in the winds and depths of the earth, in the ebbs and flows of nature.

But at some point, I must say, I had to move on with my life after that rainy week in August when Aunt Marilyn’s ring was swallowed up in Glen Rock Jewish Center’s parking lot. What gave me the strength to move on? To just forget it?

I instantly thought about the Minimalists, those people in society who are downgrading their homes, living in tiny spaces, moving out of McMansions and choosing a different life – the life of experiences over possessions, the life without clutter, the life whereby the spiritual and experiential supercedes the physical, the life, the lift of freedom.

I also thought about the Holocaust, how much this generation lost and how many of them had no physical reminder at all of their loved ones. But there was still an intimate, deep, spiritual connection.

And I now think to myself about these people suffering from Hurricane Florence, many missing their belongings – when you go through something like that – your lives, your loved ones are all that matter.

I said to myself: “It’s just a ring. And if I really needed this ring to keep the spirit of Aunt Marilyn alive then there was something very, very wrong.” And as I looked down at my bare finger, I realized that the promise I made to wear it every day needed to be altered. The promise, I thought to myself, should have always been, a promise to keep her memory alive. This, I can do, even without her ring.

As you might have noticed, we don’t need these ancient sacrificial rituals to send off our sins into the wilderness. Instead, we come together to offer the sacrifices of our hearts, the pouring out of our souls, as we examine the innermost secrets of our sins. We don’t need telephone booths, or cell phones or sports jerseys or golf clubs to connect with our loved ones when we have memories and time and space.

Later this afternoon, we will recite our Yizkor prayers. Yizkor provide us with moments to connect with our loved ones, to talk with our loved ones, to share with our loved ones what has been going on in our lives. We need nothing physical to do this. Only time and an open heart.

Gmar chatimah tovah.