

*Thin Border – Yom Kippur Yizkor*  
*September 28, 2020 – 10 Tishrei 5781*  
*Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester*  
*Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith*

The border between the living and the dead is so much thinner than we acknowledge. Those who traverse the valley of the shadow know this. How can they not? Everywhere they look they see their loved one, they hear their loved one. On restaurant signs and license plates, in bits of dialogue they overhear on the street and in snippets of song caught from a passing radio. Reliving conversations and moments and favorite jokes or favorite foods. Oh the food – a whiff from a window can bring back the memory of family meals cooked just so – for better or for worse. Friends call it memories or reminders, but those who walk the valley of the shadow know it as something more, a connection, a link to their loved one so much stronger than mere memory.

We feel the urge to pick up the phone, to share a bit of news, to send a picture of a grandchild's steps, to just say hello or I love you. It's a feeling like a phantom limb, a piece of us no longer there but still able to cause pain or joy or just an itch, an itch we cannot scratch. And so, we narrow that border between the living and the dead and we speak. We stand at the kitchen sink, sit in our car, walk down the street, lie in bed, and we talk. Out loud we share with our dearly departed the news and stories and ideas that come to us, that come to us for them. In ways casual and serious, in quick asides and long monologues, we package our love in words and send it from this world to the next.

Psychologists and grief counselors no doubt of have terms for this. Scientific jargon, diagnoses and scales from normal to questionable to worrisome. But those in the valley of the shadow – even those who know the science and the terms and the measurements – those in the valley feel the connection with their loved ones in ways that transcend the therapist's couch. And what a powerful feeling. Love, after all, can never die. And not just love, but relationships healthy and troubled stay with us long after the other person is gone. And so, it is no wonder that we go on loving and feeling and interacting once our loved ones and close relations have left this world for whatever comes next. It sustains the living from a place of spirit and mystery and that which we cannot exactly name.

If the connection lives only in our mind, so be it. But like that phantom limb, it feels disembodied. Our mind – perhaps our spirit – experiences these moments of connection as though they come from without. As though they come from beyond the thin membrane separating this world from whatever comes next. It is a balm, a promise of some sort of eternity for our loved ones and, one day, for us. Whether supernatural or psychological, let us accept this gift. It is really miraculous, the ways our minds and spirits provide a place for our loved ones to go on living long after they have taken their last breath. We need only accept the gift, allow ourselves to accept the greeting from our grandfather when we see his name on the restaurant awning, to feel the embrace of grandma when we smell her cooking while making our own children grilled cheese or noodle kugel or tomato soup.

We always do well to accept the condolences of family and friends. To hear their stories and accept their love. We would do well too, tending to that part of our soul, our psyche, our heart, in which our dearly departed reside. By giving it voice and light and love we will feel our loved ones with us, we will hear their counsel and rebuke, we will laugh together at jokes, we will share our favorite recipes, our failures and our successes. We will narrow the border between the living and the dead to reveal a world of comfort that transcends memory and brings us spirit and love.

Zichronam Livracha  
May they're memory be a blessing