

There is a paradox in the celebration of Shavuot. The holiday celebrates the majesty of Sinai. Soon after emerging from slavery and crossing the sea to freedom - the people are bamidbar - in the wilderness. Sinai is the genesis of a new nation and this community of weary wanderers needs a moment of faith. That moment comes at the foot of a non-descript mountain someplace in the Wilderness.

The Torah reads: "Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for Adonai had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder."

At Sinai, we felt God's presence - the shofar, the thunder, the smoke, the clouds and the sacred commandments placed upon the people. There at Sinai we received the Torah, The Promised Land, the laws and precepts that would guide us until today.

The paradox of Shavuot is that each of one of those people - at least each of the adults who stood at the foot of Sinai - would not cross the Jordan River. They would not enter the sacred land promised to Moses that day. They would die in the wilderness. Yes, their children would enter the land, freed from the burdens of slavery, but for those of the Sinai Generation the promised land remained elusive. All they could do was to bring closer to their own unfulfilled dream the descendants who came after.

As true as it was for the wanderers at Sinai, so it is true for us. Death will come, we will not live forever. As Rabbi Peter Rubenstein writes: "As was true for our ancestors, all of us has had an unattained promised land in life: one more fulfillment or cherished moment, one more celebration or accomplishment that always and forever remains just beyond our reach, never to be achieved or attained. We cannot have it all before we are called home."

What we do have is memory and legacy. The legacy of the Sinai generation continues to guide us - each of us brings stories, lives and legacies just as powerful to this sacred moment of memory as well. Parents and partners,

siblings and children, near and distant relatives, friends, mentors and teachers who bring us comfort and inspiration to this day.

Some come to this Yizkor with raw emotions. Some of us are new to this morning experience. We observe Yizkor in the midst of a recent death and less than a year of mourning. The wound is raw, the grief almost unbearable. Some of us have spent the year alone - missing a loved one lost to this strange and cruel disease. Others are more practiced at the custom, yet remembering the sadness of loss experienced years ago. All of us keep a promise with our departed, gathering them to us as we march forward in our lives. We are not alone. They are not alone.

Even Moses does not reach the promised land. We know he dies in Moab. Our Midrash teaches that Moses, who at 120 is healthy and vibrant, pleads with God to allow him to enter the land of Israel. God responds to Moses "such is the decree that has gone forth from my presence." Moses tries another tactic, he bargains with God to allow him to become a bird or an animal and see the return of Israel as a different vessel. God does not relent.

Moses, yearning for entrance into the land, appeals for help from the elements and visits the heaven and earth and the sun and moon and the stars and the planets and the mountains and the hills and the sea. However, he is unsuccessful with the elements.

Desperate, Moses goes directly to the angels and asks "Entreat mercy on my behalf, that I do not die" The angels respond to Moses that his fate is sealed as "I have heard from behind the curtain above - that your prayer in the matter will not be heard."

Moses is distraught, God will not give in, Moses will not complete his journey, his fate is sealed. Seeing his distress God comforts Moses, saying: "Fear not, I myself will attend you and your burial." So, God wept and so did the heavens and the earth and God says, as we read at the end of the Torah, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses. And at that moment ... God kisses Moses and with the kiss takes his soul

God's kiss to Moses is a remarkable act of love. It's also a kiss of memory and legacy. The kiss we want to give to our loved ones - the ones we hold always. It's a kiss that says, you matter to me, you remain with me. Our presence at Yizkor today is that divine kiss. The words of the wonderful poet Mary Oliver:

Every summer I gather a few stones from the beach and keep them in a glass bowl. Now and again I cover them with water, and they drink. There's no question about this; I put tinfoil over the bowl, tightly, yet the water disappears. This doesn't mean we ever have a conversation, or that they have the kind of feelings we do, yet it might mean something. Whatever the stones are, they don't lie in the water and do nothing.

Some of my friends refuse to believe it happens, even though they've seen it. But a few others—I've seen them walking down the beach holding a few stones, and they look at them rather more closely now. Once in a while, I swear, I've even heard one or two of them saying "Hello." Which, I think, does no harm to anyone or anything, does it?