

Yom Kippur 5781

With thanks to Rabbi Ita Paskind

The French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre was sitting at a café table working. A waiter approached him: 'Can I get you something to drink, Monsieur Sartre?' he asked.

'Yes, I'd like a cup of coffee with sugar, but no cream', the philosopher replied. A few minutes later, however, the waiter returned and said, 'I'm sorry, Monsieur Sartre, we are all out of cream — how about with no milk?'

Apologies for a coffee joke on Yom Kippur. The humor of the joke is that Sartre didn't want any cream, yet the waiter understood him as desiring the absence of something.

The waiter, realized, as do we, that something can only be absent if it exists, but just isn't there. We only miss things that exist, whether they existed in the past, but not anymore, whether they exist now but are not right here, or whether they may exist in some future, but not yet. And because we all exist--even separated by so much distance these days--we are missed. Our absence, and the absence of our family and friends, is palpable.

In the solitude of our homes, it's easy to feel that *we* are absent from the action, that we're attending services *without* our community, and perhaps that nobody at all notices us.

Our tradition is full of instances of absence, from Abel's disappearance, (spoiler alert: God knew exactly what his brother Cain did to him), to the absence of new life from the families of our earliest matriarchs and patriarchs, to Moshe's absence from the Israelite camp while he received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and the Golden Calf ensued.

Yom Kippur itself focuses our awareness on absence--our own. The Haftarah we read earlier notes our disengagement from the real work of the world--feeding the hungry, clothing the naked--while we, perhaps selfishly, focus on our own inner lives. But this one day, we do absent ourselves from the regular doings of the world, imagining the world without us. And fasting and dressing in burial shroud-like white reinforce that this is all a rehearsal for our own final absenting--a taste of the world without us. It may be disconcerting to think about, but if that's not an impetus for making the most of our time on this earth, I don't know what is.

And then there's Jonah, the prophet whose biblical book serves as our Haftarah this afternoon. Jonah is called to the sinful city of Nineveh to convince them to repent of their evil ways. But rather than heed God's call, Jonah flees, absenting himself. And then, when the ship that he's on is tossed by a storm, Jonah tries to absent himself from the ship, and from the world, by being thrown overboard.

These last seven months have been one big lesson in noticing absence. We've had to skip, postpone, or overhaul life cycle celebrations... birthdays, anniversaries, b'nai mitzvah. I especially know about that. So many of us have had to navigate illness or mourning a loved one without the comfort of our people in person. We've had to modify the way we engage with social movements and politics, making sure we remain safe and healthy even as we stand up for our values. And then there's school, activities, work collaborations, plans with friends, travel, and the list simply keeps going. These absences are real, and their effect on us is cumulative. Each of us has responded to these disappointments in our own unique way, but we are united in our acute awareness of absence, our own and that of others.

And we know how crucial physical presence is. The starting place for how we experience the world and our connection with others is physical; before children have language, they have touch.

But as we mature, we become aware of emotional, spiritual and social connections. But to such a large extent, these non-physical connections are grounded, enabled and facilitated by our physicality, our presence, our embodiedness.

Absent that embodied connection, it's literally like our knees are kicked out from underneath us, and we collapse.

Rabbinic Judaism, that is, Judaism as we know it, is one big response to absence. God was present in the Temple, and then upon the Temple's destruction, God and we were absent from each other. When sacrifices ceased nineteen hundred and fifty years ago, we lost the physical way we had of communicating, of communing, with God. Prayer is the way we have tried to compensate, with words, with the sacrifice of the heart. And we've tried to convince ourselves that it's better. Animal sacrifice was a more primitive way of worshiping God that was necessary in its time; but prayer is a more sophisticated, evolved way, argued Maimonides. God really wants our hearts, not our sacrifices, we tell ourselves.

Sacrificing animals to God was a messy way of being in relationship. And frankly, us gathering in person is messy. Germs, so many sounds, spills, odors, touches... and then all the food, the cleaning up.

But if I knew that God would for real be present, in some tangible way I could be sure of, different than God is present or not right now, I'd be the first on line to sacrifice that goat.

And regardless of all the messiness of physical human interaction, the moment you feel it's safe to be around others, you're going out, you're getting together with people, right? Because physical presence means so much.

So what do we do while we're waiting?

I want to suggest three possibilities, that really come from Jewish responses to God's absence from our world. They are speaking, listening, and working.

First, speaking. In Jewish tradition, prayer substituted for sacrifice. We came to become experts at using words to communicate to God our praise, our needs, our thanksgiving, our thoughts. We have such rich and precise liturgy. And the melodies for those words is particular.

What if we redoubled our efforts to be careful in our speech--to be as careful in our speech to people as we are to God? When we can't use tone of voice, or facial expressions or gestures, we have to attend to the words we use even more. Even if we are on the phone or Zoom, so much nonverbal information is lost. And don't get me started on emojis. In epistolary romances, the long-distance letter-writing relationships of yore, every word was carefully chosen to build and strengthen a relationship. Our words matter so much now, so much more now. Because they are all we have.

Now, listening, or really, noticing. With God's withdrawing or absenting Godself from us, we are so attentive to whispers of God, rumors of God. We speak of moments when we sense God's fleeting presence. We're always hunting for hints of God, so attentive and attuned to what God may be up to. We try mightily to discern God's hand and presence in our lives, in history, in strange intuitions or coincidences, in the majesty of a mountain or the intimacy with an infant.

What if we did that for each other--listening and reading and noticing so attentively and without multitasking, as if that was the most important thing we could be doing at that moment? Really paying attention to the tone of voice and facial expressions that we have to work to notice on the phone or Zoom. Meditation, for some, is a way of sensing God. But it can also, we know, help make us more attuned to other people, and indeed, to ourselves.

And finally, work. We may not have God present in our world, but we have God's image--the human being. And there is so much work to do to care for the beings that are the image of God. Even if we don't pray or seek God, there are still the *mitzvot bein adam l'chaveiro*, the commandments regarding interpersonal interactions. Creating a world infused with kindness and justice, *chesed v'tzedek*--this work takes no vacations while God is absent, nor while we're physically distanced.

This is all to say, we have a lot we can be doing while we're absent. And when we do come back together, imagine how much better we could be at speaking to each other, at listening to each other, and at caring for each other.

In a few moments we'll begin Yizkor, when we remember those who are no longer present in our world. Some of them we miss terribly; others were absent from us before they left this world; and there are yet others whose absence is in some sense a relief. But we only experience their absence because they were at one time present. So we take these moments to notice their absence, the space left in our world, in our lives by them.

We form words--the words we'd share with them if we could.

We listen for and hear the echoes of their lives and their voices, in and around us.

And we dedicate ourselves to work--to keep working on the sacred tasks inspired by their lives.