

The Subjunctive
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Yizkor – 5778

This moment, dedicated to remembering also has another purpose. In subtle ways, our loved ones are expressed in our everyday. But, today, we honor their memories as we consider what life has meant in their absence. Their impact becomes fully understood sometimes only years after they are gone.

In 1975, Phuc Tran was a child living in South Vietnam with his family who trying desperately to escape to safety in America. The night they were scheduled to leave, they found themselves waiting to board a bus with all the possessions they could carry. In a twist of fate, young Tran began to throw a temper tantrum – really, he says it was more of a meltdown of epic proportions. It was so bad that the family could not possibly board that bus and decided to calm their young son down and take the next bus. As they watched that bus pull away just a short distance, they saw it attacked by artillery fire – all on board were killed. It’s hard for Tran not to look at his life and to imagine all that would have been different if they’d been on that bus.

In Vietnam, Tran’s father was an aspiring young politician with a promising career ahead of him. The escape was harrowing but, once they were safe in America, the hard part began. The only job he could find was driving a cement truck. He might have felt pangs about the life that didn’t happen for him but he lacked the language to ask what might have been. This isn’t meant as a comment about the emotionally shallow nature of Tran’s father. Instead, it is a literal observation about the Vietnamese language.

Tran remembers the time that he said to his dad, “It’s too bad it rained, we would have gone to the beach.” And his father responded with, “that’s stupid. Why do you want to talk about something that didn’t happen?” He goes on to muse that his native Vietnamese tongue contains no version of the subjunctive. His father never dwelt on what could’ve been, for better or worse. He never pined that he should have held

security and status as a lawyer and politician back in Saigon. Instead, he did what he had to do to support his family in America.

Tran remembers the day he came home from school and announced his intentions to drop out of his course of study in ancient Greek. Afraid of his father's reaction, he was surprised to only hear his dad say to him, quite simply, "Then, what DO you want to do?" Tran went on to craft joyful work for himself as an instructor in the Classics as well as a tattoo artist.

I'm sure there is a lot to consider about Tran's father – there is a linguistic element and of course there is also an individual's personality to factor in but, let's consider what it would mean if we lived our lives without the Subjunctive – without looking at the "would haves" and the "could haves" and the "should haves". It is possible that, if we did not have the capacity to look backward, we might enjoy *some* measure of protection from the bitterness of regret, but it would also shield us from the potential of learning and growing. After all, the question of what could have been springs from the same place in our soul that allows us to ask what could *yet* be. Isn't *that* the stuff of dreamers and visionaries? It's what gets people out of Vietnam. It is what impels us to look for better jobs, or to start a new chapter of our lives. We seek better ways and move toward them.¹

When we look back at and remember our loved ones, we cannot help but imagine how it might have been different. What if we had said the words that we wish we had? What if he/she had been capable of different behavior? What would they think of me today? Our loved ones are gone but we are not without their influence. These questions are precisely the way that they continue to provide insights. They still speak to us – we simply need to listen differently. Many of you will remember the words commonly spoken at funerals and houses of mourning: "Thus, even in their absence our loved ones inspire us to live, as they themselves wished to live in their higher moments."

¹ Based on the TED Talk of Phuc Tran. <https://holisticwayfarer.com/2016/01/19/the-path-you-might-have-taken/>

There is a wonderful conversation amongst our rabbis through the ages about a few seemingly unnecessary words in the Torah. In Genesis, we read that “Jacob left Be’er Sheva and set out for Haran”² We already knew where he was, we only needed to know where he was headed. Saying he left appears to be superfluous. But Rashi explains that we need to emphasize his departure because “when a good man departs from any place it makes an impression. For during the time that the righteous person is in the city he constitutes its glory, he is its splendor, he is its crown; but when he departs from there, there departs its glory, there departs its splendor, there departs its crown”³ In other words, when the man was in the city, he made it great. Once the man leaves the place, the city needs to find a new way of expressing its greatness.

And, when that great man, woman or child left our presence, we found ourselves in the *גיא צלמות* *G’eh Tzalmavet* - Valley of the Shadow of Death, did we not? My new rabbis’ manual translates that in poetic Hebrew as the “Valley of Deepest Darkness.” And as we look back, we realize that the word “valley” is a good metaphor for how our emotional experience has looked. That was a deep dark place for good reason – the bottom of the deepest valleys are all but hidden from the light of the sun. But, once we began to tackle the incline of the sides we were headed up. Our emotions found that recovery to sometimes be a gentle slope and at other times like trying scale the side of a rock wall. But, today we see that we’ve spent time at plateaus along the route. Each time the terrain of our life flattens out for a bit, we can appreciate that we’re standing in the splendor of the sun light.

And, so there it is – the city that shone with splendor when the great man was there shines once again. So too, you and I. Life was splendorous with them and it has had its moments of splendor again. Or, if you admit that there is not enough splendor, what can you do to capture a bit more of it – is that not what your loved one would have wished for you?

² Genesis 28:10.

³ Rashi on Gen 28:10. And Torah Gems, p.224.

You know, those moments closest to death are risky for the living. You can probably think of people who were sucked in and drowned by their loss and their mourning. They were never quite the same – and who can really blame them. But that is not what Judaism would hope for from us. Ideally, we are meant to pause, to appreciate the power and significance of our loss. And then, through the mechanisms of our tradition, we are eased back in to the world. Little by little – but surely enough – we take back on the trappings of our new normal and re-enter the world of the living. And then, every so often – with candles lit in front of us, we are given permission to re-open the well of emotions. We're allowed to fully taste again that mourning which we've never lost but just learned to live with. And, these moments of depth are also meant to show us just how high we were yesterday and how high we'll be again in day or two or three. Most of the time, we stand way up there, on the peaks. Thank you, to our beloved dead for giving us a reason to visit you for moments here in the valley. And, thanks to you, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me.

I'd like to read some names now and you'll understand that, for every one of these souls, there are so many whose lives were touched by splendor when these folks were alive.

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Turn now to page 598 and rise – if you're able – for the prayer known as *El Malei Rachamim* - as we ask this ever loving and compassionate God to keep our loved ones in splendor – caring for them, ensuring that their soul remains bound up with mine and, while you're at it, God, would it be too much to ask that you assure them that we are OK...we know that would allow their souls to rest easily.