

The Wind Phone
Cantor Micah Morgovsky – Yizkor 5784

“Listen to the sounds around you carefully when you talk in your heart into The Phone of the Wind.”¹

For my birthday this past winter, my husband, Ben, handed me a small, unassuming book called “The Phone Booth at the Edge of the World” and said to me simply: for your Yizkor sermon. How lucky am I to have a partner who anticipates my needs before I know them myself?

It wasn’t until months later that I truly understood the gift I had been given. This summer, after a year of personal upheaval and turmoil, I finally had the opportunity to sit down and begin reading the quiet little book covered in pink cherry blossoms. It is a love story, a work of fiction, but based on an actual place and real events. It is a story about love and loss and the strength and connection that blooms from fragility and vulnerability.

We are here today, fragile and vulnerable. We are broken and we weep for the cracks in our hearts. We sit in this space together because we seek a salve for the wound of our losses. Some of our loved ones have been gone for decades, some more recently departed. Some died at a ripe old age and some were taken from us far too soon. For some, the memories are sweet and uncomplicated and for others, fraught with struggle and challenge. But, whatever our relationship was with them in life, we are here today hoping to somehow sit a bit closer to them. To reach out to them and feel them reaching back towards us. On this day of *Zichronot*, of memories, we beckon their souls nearer and whisper words of blessing and comfort to them and to each other. And, in the moments of silence, we listen for the still small voice of their response. Our tradition offers this *Yizkor* service as a beautiful ritual that can bring healing and comfort in the face of loss.

But perhaps there are more layers we can add to enrich our experience this *Yizkor*. In the spirit of this year’s theme of DIY Judaism, Do-it-Yourself Judaism, we’re continuing to bring innovation and imagination into the space of our mourning. Already this season, Rabbi Jay has introduced the new tradition of adding stones of memory to Betsy’s beautiful ceramic bowl. Each stone represents a soul and, much like we place small rocks on the gravestones of our loved ones, the pebbles are tangible reminders of those whom we have loved and lost.

And now, I’d like to share with you a powerful new tool that, with open minds and open hearts, might evolve our spiritual connection with our lost loved ones even further...

Many of us are familiar with Jewish death and burial rites; we attend Jewish funerals, we sit shiva at the homes of bereaved friends and family, we say Kaddish and light yartzeit candles. But I’d wager that only a few of us have spent time thinking about how our mourning rites

¹ <https://bell-gardia.jp/en/>

connect us to our loved ones beyond death. How does Judaism address the living's ongoing relationship with the dead?

Believe it or not, there exists a Jewish ghost story that seeks to explain the origins of the Kaddish prayer and sheds light on the subject:

One night, Rabbi Akiva was strolling through the graveyard and encountered the ghost of a man forced to carry arm loads of wood for all eternity, because he had sinned during his lifetime and had no one alive to atone for him. Rabbi Akiva, dismayed at the man's fate, went off and found the man's bastard son, circumcised him, and taught him to recite the words "*y'hei sh'mei raba m'vorach*." Sure enough, with these words, his father's soul was redeemed and the man was freed from his Sisyphean punishment. Afterwards, the man came to Rabbi Akiva in a dream and thanked him for enabling his soul to ascend to heaven.

A few weeks before Rosh Hashana, I dreamed of my maternal grandmother. In my dream, I was walking around in an unfamiliar house. I descended a flight of stairs and saw a woman, her backed to me, setting a table. The woman turned around and I saw it was my Grandmommy, Adeline. She beamed at me, took me in her arms and said, "It's so good to see you." And that was it. I awoke, bittersweet tears on my cheeks. Since then, I've been thinking about Adeline. What was the reason for her "visit?" Is there some wisdom I need to receive from her? Or is there something I'm supposed to share with her? Our dream encounter was so brief, but her presence lingers in my mind. I knew there was more we both wanted to express.

For some, ongoing dialogue with those who have departed this world might seem natural and thus, come easily. Maybe you talk to you mother or father on your drive home from work and tell them about your day. Maybe you speak to your friend when you're wrestling with a difficult decision or you have exciting news you want to share. Or maybe you need to walk out in nature, or step into this sanctuary to feel close to those who are gone. More likely, there are words we yearn to share, but struggle to find outlet and release in our daily lives, a bottleneck of expression lodged painfully in our chests, yearning to break forth.

The Telephone of the Wind, upon which "The Phone Booth at the Edge of the World" was based, was created in 2010 by Itaru Sasaki, as a response to the pain of losing his beloved cousin to cancer. In his grief, Sasaki purchased an old black rotary telephone and placed it in his garden. And, though it was not connected to any "earthly communication system" he began using the phone to continue speaking to his cousin. Picking up the "U" shaped receiver, holding it to his ear and mouth, dialing the numbers, one at a time, and then allowing the words to flow out. Using this tangible object, he remained connected to his cousin and found comfort and healing.

The following year, an earthquake of enormous magnitude caused a tsunami that obliterated the coast of Japan, destroying entire towns and taking thousands of lives. Countless souls were swept out to sea by the 30-foot waves crashing to shore, and their bodies were never

recovered. The city of Ōtsuchi suffered the highest number of missing persons and its survivors were awash in a sea of grief and loss.

In the aftermath, Sasaki was able to salvage his Wind Phone and relocated it to a blustery hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean, next to the town of Otsuchi. He welcomed mourners to visit his phone booth and encouraged them to make calls to their friends and relatives lost to the great tsunami. He hoped that, like him, they would find connection and hope, and thus ease some of the pain of their grief.²

For thousands of mourners from all over the world, speaking into the Phone of the Wind has become an incredibly powerful mourning ritual, sparking resilience in the face of loss. Mourners make the pilgrimage to "call" their loved ones in spirit, to say the things they didn't get a chance to say in life. The Wind Phone and surrounding gardens are a sacred place that provide solace to the bereaved as they work through the pain of their loss. As a result, The Phone of the Wind has inspired the creation of many similar spaces all over the world.³

After I finished the novel Ben had given me, read more about the real-life Phone of the Wind and subsequent Wind Phones that have sprung up all over the globe, I decided that Temple Sinai needed a Wind Phone of its own. With Sharon Goldstein's blessing, we purchased an old black rotary phone from eBay, found a comfortable outdoor chair, and engraved a special guest book for visitors to sign and leave reflections. Everything is ready to go and in place up on the patio behind the Atrium. But how could I stand here today and encourage you to try out our new Wind Phone if I, myself, had not yet placed a call?

It took me weeks to muster the courage to use the phone. I knew I wanted to speak to my grandmother, Adeline, who had visited me in my dream, but I felt self-conscious and didn't know what I should say. When I was finally ready, well, not really ready, but I decided it was time, I sat there with the phone in my hand, not knowing how to proceed. Eventually, I picked up the receiver and said, "Hello, Grandmommy, it's me, Micah." I immediately started to cry. Through my tears, I began by telling her about my children, her great-grandchildren, whom she never got to meet. I told her about Ben and how much she would love him. I told her that my mom, her older daughter, had been very ill, but that she's doing much better now. And how we lived with my aunt, her younger daughter, during our home renovations this past year. I thanked her for having two incredibly strong daughters.

Then I sat in silence for a bit, suddenly feeling foolish, because she probably knew all of this already, right? Hasn't she been out there somewhere, watching all along? What could I possibly say to her that she didn't already know? But, I took a deep breath and continued. I thanked her for the gifts she's given me, passed down through generations – an uncanny knack for bargain shopping, an ability and passion for crafting all manner of beautiful little things, and of course a love of music and singing.

² <https://www.mywindphone.com/>

³ <https://www.mywindphone.com/>

I was quiet for a bit longer, the phone still to my ear. And then I just said, "I love you." I ended the call and sat for a long while looking out over the landscape, tears spilling down my cheeks, so grateful for the opportunity to say aloud what I'd been holding in my heart.

For me, calling my grandmother on the Wind Phone was a powerful reminder that our loved ones are with us always, surrounding us, enfolding us, a palpable energy pulsing through our every breath, present with every heartbeat. Even in the moments when we experience the pain of their absence, they are also present, in our missing them, we feel them still. As with God, there is no place we can go where our loved ones are not. The Wind Phone gives space to honor this truth with sacred dialogue. If we but choose to listen, they are always speaking, their still small voices advising us, guiding us. And, in turn, they listen for us, for our cries of help, our words of yearning, our expressions of gratitude, our hurts and hopes and fears and loves...

And so, let's speak the words of our hearts into the Wind Phone. It's waiting for us, just out back, behind the Atrium. There's a comfortable seat, the old rotary telephone, and a guest registry. The setting and the phone invite stillness and slowness. Soak in the silence as you gather your thoughts and set your intention. With whom do you wish speak? What do you need to say? What message do you need to receive? When you pick up the phone, gently place it to your ear, dial the number, any series of numbers will do. When you are ready, begin speaking. Share the words you need to say, to whomever, listen in your heart for the response you are seeking, and when you are done, hang up the phone.

The Wind Phone invites us to let go of judgement, open ourselves to possibility, and it welcomes us to tap into the threads of connection that have been there all along, just hidden from our conscious ear. With open hearts and open minds, we can access the messages of the universe that swirl around us always and we can consider the endless possibilities of expression, interconnectedness and healing. In so doing, our Temple Sinai Wind Phone joins our other mourning rituals and becomes a powerful tool for coping with loss, communicating with God and our loved ones, and better understanding ourselves. In this way, may our hearts be healed, may our faith be deepened, and our memories be lifted up for blessing and carried off on the wind.