

The Unseen Presence of our Loved Ones

Yizkor, Yom Kippur 5782

At the beginning of the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Hashana, Abraham is called by God: Avraham, Avraham. And Abraham responds: *Hineini* / I am here. This single-word response by Abraham requires, I believe, consideration and explanation beyond translation.

When God called out to him, Abraham knew that God was not trying to locate Abraham or engage him in casual conversation. God speaks to Abraham the way God spoke to Adam in the Garden of Eden, when God asked: "*Ayeka?* / Where are you?", God is not asking about Adam's geographic location. God is not asking Adam to reveal his hiding place. Rather when God calls, God asks about spiritual location, about mindset and mental status. When speaking to Adam, God wants to know from Adam, "Now what? What's your next move now that you have eaten the forbidden fruit? To Abraham, God poses a similarly probing question:

Abraham, are you ready to go where I will send you? Will you do what I ask? Will you comply with my command? Adam didn't do so well on this matter. Will you, can you, respond differently? And Abraham responds: "I am here. I am ready to carry out your will. I am fully awake and aware. I am willing. I am present. *Hineni*".

What does it mean to be present? Presence in this sense is not a statement of physical availability. Present here suggests, I believe, that one is completely attuned, fully aware and profoundly ready to accept whatever God asks. What defines presence is total focus on that which the moment demands. Moreover, presence of mind and spirit may not require what more casual statements of

presence requires. The deeper kind of presence is not connected to space. It is connected to spirit.

For the last year and a half, we have been contending with the effects of the pandemic. We, in the sanctuary, are deeply aware of the dangers of this virus and of our responsibilities to protect those who enter this domain. And for those of us present, we not only maintain geographic distance from each other, but we are scrupulous in adhering to and complying with safeguards that can help us to avoid contracting the virus.

Abraham's presence is different. For Abraham, presence resides within. It is the state of availability and openness to that which occurs around us. When Abraham says, "Hineni / I am here", he confirms readiness and focus, not geography and location. And it is Abraham's presence to which I turn at this moment of Yizkor.

Abraham, you see, is present for God in a deep and intimate way. It is a presence which requires inwardness, not externalities. It is a presence of mutuality and camaraderie. And all of this resonates with me, something I think about often and deeply.

Over the past year and a half, "presence" has taken on new meaning. To be present at services can now mean that we have turned on our computers, that we visit the same website.

But are we truly present? This is the question we ask today regarding our use of Zoom technology. Shall we consider those who join us via Zoom technology to be present, even though they lack physical proximity? This is the question which we must discuss since it affects all who join our livestreams or Zoom services. Can we be present while we are together and apart simultaneously?

The sources we must consider are connected to the issue of what constitutes a minyan. Yes, ten people are, for the most part, required. But, what of the case of those who are on Zoom? To what degree are they present? Later in the fall, I will

teach a class during which we will investigate more deeply the question of what it means to be present.

In the context of a discussion about the meaning of presence, however, I would like to turn our attention to *Yizkor*. During the *Yizkor*, you see, we invoke the memories of our loved ones. We recall stories which warm our hearts and touch our souls. There is, to be sure, a degree of presence which is affected and nurtured by *Yizkor*.

We do invoke the presence of our loved ones during *Yizkor*. This is no conjuring of spirits and ghosts. Rather we connect during *Yizkor* with the parts of our loved ones which have remained with us, which we hold, carry, and cherish. During *Yizkor*, we can consider presence neither seen nor touched nor heard, but one which is spiritually palpable, a presence which is both as real as any, but deeply private and personal. What becomes present are memories, recollections. We remind ourselves at these moments of what it was like when they were physically present.

With all of this in mind, I would like to tell, or re-tell for those who remember it, a story which makes such a point. It is a traditional story from Africa which makes a very Jewish point. It is called the Sky Maiden.

In a small village in Africa, each person had a specific job to perform. Some worked in the fields some help to cook meals. One young man had the responsibility of milking the cow each day and bringing milk to all the people in the village. Every day he would wake early. Every day he would go to milk the cow. Every day he delivered the milk to others in the village. One day, however, when he went to milk the cow, the cow had no milk. If you know anything about cows you know that a cow always has milk in the morning. The young man thought this might be some sort of anomaly, but he returned the next day to find, once again, the cow had no milk. He realized, at that point, that someone must be stealing the milk.

The next night, the young man hid himself in the bushes nearby, watching carefully so that he could discover who was stealing the milk. Exactly at midnight he saw something incredible: a beam of life came down from the heavens and on the

beam of light was a beautiful sky maiden. She came down ending up next to the cow holding the bucket that she had brought with her. She milked the cow and went back up into the heavens on the same beam of light. The young man decided that he had no choice but to capture the sky maiden who was stealing the milk.

At midnight the next day, the Sky Maiden returned on a beam of light to milk the cow and take it back to her village in the sky . But as she was milking the cow the young man threw a net over her and captured her. Frightened and upset she said to the young man, “please let me go”. The young man responded and said I cannot let you go because you have been stealing our milk. The sky maiden said, “please let me go and take this milk back to my people in this in the sky. We have nothing to drink in our village and our people are depending on me to bring the milk”. The young man responded and said I will let you go, but you must make me a promise. Promise me that you will return tomorrow, marry me and stay here as my wife. and stay with I you make me a but we need that milk as well and I cannot let you take it. But I will let you go back to your people in the sky if you promise pick to return tomorrow, marry me and live with me as my wife. . The sky maiden thought for a moment and said if you allow me to return to my people in the sky one more time, I will return and marry you.

The Sky Maiden returned to her village in the sky and, good to her word, the next night at midnight she returned to the village where the young man was waiting for her to arrive. She carried with her a suitcase, and she said, “ I am here to marry you. I will be your wife as I promised. But you must make a promise to me: You must promise me that you will never open this suitcase”. The young man agreed. The young couple now began to prepare for their wedding. The entire village came to the wedding, bringing with them gifts and food. A great celebration was orchestrated and lasted long into the night. But soon thereafter, life in the village returned to normal. Every morning the young man would go to milk the cow. Everyday the sky maiden would go with the women to work in the fields.

One day, when the young man returned and the sky maiden was still in the fields, his curiosity got the best of him. What could be in the suitcase that was so important to his wife? And with that the young man reached beneath the bed, removed the suitcase, and opened it. And when he looked inside he was confused by what he saw. At that very moment, he heard the maiden returning to their home. He quickly put the suitcase back beneath the bed. As soon as his wife entered their small home, however, she looked at him and knew: you looked in my suitcase, she said. And her husband answered sheepishly: you are correct. I did look in the suitcase. And the Sky Maiden said and now I must leave you. We can no longer be married. But why? asked the young man. I don't understand, he said, why must you leave? Especially since I discovered that the suitcase was empty. And the sky maiden responded: that is exactly why I must leave you.

I cannot remain married to you because the suitcase you opened contained that which is most important to me, that which I brought with me, to hold and cherish from my home in the sky. In the suitcase were the sounds, the memories, the songs, the smells of my home in the sky, which I have left and will never again hear, taste or smell. I leave you not because you looked in the suitcase. I leave you because what was in that suitcase were the things that were most important to me. I leave you because those memories, which are most important to me, meant nothing to you.

My friends, during *Yizkor*, we open our suitcases to remove some of the most important things we possess. Yes, it is true, that some of those things are invisible. But they are real, and they are powerful. We have learned this year, that presence has a wider and deeper meaning than we ever realized. Those we recall are no longer in this world physically, but they can still be present, and their presence can be felt and cherished.

I hope that, as we recite *Yizkor* you can still feel that presence, that you and I can recall the sights, sounds, smells and songs which they have left for us, through

which their presence returns to us. I hope, as well, that that these things, which are most important to us, will remain with us always.

Please join me for Yizkor.