



Yom Kippur, 5772
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So Close and Yet So Far Away
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I've had lots of conversations with people over the years, but I never had a conversation like this one. I'll never forget the day and time he came to see me. February 10, 11:00 a.m. I tried to put the conversation out of my mind, to forget about it, but I couldn't. And I didn't know what to do with it, so I asked him for permission, which he granted, to share it with you, with our whole congregation on this holiest day of the year, for the fundamental question it raises affects every single adult in our community.

A few summers ago this man had been very sick, so sick that he had nearly died. Thank God as a result of a last minute, high risk surgery, he recovered, and he is back in life. He has a family. A wife and children. A responsible job, working with other people. Some time after his recovery he comes to see me.

After some initial catching up, he goes back to that dark summer where he had nearly died. And he adds that it *wasn't* that he had *nearly* died. In fact, he says that he *did* die. He was greeted by departed relatives, by his grandparents, in an atmosphere of bright light and radiance, who told him that it was his time to come with them. He said fine, he would come with them, but not quite yet. He needed one last day to say good bye to his family. In that intervening day, the medical team did the emergency surgery that saved his life. Then he added the bombshell: ever since that first conversation with his departed grandparents, now that he is back in the land of the living, he can still talk to those who have passed on, to their spirits that are still with us, even when he is in the middle of his busy work day. He talks to departed spirits. He talks to living customers, family members and friends. All in the same day. The poet Leonard Cohen

once wrote that, “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” The crack caused by this trauma let in a light that most people cannot see.

That would have been enough for one conversation. That would have been plenty to digest. But the conversation did not end there. He added a coda to his story.

He had learned that Rabbi Robinson was teaching a class on the afterlife. So he went to see her. As you may know, Rabbi Robinson’s office is right next to mine. The day he came to see her, my office door was open, and as he passed by my office, he saw my father. My father died in 1981, when I was 20 years old. But on that day this man, who did not know my father, says he saw him in my office at Temple Emanuel, next to my collection of the Talmud.

What did my father say, I asked him?

He said that my father is a spirit hovering about me; that he likes being with me when I write sermons, and that when I am stuck, he will supply some wisdom from heaven. I asked if my father had said anything else. Yes, he responded. My father added two other discrete points.

He said he was headed to California. And this gentleman asked me: do I have any family in California, which I do: two sisters, and their loved ones.

And then my dad mentioned something about his glasses. Does my mom still have his eye glasses?

I thanked this man for coming to see me. He had made a special point of coming to let me know that he had connected with my long-dead father. He certainly did not have to do that. I had no reason to doubt his genuineness and the purity of his motives. He did not ask me for anything in return.

But ever since he left my study, I have been trying to sort out what to make of this bizarre conversation. It sticks with me not only because I love my father, and miss him, and would feel

comforted to know that he is still present somehow. But it sticks with me because, if this man is right, the issue is so much larger than my father and me. The issue concerns us all. Everybody has lost somebody. On Yom Kippur we say Yizkor for them. Could it be that our departed loved ones, who seem so far away, are perhaps closer than we think?

At first blush, the Yizkor service that we say on Yom Kippur seems to be against this kind of eerie, otherworldly sentiment. We focus on this-worldly deeds which we lovingly remember and vow to perpetuate. They were kind. We will be kind. That is how we will keep their legacy alive. In other words, no spirits hovering. Yizkor for rationalists.

But at the same time, we also have yizkor for mystics, even if you don't usually see yourself as a mystic. The mid-20th century Jewish scholar Max Kadushin coined the term "ordinary mysticism"—people who live and work in the real world, not in a monastery, but in that real world, where they have schedules to keep, and people who depend on them, they are also open to the power of the unseen. There is also Yizkor for ordinary mystics.

The core Hebrew language in the Yizkor service, the acronym for which is found on every traditional Jewish tombstone, is: *tehei nafsho tzerura bitzror hachaiim*, may the soul of our beloved departed be bound up in the bond of life eternal. What does this mean exactly?

There are any number of formulations where we try to get at this reality that our loved ones are here and not here, present and absent, at the exact same time. Ordinary people, ordinary mystics, like brides and grooms getting married though a parent has died, or a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrating their milestone though a grandparent has died, embrace the idea that their loved one is "shining down on them from heaven." Or "smiling down on them from heaven." Or the most basic formulation is: your departed loved one is still "with you in spirit."

What does all this mean? What does “shining down” mean? What does “smiling down” mean? What does they are “with” you mean?

It is certainly possible that all of this can be taken metaphorically. They are shining down on us—poetically speaking.

But I personally embrace a non-metaphoric read—that our loved ones’ spirits are here in some way that most of us cannot explain or understand but is nonetheless real and true. Like other ordinary mystics, I totally believe in the reality of the unseen. To use the language of Jewish metaphysics, there is the world of *gashmiut* and the world of *ruchniut*, the world of physicality and the world of spirituality. Some of the most powerful things in the whole world—love, hope, and joy—cannot be touched, cannot be seen, but they are profoundly real and immensely powerful.

Which brought me back to my father’s eyeglasses. The man who came to see me had said that my father mentioned something about his eyeglasses, were they still with my mother? So when I visited my mother in Denver this past year, I asked her: “Mom, that guy said Dad was asking about his eyeglasses. By any chance, do you still have them?”

Do I still have Dad’s eyeglasses? Of course I do, my Mom said. They have been in the nightstand by my bed ever since Dad died. They are the one thing of Dad’s I never gave away. His suits, his ties, his watches, anything of his people could use, I gave away. But not his eyeglasses. They touched his face. I would never give them away. They’ve been with me for the last 30 years. She brought them to me. I am holding my father’s eye glasses in her small apartment, and now the issue is squarely joined.

On the one hand, this man said that my dad asked after his eyeglasses. It turns out that that is the one thing of his my mother never gave away. How could this man in Newton, who

does not know me personally, who never met my father, who had died in Denver 30 years ago, who does not know my mother, how could he possibly know this? I am clearly in the presence of something I do not understand. But there must be *something* here.

I personally find this comforting. The image of our departed loved ones with us, hovering, reminds me of the last line of Adon Olam: *adonai li, v'lo irah*, the Lord is *with* me, I will not be afraid. Now can we *see* the Lord like we can see one another? No. Can we *hear* the Lord like we can hear one another? No. Can we *feel* the Lord like can shake one another's hands? No. But is the Lord's presence still real to me so that I am not alone and not afraid? Yes! Maybe the same kind of thing is true with our departed loved ones. They are hovering here in a way that reassures.

On the other hand, holding onto these glasses, I acutely felt the limits of this kind of thinking. So much was there, around that coffee table. My mother was there. My dad's glasses were there. I was there. The yearning was there. The missing was there. The love was there. The only thing that wasn't there was my dad. We could talk about clues and cues, signs and portents, omens and cosmic tea leaves, all day long, but none of that changes the central fact that for the last 30 years, my Mom has been alone in her apartment. My Dad is not there, and he is not coming back.

In the end we just don't know whether our beloved departed are really here or not, and we'll never know. We can believe what we want to believe, and there is none to tell us we are wrong or outside of the Jewish tradition. We do Yizkor for dry-eyed rationalists. We do Yizkor for ordinary mystics. Jews don't do answers; we do conversations. Who knows?

But here is what we do know. What we do know is *that there are people who are alive who are so close and yet so far away. These are the people, the living, to whom we should be directing our attention. Yom Kippur is about the living.*

How many of us have elderly parents whom we don't see enough? They are so close and yet so far away. What can we do, right here, right now, to get closer?

How many of us have families where, for one reason or another, there is a rift, a lack of peace, people aren't talking to each other? I have seen this in family after family whose members are so close, and yet so far away. What can we do, right here, right now, to get closer?

How many of us don't really see our spouses and children, they are under our roof, we see them every day, but we don't really see them. We are distracted. Running late. Our eyes are on our email, not on the people before us. So close, and yet so far away. What can we do, right here, right now, to get closer?

With the dead, we are stuck with the paradox that they are so close and yet so far away.

But with the living, we do not have to be stuck with this paradox. Enough with the so far away part. Enough. Make it better. Get closer. Make it right. Now, while you still can. *G'mar chatimah tovah.*