

“The Harmony Inside Us”
Sermon: Yom Kippur Morning 5767
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Just the two of us in the car - driving south on Route 128 – Liana and I are heading out for a special night of some quality one-on-one time. Emily and I like to make sure that each of us is spending this kind of time with both of the kids. We really look forward to having either Liana or Jonah to ourselves for a little while. Sitting in the car on this particular night – I, in the front and she, of course, in the back – we talk about lots of things: her first days in her new kindergarten class – the number of “sleeps” until Grammy and Papa come for another visit – we talk about whether or not THIS is the night that she is going to order something OTHER than macaroni and cheese for dinner.

And then....out of nowhere.....Liana asks, “Daddy.....when I have a baby.....will you love my baby?” ---- I said, “Excuse me?” ---- “When I have baby....will you love my baby?” ---- “Liana, of course I will.” ---- She pushed: “Forever?” --- “Forever,” I said, “I promise.” ---- To be honest, I wasn’t really sure where all of this was going. And then, very matter-of-factly Liana continued: “Daddy.....when YOU’RE a grandpa.....you’ll still be my dad. Even when I’m a mom. You’ll be very strong. And in your heart, you’ll know how it felt to be a daddy of a little girl named Liana. Daddy – that’s because you’ll have my harmony inside of you.”

I almost pulled the car over.....From that moment – I haven’t been able to stop thinking about the beauty and the depth of meaning of words so innocently spoken by a five year old: ‘My harmony is inside of you’ – The notion, in a way, is really miraculous: that we all have the ability to share with others – and to receive from others - the music of our souls. That this music – when heard and appreciated - has the capacity to inspire us and to even make us strong. And that regardless of how much time might pass – even years later - once received - the harmony of the heart continues to echo within us.

This inner song, I have come to believe, is love. It is – as we know – as we have experienced - the most precious gift that we have to give. The most precious gift that we receive.

It should come as no surprise that our Jewish tradition teaches this very lesson. In one text we read: “K’ner madlik ner” - “Just as one candle has the ability to kindle an infinite number of other candles without diminishing its own flame, so too do we each have the capacity to inspire an unending love in the hearts of others.” As well, author and teacher Rabbi Baruch Silversteien has written (*adapted*): “Judaism has always been sensitive to the need of love in our lives and to its role as a most enduring source of inspiration..... Expressions of tenderness, Judaism reminds us, add poetry to our lives.....introducing color and meaning. A life without love,” he concludes, “is like a world without flowers and without music.”

On Yom Kippur, seemingly we are reminded of this lesson at every turn. It is a day, on which, we try our best to be with those closest to us – family or friends - or, at least we try to be in touch with them. On this day, our prayer book and our fasting, call upon us to

focus on what we know to be most important in our lives: the relationships that we share – asking us to consider how we might make what is already good, even better - how we might bring healing to what has either been strained or broken. And, perhaps most profoundly, as Yom Kippur is a day of remembrance – on this day we are reminded that love is enduring and lives on even after someone we love has died.

Jim Murray is considered by many to have been the greatest sports writer of all time. His writing career began in the 1940's when Murray was still in college and took off in the early 1960's when he began writing a regular sports column for the "Los Angeles Times." In the profession, Murray became known for his style, insight, and, most definitely, for his humor. At its height, Murray's column was picked up by over 150 newspapers across the country. And his witty comments, such as: "Show me a good loser and I'll show you a man who is playing golf with his boss" made him a household name to anyone who loved sports.

Yet, from Murray's columns, his books, and the biographies written about him, we learn that what meant more to Murray than anything else was the relationship he shared with his beloved wife Gerry. A more simple – less extravagant – more 'in the background' kind of person – Gerry was the anchor and the compass in their relationship and their family. Gerry unconditionally supported and loved her husband every day of their close-to-forty year marriage. And so, it was nothing less than devastating when, in 1984, Gerry died unexpectedly.

Struggling with his emotions.....the unspeakable sense of loss.....the question of how he was going ever to live without her.....Murray responded by doing what he did best: he wrote:

Murray's "LA Times" column that appeared literally two days after Gerry's death was entitled: "She Took the Magic and Happy Summer With Her." --- There, he said: "This is the column I never wanted to write, the story I never wanted to live to tell. I lost my lovely Gerry the other day. I lost the sunshine and the roses...You have a funny way of remembering things. – Murray continued -- The thing I remember clearest today, for some reason, is the habit she had of leaving notes for the kids when she was only going to be gone for the shortest of time --- the briefest moments. She would leave these notes on a table in this huge lettering – for her handwriting was like her heart – large and overflowing and joyous. "Gone to the store," it would say. "Be right back. Love....Mom." She didn't want the kids to think they were without her love EVEN FOR A FEW MINUTES."

Murray concluded: "Gerry has left no notes this time. But she has.....as usual.....left her LOVE."

Yom Kippur comes to remind us that while our lifetimes may be limited, the miracle of love is that it is not.

Yom Kippur understands our need, on this day especially, to remember. Gathered here – now – surrounded by so many – how mindful we are, as well, of those who are no longer with us. On this day that we turn the page on yet another year and look ahead towards the year-yet-to-be – how mindful we are of those who will not be able to share our joys – to help us with our challenges – to encourage us with their words – as they once did.

And so it is that Yom Kippur reaches out to help us. First of all, traditionally, we do not begin a new year alone. We surround ourselves with those who will be there for us and with us: our family...our friends...our community. Their love and their concern is very much a part of this day.

Then, of course, on Yom Kippur, there is, Yizkor --- our people's traditional service of remembrance. A service that has been gently woven into the fabric of this day's liturgy by our rabbis to help us reach out to – and recall - our loved ones. Without question, Yizkor is, perhaps, one of the most moving services during the High Holy Day season. And, indeed, there are many – many who simply feel drawn to be here.

Though the word Yizkor is commonly used to refer to a full service, Yizkor, in fact, is actually only a single prayer. In its opening words it says: *Yizkor Elohim Nish'mot Yaki'rai* --- May G-d forever remember those most dear to me who have gone to their eternal rest." Part of what is interesting about this prayer is how much the rabbis wanted for it to be accessible to us on this day. For example, while most prayers in the Jewish prayer book require a minyan – a minimum of ten people – to recite its words --- Yizkor, we are told – can be recited by a person no matter how many people are present. One can even recite Yizkor alone, if needed. Similarly, if, for any reason, one is not able to be at temple for Yizkor, it is acceptable to recite its words at home or wherever else one happens to be.

Another interesting aspect of this prayer is in how Yizkor is recited. While the Service of Remembrance, itself, is spoken aloud, the essential Yizkor prayer is actually recited silently. The message is clear: while the words that we speak on this day are important, we also need the opportunity to listen – to open our hearts and to feel how close our loved ones really are.

Columnist Bob Greene tells a story about a man by the name of Bernie Meyers: When Bernie went into the hospital last September, his family, at first, did not know how serious his illness had become. And so, his ten year old granddaughter, Sarah was not taken to see him. Sarah's mother explained: "He hadn't been feeling well for some time. And so he went into the hospital for some tests...just to find out what was wrong." What was wrong, though, was lymphoma – and in Bernie's case it was advanced and irreversible. He died two weeks later.

Sarah Meyers never got the chance to say "Good bye" to her grandfather and it upset her.

For the longest time, Sarah didn't say much about what she was feeling. But then a few weeks later she came home from a friend's birthday party. All of the children had been

given helium-filled balloons as party favors. And when Sarah came into the house Sarah had hers – a bright red one. A few minutes later, Sarah went outside carrying not only the balloon....but an envelope.” Inside the envelope, she explained to her parents, was a letter that she had written to her grandfather. In the letter Sarah wrote: “Hi Grandpa. How are you? What’s it like up there?” It ended with Sarah telling her grandfather that she loved him very much and that she hoped that somehow he could hear what she was telling him.

On the front of the envelope Sarah wrote: “To Grandpa Bernie, in Heaven Up High.” And she even made sure to include her return address.”

After tying the envelope to the balloon, Sarah let it go. Both she and her mom watched as the balloon and the letter sailed up into the sky....over the trees near her house.....and then out of sight.

Two months later, after Sarah’s not having thought about the letter for some time, a letter arrived at the Meyer’s home. It was addressed to Sarah and her family. And, according to the return address, it had been sent by a man named Donald Kopp.

The letter began: ‘Dear Sarah.....Your letter to Grandpa Bernie reached its destination and was read by him. From what I understand they can’t keep material things up there, so it just drifted back to earth. They just keep thoughts, memories, love, and things like that. I found your letter while I was walking in the woods. And I thought that you should know that whenever you think or talk about your grandpa.....he knows.....and he is very close by with overwhelming love. The letter concluded: Sincerely, Don Kopp – also a grandpa.’

We know what it is to feel the closeness of our loved ones – to hear their words in our hearts – to be inspired by their lives – to find strength in our memories of them. We speak to them still – in prayer...in moments of quiet meaning. We think of what they would do were they here....what they would say to us.....how they would help.

Rabbi Gerald Wolpe tells the story of a Jewish man who recently ran in the Boston Marathon. Born in Poland and now very much into his 80’s, many had told him that he shouldn’t run. He, however, thought differently. And, as it turned out, he not only ran, but he came in with a very respectable record.

Spectators who saw him finish the race were astounded at what he had done. “How did you do it?” they asked. “Special diet? An exercise routine?”

With calm and assurance, and a deep inner faith, the man answered: “How? I had companions running with me.”

The people responded: “We did not see anyone with you? Who were your companions?”

“You did not see them” he replied “because they were in my heart. My Zadie – of blessed memory – he ran with me. And my father – of blessed memory – He too ran with me. In fact, everyone from the shtetl ran with me. I was able to finish the race because we all ran together!”

On this Yom Kippur morning, as we start yet another new year, we pause for our own heartfelt prayer – and moments of peaceful silence – so that we too might remember that, as we live our lives, we also make OUR way TOGETHER – together with all those whose love continues to be a part of us.

One final teaching: Our Jewish tradition also wants for us to know that there is yet another whose presence is with us on this holiest of days – yet another who is here for us as a source of unending comfort...and strength. That is G-d.

According to rabbis the memorial prayer of Yizkor is recited not once, but four times a year. Yom Kippur is one. The other three, we are told, are during what are known as the Jewish Pilgrimage Festivals of Passover, Sukkot, and Shavuot. It was on these days that our people believed that G-d’s presence was uniquely close – and could, therefore, be uniquely experienced. For this reason, in ancient days, Jews would literally travel – sometimes great distances - to the Temple in Jerusalem in order to bring special offerings.

Long after the Temple was destroyed – when the rabbis were trying to determine the most appropriate times for their sacred service of Yizkor – in addition to choosing Yom Kippur – they immediately focused upon these three Festivals of G-d’s presence. The connection that the rabbis sought to make was not only powerful, but profound: Whenever we pause to remember our loved ones – whenever we feel their love – we can feel **G-d’s** nearness as well.

Indeed, Yom Kippur is intended to be for us, a day of G-d inspired.....of memory inspired.... – love and hope.

In words beautifully written by the pen of the poet:

Of those to whom we’ve said farewell
We shall not see again the familiar face,
Nor the warm illumined eye,
Nor hear the same voice.
We shall not sit face to face
Across a table or side by side
We shall not see or hear again
As once we saw and heard....

Yet we still sense the presence of those
Who once evoked our deepest love
And still do.

We see them and hear their soul's melody –
not with eyes and ears –
But with our hearts.

On this Yom Kippur morning we pray.....
May the memories of all of our loved ones remain a blessing for us...always.
May it be that their love....and G-d's love.....will continue to strengthen us and sustain
us in the year ahead.
And may each of us continue to hear that music which indeed echoes still within our
hearts: It is the harmony inside us all.

Amen.