

Yom Kippur/Yizkor 5780

What is “Real?”

Last Sunday night while I was here for Erev Rosh Hashanah services with many of you, Matthew was at home getting Maya ready for bed. At around 7:15 he heard a knock on our front door. Rabbi Lazaros from the Chabad next door had come to ask if Matthew would be the tenth person for their minyan. At first Matthew said sorry, no, he had to put the baby to bed. But then Maya lifted her head off his shoulder, looked him right in the eye, and whacked him in the face. So he laughed and said “I guess Maya doesn’t mind. We’ll be right over.”

This is exactly the kind of thing Matthew’s grandfather would have done, which is quite a coincidence because that is who Maya is named after. Later that night Matthew and I wondered if this little interaction was somehow his grandfather telling him to get it together and go make the minyan. I’ve had a couple conversations like this over the past week, with people who feel their departed loved ones are still around, still talking to them in different ways. Several people have asked me about whether this is “real” or a “Jewish” thing to believe. I think that it is.

We live in a science-focused modern world, in which we often need ample evidence before we are willing to believe anything. Most of the time, I’m on board with this approach. I do not believe that science and religion are diametrically opposed. In fact, most of the time I find that the more I learn about science, the deeper my spiritual appreciation for the complex beauty of the world around us. But every once in a while there are experiences that cannot be explained by our five senses or described in terms of physics. And those things are still true, still real, and still important.

There is an emerging school of thought that anything that affects the way we think or act is real, even if we can't physically touch or scientifically analyze it. In fact, sometimes scientific analysis diminishes the beauty of these otherwise profound experiences.

A classic example is love. When we talk about love, we can talk about a good portion of it in terms of science. Doctors can measure the hormones that rush through your body when you see the person you love. They can scan your brain and see the parts of your brain that light up. They can take all sorts of measurements that describe the biochemical reactions that something happen, and we could call that love. But that's not all that love is. If that was all we talked about when we spoke about love, we would be missing something very important.

Love is more than the physiological response we have to our beloved, and even though that "more" is hard to measure, it is very real. What's more, those feelings last long after that person has left our sight, often even after they have left this earth. The person's physical absence does not mean that they are not present in our hearts and our minds. The memories of our loved ones are very real, and in many ways they keep the people we have lost here, with us. When a trick of the light or a turn of phrase suddenly gives us chills and makes us remember someone who has long been gone, that person is present with us in that moment. And if their memory helps us choose our actions, or fills our hearts with love and gratitude, all the better.

This is the sentiment expressed in the poem *Once a Great Love*, by Yehudah Amichai:

Once a great love cut my life in two.

The first part goes on twisting

at some other place like a snake cut in two.

The passing years have calmed me

and brought healing to my heart and rest to my eyes.

And I'm like someone standing in the Judean desert, looking at a sign:

'Sea Level'

He cannot see the sea, but he knows.

Thus I remember your face everywhere at your 'face Level.'

A person standing in the middle of the desert has no connection to the ocean, no landmark by which to judge “sea level.” But sea level is still an important measurement elsewhere in the world, and knowing where it is might change the traveler’s perspective on where they stand in the middle of the dry desert. Just as “sea level” exists and holds meaning even for someone in the middle of a barren desert, the memories of our loved ones influence our actions even when we can no longer see, touch, or speak to them.

That is part of the reason why we have so many rituals around death and mourning. Judaism is frustratingly vague on the details of the afterlife, but it makes up for this vagueness with extremely specific instructions about what we are meant to do on this earth when we lose someone we love. It is traditional to recite Kaddish for set periods of time and then on the anniversary of someone’s death. Four times a year we say Yizkor, which literally means “may He remember.” The recitation of Yizkor was originally reserved for Yom Kippur, when the solemn themes and atmosphere of the day naturally lead us to contemplate life and death. Machzor Lev Shalem reminds us that when we recite Yizkor, “the veil between the worlds of the

living and the dead becomes more transparent,”¹ and we feel the presence of the departed particularly strongly. In its original form, the primary purpose of this memorial service was to honor the deceased by committing to giving tzedakah in their memory, the idea being that the good deeds of those on earth would elevate the souls of the departed.² But the inverse effect is also at play: the good influence of our departed loved ones reminds us how to behave, even when they are not physically present to remind us themselves.

Over time, the tradition grew to include reciting Yizkor not just on the somber holidays, but on festive occasions as well, specifically the three Pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. In these moments, we ask God to remember our loved ones and, in so doing, take time out of our festive occasions to remember them as well, almost as if they are still here to celebrate the holidays with us. It is sad to know they are not here to make our favorite dish, or tell our favorite jokes, but when we make those recipes and re-tell those jokes, they are present in a very real way.

It is indeed a Jewish idea that the people who raised us, taught us, loved us, or otherwise touched our hearts continue to shape our thoughts and actions long after they have left our lives. The exact physics of how they do that might forever remain a mystery, but love among the living is equally indescribable. With the memories of all those we have loved and lost held close to our hearts, we turn to the memorial service on page 644.

¹ Machzor Lev Shalem, 290.

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/yizkor-the-memorial-service/>