

Time, Space and Memory

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10 Tishrei 5787 ~ Yom Kippur ~ 21 September 2026

You have probably heard the old chestnut about the new rabbi who notices that when the congregation reaches a particular prayer, half stand and half sit. Each group claims that it is following the historic tradition of the community. The rabbi goes to visit his predecessor and explains that one side argues and the other takes the opposite position. He asks the elder rabbi, “What is the tradition?”

The rabbi looks at him and says, “That’s it. Our tradition is to argue.”

In most synagogues, people also have a tradition of their own seats, year after year.

Mr. and Mrs. Greenberg have finally managed to get tickets for the hottest show on Broadway. It is sold out. Scalpers are retiring on this one. The Greenbergs have orchestra seats and notice that in the row behind them there is an empty seat. When intermission comes and no one has sat there, Mrs. Greenberg turns to the woman sitting next to it

and asks, "Pardon me, but the show is in such demand. Do you have any idea why that seat is empty?"

The woman says, "That was my late husband's seat."

Mrs. Greenberg apologizes for being so insensitive, then asks, "Without meaning to be rude, this is an incredibly hard show to get into. Surely you must have a friend or relative who would have wanted to come to see the show with you?"

The woman replies, "No, they're all at the funeral."

There actually is a tradition that following a death, we do not sit in our usual place in synagogue. We move because death has caused a dislocation in our personal life. And when we move to sit somewhere else, we disrupt the seating pattern of others. Gradually, this death ripples through a congregation.

Finding our place, finding our space, is important.

"Happy are those who dwell in Your house; they forever praise You." אֲשֶׁר יוֹשְׁבֵי בֵיתְךָ עוֹד יִהְלְלוּךָ סֶלָה:

When we sit at the dining room table or in a favourite room, we often feel the presence of the people we love. We sense their presence long after they have died. For some, this is

painful, particularly during the first year after a loss. For others, remembering a loved one in her seat is evocative and comforting.

Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead* takes the form of a long letter written by Reverend John Ames, a seventy-six-year-old Congregationalist pastor who knows that he is dying. Because his young wife and seven-year-old son will not have him around as the boy grows up, Ames writes to pass down his life story, memories and spiritual wisdom.

He tells his son:

"I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle. If only I had the words to tell you."

As I read of Ames sitting in his church and reflecting on his life, I thought of the words we recite during these penitential days:

וְשָׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת־ה' אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית־ה' כָּל־יְמֵי אַחַת
חַיִּי

“Only one thing do I ask of God: to sit in God’s house all the days of my life.”

We know that this dwelling is temporary. Next week, we will say the berakhah לִשֵּׁב בַּסֻּכָּה, to sit, to dwell in the sukkah. But we know that it is a frail structure and that we will occupy it only for a limited time.

So is life.

And sometimes, in the midst of life, we lose our sense of time. I did during and after the COVID epidemic.

Have you ever lost track of time? Perhaps on a long hike or a multi-day canoe trip? Perhaps on a leisurely walk, in a deep conversation, or during an illness, whether as patient or caregiver? Perhaps during shivah or throughout the cycle of the Kaddish year?

In 1983, the LA Mayer Museum of Islamic Art lost track of time. The museum, a few minutes from the home of the President of Israel, contains two remarkable collections: Islamic art and rare watches and clocks. One April night, 101 timepieces were stolen.

Among them was the crown jewel of the collection, a self-winding watch made for Marie Antoinette by the Swiss master watchmaker Abraham-Louis Breguet. It was one of

the world's most famous timepieces. For decades, investigators followed thousands of leads without success.

Then, in 2006, a small inquiry led to a remarkable discovery: many of the stolen watches had been hidden in different cities around the world. Some were recovered. Others were never found.

Time lost and recovered.

We are now in the seventh month of the Jewish calendar. During this month, we have seven days of Yom Tov, time to withdraw from the active pace of our lives. Shifting between sacred and common time, between weekdays for work and the days of the festivals, accentuates the transient nature of our lives. Paradoxically, during this season we are called to be conscious of eternity and the passage of time.

When families come to say Kaddish on a yahrzeit or gather to celebrate a simhah, they occasionally comment that it has been so long since their loved one died — a lifetime of other family moments. And then, when the tears well up, when the heart feels its acute pain, the loss seems recent, almost immediate.

We lose time and then regain it. The Yizkor and Yahrzeit booklets are among the ways we retain a name and a memory. We want to recall the names of those we love. Names impart identity and meaning to our lives.

Part of what is so painful about the Shoah is that there are no cemeteries, no headstones, to mark the loss of six million Jews. So we do what we can to remember.

Yad Vashem has gathered millions of Pages of Testimony about those who were murdered. In our cemeteries, families place the names of murdered relatives on the backs of local tombstones. We do not want our dead to remain anonymous, faceless, unknown.

That is why it is so important to tell stories about the people for whom we are named. A few years ago, I asked a cousin if she recognized someone in an old family photograph. She said, “I certainly do. They are my parents.”

A name can suddenly restore a face, a relationship, a moment.

God’s name also occupies an important place in the prayers of Yom Kippur.

We do not pronounce the four-letter sacred Name. We simply say: Hashem—the Name.

In the Musaf Avodah service, we reenact the confession ritual of the Kohen Gadol and invoke God's Name:

פִּשְׁעֵתִי לִפְנֵיךְ, חֲטָאתִי עִוִּיתִי, אֲנִי הַשֵּׁם

“Please, Hashem, I have sinned, I have committed iniquities, I have transgressed before You.”

Before reciting the detailed vidui, we call upon God by name. And we identify the divine qualities of love and compassion:

Hashem, Hashem, El Rahum v'Hanun.

Although the Torah tells us that we cannot see God, we yearn for the Presence of the Holy One. In Psalm 27, we imagine God saying, “My heart says, seek My face.” And we respond: אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ יְהוָה אֲבַקֵּשׁ: - “I shall seek Your face.”

Come with me to Jerusalem, to the National Military Cemetery at Mount Herzl. I have always been moved by the simplicity of its memorial markers: name, parents, place of birth, dates of birth and death, and the military operation in which the person died.

Last year, I told you about the stickers posted at bus stops and train stations, with the names, pictures and words of soldiers killed in defence of Israel during the Gaza war.

Each of the fallen also has a name inscribed in the Memorial Hall on Mount Herzl, along with a retrievable electronic record. Every day at 11 a.m., those who died on that day are remembered.

Some who died were young survivors from Europe. Hastily recruited and trained, there is very little personal or family information about them. They have been swallowed up by anonymity. A project called Giving a Face to the Fallen seeks to identify personal information, to restore a person to a name. We want to give a face to the fallen.

A midrash imagines the Holy One saying: Don't leave me. Stay a bit longer. It is the ritual equivalent of a Jewish goodbye. We cannot simply say farewell and leave. We linger at the door. We think of something else we want to say.

A cultural commentator suggested that when we leave a gathering, we should simply "ghost" away and send a thank-you text the next day. But Elissa Schwartz writes, "I, quite possibly because I am Jewish, am incapable of ghosting." As the old joke goes: "WASPs leave and don't say goodbye. Jews say goodbye and don't leave."

Although I'll be leaving KBI, I'll hold onto my memories of the people and this community. They are precious to me.

When a person is dying, we want to hold onto our loved one. After death, shivah enables us to maintain a sense of presence. Even when we reach the end of eleven months of mourning, many find the final Kaddish difficult. It is a letting go of what has been a meaningful connection to our beloved.

We are in search of lost time. À la recherche du temps perdu.

Albert Einstein, in a condolence note to a family, wrote that the distinction between past, present and future is “only a stubbornly persistent illusion.”

During this sacred season, we hope to hold onto sacred moments and personal memories. We recite Yizkor to affirm the enduring bonds of life and love.

However, some of us may feel that important relationships in our lives went awry or remained unresolved. We may imagine, along with Ecclesiastes: That which is crooked cannot be made straight; what is lacking cannot now be counted. (1.15). But the recovery of the timepieces from the Mayer museum reminds us that some cold cases can

be resolved. Even if not all can be recovered or made straight, it may be possible to come to a moment, an insight, that enables us to go forward in time.

The Israeli poet Zelda writes about the many names that each of us carries:

לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם

Each of us has a name

given by God

and given by our parents.

Each of us has a name

given by our stature and our smile

and given by what we wear.

Each of us has a name

given by our enemies

and given by our love.

Each of us has a name

given by our celebrations

and given by our work.

...Each of us has a name

given by the sea

and given by our death.

Today, as you think of each person whom you remember, call up his or her image in your mind. Try to remember how she spoke, how he smiled, the texture of her skin, the bristle of his face. Reclaim a moment in time.

In Gilead, John Ames writes:

“I wish I could leave you certain of the images in my mind, because they are so beautiful that I hate to think they will be extinguished when I am. ... Memory is not strictly mortal in its nature, either. It is a strange thing, after all, to be able to return to a moment... A moment is such a slight thing. I mean, that its abiding is a most gracious reprieve.”

Memory is love across time. So hold onto the names and faces of those you love and remember. Write them down. Identify their faces. Tell their stories. After all, what does it take to remember, to regain a moment in time, to reclaim, to restore a relationship?

Alice’s question to the White Rabbit in *Through the Looking Glass* may be helpful. “How long is forever?”

And the White Rabbit responds: “Sometimes, just one second.”

Now it is time for us to remember.