

The Wind Telephone – Shavuot Yizkor

Back in the year 2010, a 70-year-old Japanese gentleman by the name of Itaru Sasaki lost his beloved cousin. Finding that he needed a place to air his grief and connect to the one he had loved so deeply, Sasaki developed an unconventional solution – he took an old fashioned, British-style phone booth painted white, installed it in his backyard, placed within it a black rotary phone connected to nothing, and began using the device to converse with the dead. In an interview with *This American Life's* Miki Meek, Sasaki explained: “Because my thoughts could not be relayed over a regular phone line, I wanted them to be carried on wind.”¹ He named his creation, most aptly, the wind telephone.

Fast forward one year later and, as many of us will remember, a terrible tsunami devastated Japan resulting in close to 19,000 individuals either killed or missing. Sasaki’s small town of Otsuchi, located on the northeastern coast of the country, was amongst the hardest hit with over 400 people dead or unaccounted for out of a population of about 12,000. Suddenly, Sasaki was far from the only one seeking a way to connect with those whom telephone wires could no longer reach. Over the next five years it is estimated that over 10,000 people came to make use of his unusual booth – many traveling for hours on end in order to do so.

In a program entitled “One Last Thing Before I Go,” Meek received permission to record the conversations of visitors to the wind telephone and listeners were given entrée into these most intimate of monologues. Many of the exchanges are quite matter-of-fact: “Hi, Grandpa. How are you? I’ll be in fourth grade next semester. Wasn’t that fast? I finished all my homework. Everyone is doing fine.”² Many of the exchanges are quite poignant. “[My son,] please let me hear you call me Papa. Even

¹ <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/597/one-last-thing-before-i-go>

² Ibid.

though I built a new house, without all of you it's meaningless. I want to hear you reply but can't hear anything. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I couldn't save you."³ And the vast majority of the calls, according to Meek, contain one of two Japanese expressions which essentially mean "Don't worry about us" or "I'm doing my best to get by" respectively. Reassurance. Regret. News of the everyday and also – of course – the exceptional. There are so many things we'd like to say to those who are no longer with us. We, too, wish for words carried on the wind.

This morning we gather for Yizkor, reciting prayers of honor and memory for those whom we have loved and lost. While we may wish to be able to speak with our loved ones, now departed, most every day, this feeling of longing is somehow heightened at holiday times when families join together and mark the passing of another year, when we find ourselves in synagogue practicing the customs they so cherished, when grand-children are a little bit older and we ourselves a little bit grayer, when it's impossible not to remember sweet days of yore when they sat beside us in shul or stayed up with us for late-night learning and cheesecake. Perhaps on Shavuot, especially, this celebration of receiving the 10 Commandments and inheriting a particular legacy of sacred values and commitments, we have the opportunity to evaluate our lives and our deeds, examining our successes and our shortcomings, and we think of them. We imagine the various ways they'd be both proud and disappointed, the advice they might give, the encouragements they might offer, the unconditional love that would undoubtedly support us along the way. There are just so many things that we'd like to be able to say to them.

In certain ways, the Yizkor service soon to begin is our tradition's version of a wind telephone. I mean this not in a supernatural way - I don't necessarily believe that the heavens are more open at this hour than at any other time or that a special portal to the dead reveals itself when we begin these sacred

³ Ibid.

words. I believe that we can talk to our loved ones at any time and in any place and I know that many of us do so with some regularity. But just like the visitors to Otsuchi often found closure or healing or release in making this particular pilgrimage, I think that there is a power to Yizkor – in knowing that we’re not alone in our grief, in having designated space to mourn and to remember, in affirming that love and human relationship transcend even the limits of mortality. We come to Yizkor seeking comfort and strength. Most of all, we come seeking a sense of connection to those whom we miss so desperately.

The *This American Life* program during which Sasaki’s story was told, had as its theme the power of words in the face of death, and this idea – too – seems most appropriate as we stand here during these holy hours of Yizkor. While the death that we each stand in the face of today is hopefully less imminent and urgent than that which confronted the people of Otsuchi, we – too – have been reminded, these last many years, how very vulnerable we all are – living through a global pandemic that has claimed the lives of millions, witnessing a terrible war in Ukraine, living through a rash of terror attacks in Israel and mass shootings in our own country that have senselessly and prematurely claimed the lives of far too many. As we know far too well, words cannot forestall death nor can they forestall grief and mourning. Still, in the face of loss they are not without their merit.

Judaism is a religion that believes strongly in the power of words. God’s creation of the universe was effected by speech acts – “God said ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). The very laws that we celebrate today on Shavuot, the *aseret hadibrot*, often translated as the 10 Commandments, literally means the ten “utterances” and points to the fact that Torah came into being through the sheer power of Divine communication. Later in our service we will read the story of Ruth, where our protagonist comforts her thrice-bereft mother-in-law, Naomi, through words: vowing not to leave her

after Naomi's husband and two sons die but rather pledging to stay with her unto death so that Naomi should never be alone. Words, Judaism teaches, have the power to create and to destroy. They also have the power to bring healing.

In just a moment, we will turn to Yizkor, the sacred liturgy provided to us by tradition along with more contemporary meditations offered by the authors of *Machzor Lev Shalem*. The prayers that we recite connect us through time and space to other grieving Jews and provide us with that which to say when our own words might fail us; articulating the depth and strength of our love for another is no easy task. I believe, however, that the prayer-book is not necessarily a script to be followed but rather a source-book for inspiration, an anthology from which we have the permission to depart. Yizkor is the time to pick up the receiver and let our words be carried by the wind. It is our time to say what we would most fervently wish our loved ones to know and hear.

I can't be sure if callers from Otsuchi had any particular success in delivering their heartfelt messages to loved ones, but I do know that visiting Sasaki's backyard phone-booth was transformative for these grief pilgrims in many ways. "It changed something,"⁴ one woman reported. "For the first time since he died, we were able to talk about it as a family," another one shared. Voicing unexpressed regrets can bring tranquility, unexpressed anger can bring closure, unexpressed sadness can bring healing. And sharing the good stuff – the accomplishments achieved and new babies born, the inside joke that only he would have truly appreciated, the fact that everyone is really doing okay much as we miss her terribly – this, too, can bring a feeling of closeness and comfort. In the words of author Mitch Albom, "Death ends a life, not a relationship." The conversations between us and our loved ones, now departed, can still be carried on the wind.

⁴ <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/597/one-last-thing-before-i-go>

And so we now turn to Yizkor, picking up the receiver and speaking into the abyss. Whether we use the words of the *machzor* or substitute our own personal ones instead, whether these heartfelt sentiments are in some way heard by those to whom they are directed or remain for our ears alone – we hope that these quiet moments not only honor our loved ones but also return them to us, if just for a short while. “Come back,” said one of the visitors in Sasaki’s booth. “We will be waiting.”⁵

Y’hi zichram baruch – May the memories of those we recall this day be for a blessing. And may our words always be carried to them on the wind.

We now rise for the Yizkor service on page 290.

⁵ *Ibid.*