

KOL NIDREI SERMON

5777

WIND PRAYERS

This year marked the 5th anniversary of the tsunami in Japan, where in a less than an hour, 30 foot black waves wiped out villages, killing about 19,000 people, with thousands more missing.

A year before the tsunami, a man named Itaru Sasaki had lost a cousin, and was having trouble expressing his grief. So he bought an old fashioned English telephone booth, the ones that are red with paned glass on all sides. Sasaki painted the booth white, put a green patina roof on top that pointed up to the sky, and set it in his beautiful garden overlooking the ocean. He then placed an old, black, rotary phone in the booth, connected to nothing, and used it to talk to his cousin for whom he was grieving. “Because my thoughts could not be relayed over a regular phone line,” he

said, “I wanted them to be carried on the wind. So I named it the wind telephone.”¹

Remarkably, the wind telephone became a part of grieving in the aftermath of the tsunami. *This American Life* Producer Miki Meek learned about the telephone from a memorial documentary on Japanese television, while on a visit to her family this past year, leading to her radio story. As she tells it, “after the tsunami and earthquake happened, word got out about Itraru’s special wind telephone—that he was using it as another way to stay connected to the dead. Soon, people started showing up randomly on his property, and walking into the phone booth. This has been going on for five years now. Itaru estimates that thousands of people from all over Japan have come to use his phone.”²

In the memorial documentary, the television crew filmed the booth from afar, with an audio hookup inside the booth, enabling us to hear their poignant conversations. We hear their voices in Meek’s story. Some visitors, like 2 young

children talking to their grandfather who had died, shared routine things of their lives. “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. Bye.” Some asked heart wrenching questions, like this teenager, who cried, “Why did you die? Why did it have to be you dad?” Some express concern for their loved one’s comfort, like this man who lost his wife, daughter and mother in the tsunami, all of them missing. “It’s so cold. But you’re not getting cold, are you? Be found soon. Everyone is waiting for you. Just be alive somewhere. Anywhere. I’m so lonely.”

Itaru says that there are more men who come than women, men for whom it would be hard otherwise to express their grief. For some of those who come, this is the first time they have been able to talk about their loss. A mom and her 4 teenagers travelled four hours to come to the phone. She says about her family, “we were all about to fall apart. We were so broken. We didn’t think we could make it through.

And maybe that's why we never talked about Dad until now. But talking to him on the phone today, it changed something."

In this secular age, with many elements of religious traditions rightly challenged or discarded, it is worthwhile focusing on this holy day, how a religious practice, a ritual, a prayer, a mitzvah, can "change something." What is it about the telephone that speaks to those mourners, so they could speak back through it? What is it that we can learn about our own experience and relationship to our rituals, so that they will speak to us as well?

Of the many people we hear speaking into the telephone, some approach it with curiosity ("so this is the wind telephone"); some with initial awkwardness ("what am I supposed to say?"); some with complete comfort, dialing their loved one's old telephone number before they speak. All end up in tears saying what is in their hearts. All seem to let go of the material limits of what we see as "real," and

embrace the expansion or deepening of reality that ritual, much like art, can give us. Nobody remarks, “but it isn’t connected to anything! It’s not a real phone!” They know that. If it were that kind of “real” phone, they wouldn’t bother to go to it, because “real” phones cannot open us up to speak our hearts to those who have died. This phone can. In fact, this “unreal” phone somehow allows those who come to a deeper reality than they otherwise could.

What gives this phone a kind of transcendence that helps those wishing to transcend? It may be helpful, in our secular context, to see this kind of ritual as art. Art and ritual have been linked from time immemorial. The great cultural critic Walter Benjamin talked about art as having a quality of “aura” a word tinged with the mystical, and Benjamin, a close friend of Gershom Scholem’s, knew a considerable amount about Jewish mysticism. When art is infused with “aura,” when you gaze at it, it gazes back at you. It is not a property of the thing itself, but more about the relationship

of the art to ourselves, and that relationship is connected to tradition. As Benjamin wrote, “[t]he uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition is itself thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. . . . It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function.”³

What that means is that the power of the wind telephone is partly related to the fact that it is shared. It has become a place of pilgrimage. People come with intention from all over specifically to that place, and because so many people have stepped inside to pour out their hearts, there remain traces of that brokenness and open heartedness, so that now when you walk in the telephone booth, all those traces can be felt. It is a place to be alone, but at the same time a place that is shared by thousands of people in an evolving tradition.

When I speak of art I do not mean only visual art. Judaism itself focuses on the art of the word. Our prayers are infused with poetry. Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionism, called mitzvot, or Jewish ritual “religious poetry in action.”⁴ That conception has been very helpful to me as a liberal Jew. The power or truth of a ritual does not depend on whether or not God literally handed it down to Moses on Sinai. Neither does it rely on whether it restates a rational proposition. If the point of poetry were to express a rational thought, we could just summarize the poem in prose and do away with the poetry. There *are* important parts of our tradition that express rational concepts, like our prophetic tradition’s demands for social and economic justice. But there are also parts of our tradition that, like poetry, help us to explore, as anthropologist Michael Jackson wrote, “the limits of . . . (‘reason,’ . . . or ‘rational principle’), when normal habits of thought and rules of social location are lost or disrupted,

when we confront sides of ourselves that ordinarily to do not see the light of day, yet from which new modes of consciousness and expression may emerge—a penumbral zone that Wallace Stevens alluded to in his image of ‘the palm at the end of the mind,’ standing ‘beyond thought,’ on ‘the edge of space,’ . . .”⁵

“Normal habits of thought and social location” are often lost at a time of a loved one’s death. Here, our rationality and our knowledge fail us. Can we continue a relationship with our loved ones after they die? Is there a way to reach out to them? “The world to come is not like this world,” the Talmud says, warning us against projecting our own form onto those after death. But how else can we express our concerns, love and loneliness, other than in the language of our own reality. How many of us have dreams of our loved ones after they died or a sense of their presence in places where we have spent time together. This is reflected in Hasidic stories, where the relationship between the bereaved

and the dead continue, such as the story of a woman whose late husband came to her in a dream asking for forgiveness and she cried out: ‘With all my heart I forgive you,’ and awoke comforted.”⁶ (Raphael 353)

Rabbi Yonatan in the Talmud asks, “Do the dead know so much? Isn’t it stated (quoting Ecclesiastes) “the dead know nothing.” (BT Berakhot 18a). Both sides of the argument are presented for many pages. Who wins? It remains an open question. Yet our tradition understands that although our knowledge is limited, many of us continue to have some kind of relationship with loved ones who die, which our rituals mediate. We express our love and caring for them through Kaddish, which is understood partly as a way to help them on their journey. We visit their graves and pour out our hearts to them, asking that their souls be bound up in the bond of life, knowing that our souls, in whatever form, will be bound up with theirs and all beings at some point. We light memorial candles, say Yizkor prayers, and

give tzedakah in their memories. These practices all transcend rationality. You cannot dissect the Kaddish prayer and understand why it helps us to reach beyond ourselves to connect. It is the religious poetry in action.

Death is a time that we can especially see the power of ritual. Much of life includes loss, and we always have a need to reach for something beyond the illusion of the fixed nature of what we call the “real.” The wind telephone is a small, contained space that seems to give focus and support both to those who grieve and to those who yearn. It enables them to express pain that is within, but also to look out of the glass of the small space of our lives and be transported beyond.

We have our own wind telephones in Judaism. Think of the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, or in Hebrew, the *Kotel*. The ritual at the *Kotel* consists of a paradoxically small and mundane action, writing a note, as a way to reach out beyond our limited and knowable world to something that transcends us. Like the Wind Telephone, the

Kotel is tinged with loss, which is why it is known as the Wailing Wall. Like the telephone, the *Kotel* is a pilgrimage site, part of its power is the traces of all the other tears and prayers, quite visible symbolically through the thousands of notes in the cracks of the wall. Like the Wind Telephone, the Wailing Wall is a place from which we can express and send off messages of our hearts to a place we could not otherwise reach. *This is prayer. This is why we are here today.*

Our prayers are like poetry. In Judaism, poetry itself is another kind of wind telephone. A whole book of the Bible, Psalms, is a collection of poetry to lift our souls by expressing life's pains, joys and yearnings. Psalm 23, "Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me" (23:4); Psalm 51, "Create a pure heart in me, O God; renew in me a true soul" (51:12); Psalm 19, "May the words of my mouth and the prayer of my heart be acceptable to You, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (19:15). The word for rock in Hebrew is *tzur*. The Talmud says, don't

read this word as *tzur*, rock, but rather *tzayar*, or artist, “You O Lord, are my Artist.” God is understood as an Artist, and it is through our art—our poetry and ritual—that we can reach out to our Source of all. The place of poetry is expressed before the Avodah service on Yom Kippur in the ancient poem *Ohila L’El*, which is translated in our *Kol Haneslama Machzor*: “the thoughts in a person’s heart are his to arrange, but the poetry comes from God.”

Not all of us can be poets, and some of us, like those who come to the wind telephone, just need to say in our own words what we feel. There is a tradition in Judaism called *Hitbodedut*, taught by the Rebbe Nachman of Brazlov of the 18th century. *L’hitboded* means to be by yourself, and Rebbe Nachman taught that it was important to take a set time every day, preferably out in nature, to simply talk to God in our own words, the way the Japanese were talking in the wind telephone to their loved ones. Rebbe Nachman told his Hasidim that they should do this in the language they know,

Yiddish at that time, not Hebrew, and just have a conversation. The important thing was that we set aside a set time daily and somehow, without the formality of Hebrew or prescribed prayer, take the opportunity to just have a conversation with the One who is beyond.

I want to offer these practices of *hitbodedut* and mitzvot, these rituals Kaplan called “poetry in action,” specifically as an invitation to those who are agnostic, because I think at their most poignant, these rituals and prayers embrace the stance of not knowing. They are not expressions of dogmatic knowing but rather expressions of a human yearning to reach beyond. As the liturgical poem *Anim Zemirot*, says, “And so I . . . imagine you, find names for you, yet never have known you.”

Agnosticism can be a very religious and open stance. I have been doing a lot of reading of Virginia Woolf and her family. For Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen who was a well-known agnostic, his agnosticism led him to a rejection of all

religion. What he most disliked about religion, he wrote in “An Agnostic’s Apology,” was the “whisper that all is well” when it wasn’t. “Dreams may be pleasanter for the moment than realities; but happiness must be won by adapting our lives to the realities.” His sister, on the other hand, Caroline Stephen, also left the Church of England because of her agnosticism. “The more vividly one feels the force of its eloquence,” she wrote of the Church of England’s liturgy in *Quaker Strongholds*, “the more, it seems to me, one must hesitate to adopt it as the language of one’s own soul.” But she didn’t stop there. She looked for a language that did speak from her soul and found it in Quakerism. For her as a religious person, it wasn’t about knowing. It was about “struggling towards truth, Goodness and beauty.”

Listening to the heartfelt conversations in the Wind Telephone, we don’t hear anyone using it as a way of false comfort. On the contrary, we hear people facing their own pain in a way that they wouldn’t otherwise have been able to

do. That can be a comfort, but not a false one. Our prayers, our psalms, are not here as an escape, but as a way to reach beyond to whatever you are called toward—Goodness, Truth, Light, Oneness. They are just words that strive to be, “the language of one’s own soul.” There is plenty of room in our tradition to reject and embrace. Embrace what speaks to you, leave aside for the moment what doesn’t, expect change and welcome the mystery.

The questions that we ask in our souls, in our holy spaces, in our telephone booths, so to speak, these are not questions of knowledge. They are attempts to reach beyond the fragments. Our rituals, art, and literature are our medium, whether it is our notes at the wall, our Yizkor prayers for our loved ones, or our mitzvot that express the beauty of life and seek the presence of the One. All we have is our own language. As Virginia Woolf herself wrote, “I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole . . . Perhaps this is the

strongest pleasure known to me. . . . it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a world of art; that we are parts of the work of art.”⁷

Judaism in its most inspiring embraces agnosticism. It understands that our names and images of God are metaphors, coming from our own finite language. Think of God as an Artist and our lives as a fragment of the great work of Art. As the verse in our prayer books from *Anim Zemirot* says: “Here’s parable and proverb and endless visions sung, and yet, beyond all imagery, behold you are one-- *Hincha echad b’chol dimyonot.*”⁸

May our bodies have an easy fast, our names be written in that great Book of Life, and our spirits be free on this Day of Awe to soar.

¹ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/597/one-last-thing-before-i-go?act=1#play>

² <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/597/transcript>

³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schoen Books, 2007), p. 223-4.

⁴ Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (Philadelphia and New York: Jewish Publication Society/ Reconstructionist Press, 1981), p. 434.

⁵ Michael Jackson, syllabus for the course at Harvard Divinity School, "Poetry and Religion," (HDS 3722).

⁶ Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, second edition (Lanham, Maryland: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), p. 353.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," in *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeane Schulkind (New York: A Harvest Book, 1985), p. 72.

⁸ Transl. by Joel Rosenberg, in *Kol Hanesama* (Wyncote, Pennsylvania: The Reconstructionist Press, 1996).