

Yom Kippur 5787 - Ne'ilah

"When a Closing Becomes an Opening"

By Rabbi Gabriel Botnick

The Mazkir service can be somewhat difficult. Calling to mind those we've loved and lost can leave us feeling emotionally raw, and can bring to mind those early days of mourning, when friends and acquaintances tried to comfort us with words of condolence and support. I always find that those interactions can be somewhat awkward or uncomfortable. It's never really easy to know exactly what to say to someone in mourning. We want to offer comfort, but the words that often first come to mind can sometimes feel hollow, or trite.

Someone might say: "Well, they're in a better place now" — which might reassure some people, but for others it simply doesn't ring true, and can even feel offensive. A more traditional Jew might say: HaMakom yenachem etchem, may the Holy One comfort you — which, also, can be either hit or miss, depending on who's receiving those words. I have always preferred to say zichrono livrachah, or zichronah livrachah, may their memory be a blessing, which doesn't rely on what that person thinks about God. Rather, it's an invitation to find comfort through reflecting on the times shared with the one who's passed.

But only after I began coming to England regularly — after Rose and I were married, but before we moved here permanently, nearly six years ago now — I encountered another way to offer words of comfort. An expression I had never before heard, neither growing up and living in the United States, nor in the times I lived in Israel, but that I now know to be quite common here in the UK: "I wish you long life."

About nine years ago, Rose's grandfather, Papa Henry, passed away. Rose and I found ourselves back in London for a visit that happened to coincide with Henry's first yahrzeit. I watched my father-in-law light the yahrzeit candle, and afterwards I turned to him and said: zichrono livrachah, may your father's memory be a blessing. Mark said "thank you," then asked if I had anything else to say. "Umm... I loved him very much? He was a great man." To which Mark responded: "Thank you. He was. But how about, 'I wish you long life'?" I was confused. "Why would you wish me long life?" "No," he explained, "you are supposed to say that to me. When someone is mourning, you say, 'I wish you long life.'"

Now, you have to understand: I had been working as a community rabbi for about five years by that point, on top of my five years of study, and my involvement in Jewish life for many years prior. But I had never, ever heard this phrase before. It turns out, wishing someone long life is

unique to British Jewry, as well as a few other Commonwealth countries, but it is not a universally practised Jewish custom.

And while, to me, the expression was simply unfamiliar, I know a number of people — many here this evening — who really struggle with these words. Why would we speak about a long life precisely when we are remembering a life that has ended? And when someone has died too young, these words can almost feel cruel. But over time, I've come to hear something quite beautiful in these words. To wish someone long life is not an attempt to ward off the evil eye. It's not suggesting that we need protection from someone's death rubbing off on us. Rather, it's saying: you should have many more years in which you continue to speak their name, and tell their stories, and keep their memory alive in this world.

In other words, saying "I wish you long life" may not be so different from saying *zichrono livrachah*, "may their memory be a blessing." Both expressions ask that the life which has ended continue to live on through us. That their love, their wisdom, their humour and values continue to shape the lives of those who knew them. Both expressions are really about legacy — about whether a person's legacy can continue to be present in the world after they themselves are no longer physically present.

Of course, this raises a more difficult matter: how do we know whether the life we are living now will be seen as a blessing once we are no longer here? How do we know whether we are creating the kind of legacy that others will be proud to carry on?

Well, our tradition offers at least one possible way to know, and I should say that the text in which that answer appears was first brought to my attention by my wife, Rose. You know, this is the first Yom Kippur that she and I have not observed together at the same synagogue, because it's the first year that we are both serving as community rabbis. Well, a while back, Rose and I were discussing ideas for our High Holiday sermons, and she told me that she was planning on using this text I'm about to share as the foundation for her own *Ne'ilah* sermon. Now, I don't know what direction her sermon wound up taking in the end, but the Torah I am about to share is very much credited to my brilliant wife.

There's a verse in the Book of Isaiah in which the prophet says: *vehayah emunat itecha chosen yeshu'ot chochmat va'da'at* — "the faithfulness of your times shall be a store of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge." It's an elegant verse, though, on first reading, it's not so obvious what it has to do with how we measure one's life. But in the Talmud, the sage Rava reads each of the six words in the verse as if they point towards six different questions — questions which, he

imagines, the heavenly court asks a person when they are brought to judgment for the life they had lived.

First: emunah, faith. Did you conduct your affairs faithfully? Itecha, your times: did you set aside fixed times for Torah study? Chosen, store: did you engage in bringing new life into the world? Yeshu'ot, redemption: did you look forward with hope towards redemption? Chochmah, wisdom: did you engage deeply with wisdom? And da'at, knowledge: did you derive an understanding of one thing through another?

These are curious questions, and not necessarily the questions we might expect to be asked. You would think the rabbis would be more likely to suggest that we'd be asked about our religious observance: how often did you pray? How many mitzvot did you perform? How much Torah did you study? But Rava's questions are more concerned with the broader texture of one's life, with the habits that help define a person's character.

"Did you conduct your affairs faithfully?" Not just were you technically honest, but did you have faith in others? Did you give people the benefit of the doubt? Did you resist the temptation to squeeze every possible advantage from a transaction, or to turn every encounter into a contest?

"Did you set aside time for Torah?" Not just practical, textual Torah study, but the way Torah study is meant to shape the way we approach everything: with curiosity, with a critical eye, with the patience to continue wrestling with something until we fully understand it.

"Did you engage in bringing new life into the world?" This isn't just asking about children. It's reaching beyond biology: did you support and nurture others? Did you teach them what you know and love? Did you encourage them, or help build something that will continue to sustain others in your absence?

"Did you look forward with hope towards redemption?" That is, did you leave room for the possibility that the world could look different? That people could do and be better? That relationships could be repaired? That something broken could still be made whole?

And then the final questions: did you engage deeply with wisdom? And did you derive an understanding of one thing through another? That is, did you take what you learned in one part of life and allow it to inform your understanding of another? Did you allow your experiences to deepen your comprehension and enrich your life, or did you simply let those opportunities pass you by?

Taken together, these questions offer a remarkably broad sense of what a meaningful life might contain: faithfulness, hope, and legacy; curiosity, wisdom, and understanding. And these are good questions to ask on Yom Kippur, as we begin to set intentions for the year ahead.

But perhaps six questions might be too many to ask, especially now, at the end of a long day, and roughly twenty-four hours into our fast. Perhaps there is a simpler way to measure a life?

There's an old, well-loved Chassidic story, long attributed to Reb Zusha of Hanipol, though its origins are somewhat difficult to pin down precisely. In the version most often told, Reb Zusha was lying on his deathbed, weeping. His students gathered around him, struggling to understand why he was crying. "Rebbe," they said, "you have led a righteous life. You have taught much Torah. You have served God. What do you have to cry about? Are you worried you'll be judged against the greatest figures of our tradition?"

Reb Zusha replied: when I enter the World to Come and stand before the heavenly court, I do not worry they will ask me, "Zusha, why were you not more like Abraham?" Or, "Zusha, why were you not more like Moses?" Because I know I was not blessed with the gifts that Hashem granted these great men. But I am afraid they will ask me: "Zusha, why were you not more like Zusha?" That is, why did you not fully embody the person you were meant to be?

This is the real fear, isn't it? Not falling short of someone else's ideals, but reaching the end of life without ever fully becoming the person we could have been. I suspect many of us live with that fear. Maybe we're not always aware of it. Maybe we can't even quite name it. But unless you've already taken the steps to live as fully and authentically as possible, I imagine that fear might be lingering somewhere in the back of your conscience.

And it's not only the fear of whether or not we're fully cultivating our potential. It's also the fear of what it will take, of what it will cost us, in order to do so. Because it takes bravery to have the conversations you might be avoiding — the conversations where you finally say that one thing you've been afraid to admit to a friend, relative, partner, or even yourself. It takes a real commitment of time, energy, and resources to learn the skills, language, or craft that the life you envision might require. And it takes vulnerability to let other people in on your dreams, to let them be a support to you, and to let them hold you accountable when you'd rather not be. Indeed, it takes a lot to become the people we're capable of becoming. And that, in and of itself, can be a significant barrier to setting off on the path towards self-realisation.

But maybe, for now, as the proverbial gates are about to close, we don't need to worry about arriving at some grand vision of who we might want to be in the future. Maybe instead, we

simply need to take that first step, to allow ourselves to move past the fear, and to ask: who is it that I want to be? What do I need to do to become that person? What conversations do I need to have? Who do I need with me to get there? We don't need to map out the full path tonight. We only need to ask that one question that can point us towards the right path.

The story of Reb Zusha is set at the end of his life. Rava's six questions are imagined to be asked at a moment when a life can no longer be changed. And we have just emerged from Mazkir, where we've had a chance to reflect on the lives that have already come to an end, and what it means for a life — a memory — to become a blessing. But Ne'ilah asks us to focus not on what was, but rather on what can still be, and how this moment, as the gates are just about to close, can gently guide us forward towards whatever possibility might be waiting for us in the year ahead.

G'mar chatimah tovah.