



## Yizkor 5778: What They Leave Us

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Last year, there was an extraordinary exhibit on Jerusalem, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In the midst of all the artifacts, one display case took my breath away. It contained medieval machzors – prayerbooks for these Days of Awe. Each was opened to an illuminated page with a gate, known as the Gate of Mercy. Blessed be God, says the prayer on the page, who, “opens for us the gates of mercy, giving light to those who await Your forgiveness.”<sup>1</sup>

There actually is a Shaar Rachamim, a Gate of Mercy, in the walls of the old city of Jerusalem. Now and for hundreds of years, that gate has been sealed – but on Yom Kippur, in ages past, it was that gate through which the scapegoat passed, out of the Temple and into the wilderness. Sins went out, and mercy and forgiveness came in.

But there is more that we know about the Temple gates. Rabbi Danny Nevins teaches:

...the custom was to enter the right door on the southern steps... and circle to the right, coming back out to exit the other gate. However, mourners were instructed to enter on the left and circle against the flow of traffic. People would notice this and ask them why they were walking backwards. The person would reply, “Because I am a mourner.” And the others would respond, “May the One who dwells in this house comfort you.”<sup>2</sup>

Mourners walked against the flow, the disruption in their lives shown by the disruption in their path. They would be noticed, seen and heard. They wouldn’t need to pretend everything was okay. In their mourning, they would be comforted.

Today, we pray to enter the Gate of Mercy, Shaar haRachamim. And today, we enter the Gate of Memory, Shaar haZikaron. We remember parents and grandparents, sisters and brothers; children and grandchildren, and friends gone too soon.

I’ve spoken, this Yom Kippur, about letting go and holding on. When we remember, we do both. We let go, if we can, of memories of the final weeks and days, when often our loved ones, distorted by pain and illness, were different versions of themselves. We let go, if we can, of the failings in our loved ones, and the flaws they brought out in us.

We hold on to objects, made precious by memory. Dominique Browning speaks evocatively of the beauty that clutter reveals:

...in living, we accumulate. We admire. We desire. We love. We collect. We display.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Duke Boehm and Melanie Halcomb, eds. *Jerusalem 1000-1400: Every People Under Heaven*. See Melanie Holcomb, “The Closed Gate,” pp.129-30, and illuminations and notes, p.141 and pp.143-44.

<sup>2</sup> <https://rabbinevins.com/2016/10/13/yom-kippur-5777-open-the-gates-of-mercy/>



And over the course of a lifetime, we forage, root and rummage around in our stuff, because that is part of what it means to be human. We treasure...

We live, and we pick up things along the way: the detritus of adventure; the vessels of mealtimes; the books and music of a life of the mind; the pleasures of our daily romps through the senses...

I am not done with living. I am not done with my things. I love them, in fact, more and more each year, as I recollect the journey that brought us together. I will cherish them, till death do us part.

And rather than fret about my inability to get rid of things, artfully, graciously, or otherwise, I am not only giving in to the desire to keep getting stuff, but I am also fantasizing about how I am going to pass my things on to my children....

I want to know, now, that forever after, I will be watching down on [my children] from the walls and the shelves, having somehow transmogrified myself into my stuff.”<sup>3</sup>

Plum Johnson, in her memoir, *They Left Us Everything*, describes her experience cleaning out her parents’ house, after twenty years of caring for them both before their deaths. It is a job she expects to take six weeks which ends up taking sixteen months, as she sorts through not only objects, but memory and grief, resentment and gratitude. The house that she would once circle outside of, to avoid going in, becomes her second home. She finds love letters and pre-wrapped presents, silver and china, war mementoes and a hornet’s nest, which her mother, Johnson recounts, had saved to show her grandchildren – along with her bridge group, her Bible study group, and her belly-dancing class. In one of the most moving moments, she describes finding this letter:

Something catches my eye – a small piece of folded paper... I unfold it and recognize Mum’s familiar handwriting. It’s a letter to me, dated on my fiftieth birthday. She tells me how much I mean to her and how much she loves me.

I gasp and start to tremble. “What’s wrong” asks Victor [my brother]... “This.” I hand him the letter as tears spill down my face. He starts to read it... *Darling, you’ve always been and always will be God’s blessing to me...* The he stops and looks at me tenderly.

“Why didn’t she ever give this to me?” I ask, sniffing. “She wrote it fourteen years ago.” Victor hands me a Kleenex. He wraps his arms around me and squeezes me in a long bear hug as I cry into his shoulder.

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<sup>3</sup> Dominique Browning, “Let’s Celebrate the Art of Clutter,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/31/style/lets-celebrate-the-art-of-clutter.html>



“She wanted you to have it now, I guess,” he says. “She knew you’d find it.”<sup>4</sup>

Johnson ends up grateful for the ways in which going through her parents’ house let her declutter their relationship. Going through the stuff helped her find what truly mattered. “I used to think,” she concludes, “parents should clean up their own mess before they depart this world; now I think just the opposite... Wait till your children are old enough to appreciate it, and then leave them everything.”<sup>5</sup>

As we come to this Gate of Memory, we remember the wisdom of the Song of Songs: Love is stronger than death. And we remember the teachings of our tradition, that we can ask for forgiveness, even after death;<sup>6</sup> that we can keep our connection, even after death; even though that connection is only a remnant of what we might want it to be.

[A story is told] about a young Jewish man, Joey Riklis, from Cleveland, Ohio, who goes to visit the [Western] Wall in Jerusalem after his father had died.

His father had been a survivor of the Holocaust and was an ardent practitioner of his Jewish faith. Joey had rebelled... and the two of them had been alienated for some time...

Joey had traveled to India and done his share of guru hopping in hopes of finding an alternative to his Hebrew religious heritage. But nothing truly satisfied or filled his spiritual longing. So he went to Israel to explore the heritage that he had formerly spurned. While there he noticed people scribbling notes on small pieces of paper and inserting them into the crevices of the Wall...

So Joey decided to write his own [note], addressed to his father. He wrote, “Dear Father, I beg you to forgive me for the pain I caused you. I loved you very much and I will never forget you. And please know that nothing that you taught me was in vain... I promise...”

Joey searched for an empty crevice in the Wall to place his petition. There were notes crammed and overflowing all over the place... he finally found a spot and inserted his small note into the crack.

As he did so he accidentally dislodged another that had been resting there, and it fell to the ground. He bent down and picked it up and was going to put it back when he was overcome by a powerful impulse to open the note and read it, which he did.

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<sup>4</sup> Plum Johnson, *They Left Us Everything: A Memoir* (Toronto, 2014), pp.186-87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.279.

<sup>6</sup> See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, The Laws of Repentance 2:11.



Here is what he read: “My Dear Son Joey: If you should ever happen to come to Israel and somehow... find this note, this is what I want you to know: I always loved you even when you hurt me, and I will never stop loving you. You are, and always will be, my beloved son. And Joey, please know that I forgive you for everything, and only hope that you in turn will forgive a foolish old man.” Signed, Adam Riklis, Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>7</sup>

We are not so lucky, most of us, to have such clear communication with our dead; but we reach to them now, through prayer and memory, through mercy and forgiveness. We remember them through what they left us: the objects we hold in our hands and the memories we hold in our hearts. “At the end of our lives,” Plum Johnson writes, “we become only memories. If we’re lucky, someone is passing those down.”<sup>8</sup>

We take time now to pass through the Gate of Memory.

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<sup>7</sup> Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, *Small Miracles: Extraordinary Coincidences from Everyday Life* (Avon, MA, 1997), retold here: <https://justinahurley.wordpress.com/2012/06/17/sunday-story-fathers-day-and-the-lesson-of-the-wailing-wall/>.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, p.2.53.