

## Carrying the Absence

Rabbi Sam Pollak

*We don't realize all the things* that will remind us of our loved ones.

At the end of last month, as my grandmother lay in her hospice bed, my mom, my husband Ari, and I went to her apartment to get a start on cleaning out her things. We had already spent many hours sitting by Grandma's bedside, and we were feeling antsy. She was asleep more and more, and the hospice nurses assured us it was okay to leave for a bit.

As we walked into her retirement community, I was reminded of all the times I saw Grandma there for lunch. About once a month, I used to meet Grandma in the front Bistro, order the oily fish and chips that always burned my mouth, and wait too long for the tiny kitchen to fill the lunch-rush tickets. But it was a blessing to have those hours with her, discussing the latest books we'd read and hearing family stories. And every time, I would find Grandma waiting for me to arrive, sitting in her red power chair, the electric scooter she used to get around.

I hadn't realized how much I associated that red power chair with Grandma. Not until I saw it empty.

When we arrived at her apartment to clean out her pantry, there it was: the red power chair, sitting outside her door. Sitting empty. On the back cushion I could see the name label, normally hidden from view when Grandma occupied the chair: Francine C. Rosenthal. There she was—or rather, there she wasn't. I would never see Grandma waiting for me in the red power chair again.

*When our loved ones die, their* absence becomes a kind of presence, but the hole left by their passing is also a way to feel them in our lives. I don't want to forget that image of Grandma's empty red power chair, even though it's painful. It also helps me remember her and feel her close.

This service, Yizkor, is a time for us to turn our attention to those absences we carry. Reciting the Yizkor prayers reminds us that the grieving process is never really finished. At least once a year, we return to care for the lack we feel in our lives left by

someone's passing. And by coming together for these prayers, we say to one another, "You do not have to carry that burden alone."

*The Jewish process of mourning is* one of slowly shutting the door on loss, but never quite closing it all the way. It offers us various stages of intensity, beginning with the week of *shiva*, when we are encouraged to stay home, to let others care for us, to let worldly concerns proceed outside, while we feel the depth of our grief inside. Then comes *shloshim*, when we are encouraged to leave the house, go back to work, to begin taking care of things. And to mourn a parent, we are encouraged to recite the *kaddish* in their memory every day for the entire year.

This is the *mourning* practice, not the grieving practice. Every year, on the anniversary of someone's death, we mark their *yahrzeit*, by reciting *kaddish* for them and lighting a candle that burns 24 hours. Like coming together for the Yizkor prayers, *yahrzeit* reminds us that though the mourning process has ended, grief has no terminus. The door never quite closes.

Dr. Pauline Boss, the grief researcher who developed the concept of ambiguous loss, teaches<sup>1</sup> that we ought to give up on what she calls the "myth of closure." "Closure' is a terrible word in human relationships," she says. "Once you've become attached to somebody, love them, care about them, when they're lost, you still care about them. It's different. It's a different dimension. But you can't just turn it off."

Judaism keeps it turned *on*. Yizkor keeps it turned *on*. Judaism is not a religion of closure, but of continued memory. It helps us hold on to the absences we feel in our lives, helps us preserve the connections we had with our loved ones, even if in a different form.

We don't try to shut the door on the emptiness left by death. Instead, we are compelled to prop it open.

*Even so, human beings are not* nearly as orderly as Jewish tradition often tries to treat us. Our emotional lives don't function on a schedule, flashes of memory catch us off guard, the items and activities we once did with someone evoke pain instead of joy.

And just as we each have a unique inner life, so do we each have unique relationships with those who die. Some deaths happen in their time and peacefully;

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<sup>1</sup> Tippet, Krista, and Pauline Boss. "Pauline Boss - The Myth of Closure." *On Being*, Krista Tippet Public Productions, 23 June 2016, [onbeing.org/programs/pauline-boss-the-myth-of-closure/](http://onbeing.org/programs/pauline-boss-the-myth-of-closure/).

others too soon and painfully. Some deaths end a close, loving relationship; others end an adversarial or abusive one. Grief in these circumstances is hard to hang on the framework of *shiva*, *shloshim*, and *yahrzeit*. Sometimes, we'd rather close the door entirely, and Yizkor opens old wounds.

In an article<sup>2</sup> for *Tablet Magazine* published a few years ago, contributor Jennifer Richler tells of her yearly journey with grief on the Days of Awe. 14 years before writing the column, Richler's mother died suddenly and tragically, when on a vacation hike she slipped and fell 100 feet. Since then, Richler had refused to stay in services during the prayer *Un'taneh Tokeh*—the prayer that says it is written who will live and who will die, and that repentance, prayer, and *zedakah* lessen the severity of the decree. To Richler, the prayer implied that her mother had not repented or prayed or given enough, so God took her. Richler couldn't accept that, so she left the room.

In time, and after much reading and conversation with her rabbi, she decided that she wanted to embrace her struggle instead of turning away from it. The yearly return to the *Un'taneh Tokeh* offered her a chance to reinterpret the words, and in doing so, to reinterpret the meaning she took from her mother's death. She found new ways to keep her mother's memory alive. She ended her 14-year streak, and stayed in the service for the prayer.

No one can prescribe the way each of us carries grief, in its endlessly complicated variations. The shape of our grief emerges out of the convergence of who we are, who *they* were, and the passage of time. But coming back every year to check that the door is still open, at least a crack, offers us a chance to move ourselves in a new life-affirming direction. It is a chance to find healing—not closure, but healing.

**Author Michael Chabon, in his novel *Moonglow*,**<sup>3</sup> tells the story of his own fictionalized grandfather. At one point, the grandfather explains to his grandson his experience of grieving his wife, the grandmother:

“If your wife, your brother, or God forbid, your child dies. It leaves a big hole in your life. It's much

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<sup>2</sup> Richler, Jennifer. “Why I Stopped Saying the High Holiday Prayer About God Deciding Who Lives and Dies.” *Tablet Magazine*, Nextbook Inc., 24 Sept. 2014, [www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/184581/stopped-saying-unetaneh-tokeh](http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/184581/stopped-saying-unetaneh-tokeh).

<sup>3</sup> Chabon, Michael. *Moonglow: A Novel*. Haper Perennial, 2017.

better not to pretend there's no hole. Not to try to, what do they say nowadays, get over it.

... "So, you know, when it's time for *kaddish*. You stand up in front of everybody and you point to the hole, and you say, 'Look at this. This is what I'm living with, this hole.' Eleven months, every week. It doesn't go away, you don't 'put it behind you.'

... "And then after a while you get used to it. I mean, that's the theory. That's why I went every week, no matter where I was, so I would get used to it. It worked that way with my parents. I guess I thought it would work with your grandmother, too." (386–387)

We pray that every week, every month, every year, we get a little more used to those empty spaces in our lives that loved ones once occupied. Even so, it is hard to point to that spot, year after year, and bear ourselves to one another.

Yet, that is also the beauty of joining as a community for *kaddish* and for Yizkor. We come together to acknowledge the absences each of us carries. We come together to support one another. We come together to affirm that, no matter what shape our grief takes, none of us is alone.

We each hold our grief in different ways, and we each are used to it to different degrees. But none of us needs to carry that burden by ourselves. Your community cares about you; your clergy cares about you. You are not alone.

***Today, as we remember all our*** loved ones, we recall lives of blessing and lives of hardship. We remember difficult relationships and easy ones. We bring to mind those who died too soon and those who were ready.

As we remember them, let us continue toward healing. Let us find renewed meaning in how we carry the emptiness they've left behind. Let us take the best of them to heart, and let us we share it with others.

May we strengthen one another, and may we know: none of us is alone.

*Zichronam liv'rachah*. May their memories be a source of blessing among us.