

With or Without Me

Yizkor 5774 (2013)
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A number of weeks ago, I noticed a beloved member of our community at our weekday morning service. As this person does not regularly attend the daily service, I assumed that he had come to mark a *Yurzeit*, the date commemorating the passing of a loved one.

As the service concluded with the mourners' *kaddish*, I noticed that this man did not join the recitation. Shortly after prayers ended, I went over to greet him and he seemed to have read my mind for I was immediately greeted with the following words: "Rabbi, I don't have a *Yurzeit*, I am here for me."

Though the person's comment was not intended to be overly profound, it somehow left a deep impression on me.

"I don't have a *Yurzeit*, I am here for me."

I know what he meant...but for a moment, imagine you were given the opportunity to observe your own *Yurzeit*; to account and take stock of your own life as though you were no longer here. "I don't have a *Yurzeit*, I am here for me." Such an opportunity would necessarily be distinct from the usual *Yurzeit* in one critical way – a *Yurzeit* invites us to reflect on a life that was, whereas this opportunity would allow us to reflect on a life that is yet to be.

In an essay titled, "*Wake Up from Your Slumber*," Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel zt"l, who served as the chief rabbi of Tel-Aviv from 1936 until his passing from the world in 1949, argued powerfully that the entire process of Teshuvah, of penitential return, can be summed with just a few short words – *immi u'biladi* – With me or without me?

In this vein, the penitent, the individual who wishes to transform and change his or her life, is likened to a person attending his or her own *Yurzeit* or even funeral. Mourning for the loss of

his own life, the penitent is forced to ask – What was life with me and what is life without me? What contributions have I made, or could have made, or should have made? Similarly, the mournful penitent wonders – How was my family or community with me and how are they now without me? What impact have I made on those I loved, or could have made, or should have made? In desperation, the penitent turns to his Holy Maker and asks of God – What is Your Creation with me or without me? What difference has my gift of life made in God’s world?

With great determination, as though fighting for his own lost life, the penitent now vows to live life differently, if only, if only he was given the chance to live life anew. Indeed, only now, only through the threat of no longer being, the penitent realizes the gift of life, the gift of time. As though speaking to God, as though speaking to his own self, or perhaps to those still alive, he is now ready to proclaim: Time is too scarce. Time is to savor. Time is sacred too.

Time is too scarce.

As a rabbi, people often send me their resumes with the hope of making some connections or helping with a possible lead. Now a resume is quite a fascinating artifact of life. Some resumes are airtight. Every year and sometimes even every month is accounted for. Other resumes however often come with several gaps. I am always curious about those resumes – One can’t help but wonder what happened in the years that are not included. Quite often, I even get to find out about those so called missing years. Indeed, at times, the most important information about a person is hidden within those years. For example, the woman who quit her job for three years so she could attend to her dying mother. Or the young man who realized that law school was just not for him and spent the rest of the year volunteering at a shelter. At other times however, people simply have unaccounted gaps.

Now, personally, I am not so worried about academic or professional unaccounted gaps. Life is a complex journey and each one of us, no matter how focused or goal oriented we may be, at some point or another, is bound to take a wrong turn, or make a U-turn, or take the scenic route.

Having said that, as a rabbi I am concerned about a very different sort of resume gap.

For a moment, imagine you had to write your resume as a member of a family – perhaps as a daughter or a son, a sister or a brother, a spouse, a father or a mother, or a grandchild. What gaps might you discover in this sort of exercise?

For a moment, imagine how you would account for the weeks that past without a phone call or the months that went by without a proper family meal, or perhaps even the years that went by without a quality visit.

Still for a moment, imagine a parenting resume that would force one to account for the missed opportunities to spend time with one's child and family. Or imagine a marriage resume that would force spouses to account for any loss time, missed dates, quiet dinners.

Imagine a resume that reads: 35 years as a daughter, with a 5 year gap. 18 years of parenting, with a three year gap. Or even 40 years of marriage and a 10 year gap.

In this vein, Rav Amiel's question – *immi u'biladi* (with me or without me) – challenges each of us to wonder: Have I been sufficiently present in my own life? Given that time is too scarce: Have we truly used our allotted time wisely and efficiently, sensibly and sensitively, constructively and creatively?

As noted earlier, Rav Amiel's question offers us an additional realization: Time is to savor.

A few months ago, a dear and beloved friend sent me a moving video presentation she had created in honor of a family celebration. The video mostly showed a montage of family photos over the years. The heart of the presentation included a sweet video of my friends' children playing dress up and acting out some sort of an impromptu skit or play. Now here is the part that got my attention: At the very edge of the video frame, my friend is seen seated on a chair,

texting or emailing on her smart phone. The video is quite powerful – while my dear and beloved friend is *in* this family video, she is clearly not really there.

As I watched the video, I couldn't help but see my own self in it. How many times have I been guilty of the same minor transgression and inadvertent sin?

Now let me be clear, my dear and beloved friend is a wonderful and dedicated mom. I think I'm a pretty good *abba* too. Like so many of us, my friend and I try to attend almost every one of our children's extracurricular activities and events. Nevertheless, like so many of us, we often forget that there is a critical difference between attending and being fully present. It is not enough to invest time; we must also learn to savor time.

This very point does not merely apply to our interpersonal relations but also to our very relationship with God. How many times has each one of us said the *Amidah*, the weekday or Shabbat prayer, without any focus or presence of mind? How many times have we sat in this very room, in the presence of the Divine, without any focus or presence of mind? How many mitzvot have we fulfilled this year without any internal fulfillment? Attendance is simply not enough; true service demands the full attention and presence of the heart.

In this vein, Rav Amiel's question – *immi u'biladi* (with me or without me) – challenges each of us to wonder: Even when I attended, even when I was actually there, was I sufficiently present in my life? Given that time needs to be savored: Have we truly used our allotted time wisely and efficiently, sensibly and sensitively, constructively and creatively?

Rav Amiel's question offers us yet another realization: Time is sacred too.

Over the summer, I was blessed to hear the daughter of R. David Hartman, Tova Hartman, teach a moving session about her late father's life and teachings. Towards the end of the session, Tova Hartman described how she studied Torah and Talmud with her father all of her

life and how their debate and disagreement formed a strong basis to their deep connection and relationship. Tova then went on to describe the day before her father died.

R. Hartman seemed unconscious; he was fragile, weak, and hanging somewhat between life and death. Tova described the scene with these words: "My mother and sister were there, and I spoke to him about something we learned about R. Akiva, [relating to an old disagreement we once had about a Talmudic account]. I said: "*Abba*, do you now agree with me." My mother said: "Tova you're killing him." My sister said: "Tova, don't you ever give up." I never did." And then Tova Hartman said: "In learning him now and teaching him as well...our conversation keeps on going and I am not giving up."

Time is both fleeting and eternal. Most moments are forgettable, but some moments live on for all time. Some time is sacred time.

In recent years, on rare and cherished occasions, like Tova Hartman and like so many in this room today, I have experienced the gentle and comforting presence of a loved one who is long gone.

When I was a young child, my grandfather, of blessed memory, loved taking me out for lunch. For that short hour, I had my *Nono's* full attention; we savored each and every moment and time became sanctified. Now a days, on rare occasions, at family or community meals, my *Nono* comes back to life and his presence is strongly felt at our family table. It may be our home, but for me, my *Nono* is the host and I am simply a guest seated at the foot of a table with a table-head that reaches the heavens.

Only a few weeks ago, during *Kabbalat Shabbat* here at CBI, a number of us broke into spontaneous dance. Soon enough, a few others joined in and our circle grew ever bigger and our intention grew ever deeper. For a split second, I was suddenly transported back in time, to the High Holidays services at the small shul Frayda and I attended in our early twenties in Montreal. Our rabbi at the time, R. Schmidman, of blessed memory, was nothing short of a Modern Orthodox rebbe; a rebel rabbi who seamlessly combined intellect and soul. In one

instant he would quote Rav Soloveitchik alongside Shakespeare and Blake, and at the very next moment he would break into *niggun* and get lost in both song and dance. As we danced that Shabbat evening here at CBI, I suddenly felt Rav Schmiddman dancing in our midst and tears began rolling down my eyes. It has been eight years since Rav Schmiddman left this world, but here in Berkeley he was well and alive. Meaningful time transcends the bounds of time. Time is not simply objective – time is sacred too.

In this vein, Rav Amiel's insight – *immi u'biladi* (with me or without me) must also be understood as with me and even without me. *Immi u'biladi* (with me and even without me) challenges each of us to wonder: What of my life will live on even without me, even when I am long gone? What contributions have I made that will go on, even without me, even when I am long gone? What impact have I made or influence did I have on those I loved that will linger with them even without me?

'With me and even without me' helps focus our attention on those things in life, be it people, relationships, communities, or mitzvot that transcend time and leave their mark for all time.

In just a few short moments we will shift our attention to the powerful *Yizkor* service. The *Yizkor* service, like a *Yurzeit*, and like Rav Amiel's insight, painfully reminds us of the existential nature of our life. If only, if only we had more time with a loved one, and Oh how we would savor that time, and Oh how we would make that time live on for all time.

Friends, time is just too scarce so time must be savored, for savored time becomes sacred time.

So at this time, permit me to turn to God and offer this prayer.

HaKadosh Baruch Ho – Holy and Blessed One:

This year, as we strive to reconnect with one another, with our loved ones, with our community, and with our world...

This year, as we strive to reconnect with You God, with Your Torah, and Your Mitzvoth...

Teach us God to live life more fully, to infuse presence and focus in each moment, word, and deed, to seize the eternal in the transient and passing.

This year, teach us God to distinguish between the holy and the profane, between attendance and presence, between living now and living for all time.

May we all be sealed and inscribed in the Book of Life, the Book of Sacred Time.