

“UNTIL GRAY HAIR, I WILL BEAR YOU”: God, Our Full Selves, and Yizkor

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WHEN MY OLDEST child was small, she, like most children, said many distinctive and memorable things. Those things kids say are funny and memorable because they stretch the boundaries of language, but also because they often contain profound truths in more primitive and basic language. Often, when she got upset and we would try to calm her down or correct her perspective, she would simply reply, “You can’t feel me.” An adult might have said something more sophisticated and less vivid, such as “I don’t think you and your analysis are able to truly capture the feelings I am holding inside that can’t be fully externalized.” But “you can’t feel me” says it much better and simpler: there is something about me that you don’t get. You just can’t see all of me. You can’t feel the entirety of what it is to be **me**.

I have thought about that for years now, not just as a nostalgic father, but in contemplating what it is to know another person. Do people ever really know us? Do we ever really know other people? Can we feel them? Almost by definition, we cannot and do not. Too often our mental images, even when they try to take account of more than one aspect of the person in front of us, end up producing something like a cubist painting—at best a flat hint at the multidimensionality of the thing. And an inevitable casualty of this endeavor is that those paintings often obscure the true integrated self even further.

Sometimes that lack of full knowledge about others manifests in guessing and speculation. Does she have

a temper that I have never seen? Is he really as nice as he seems? When Rabban Gamliel imposed, as an entry requirement to his *beit midrash*, a litmus test of “תוכו כבחו”—that only those whose outsides perfectly matched their insides could come in—eligibility rates plummeted, and the study hall was nearly empty (Berakhot 28a). Most people are complex; we cannot extrapolate from our fragmentary experiences of them to an accurate picture of the whole.

This can be frustrating—as it was to my daughter—when we feel that people don’t get **us**. Particularly as we get older, as we settle into professional and personal patterns, we may start to ask: Do people think this is all there is to me? My students know me primarily as a teacher of Talmud and *halakhah*, and maybe I can get them to see me as a cyclist as well. But they don’t see me as a parent or spouse or as a *shaliah tzibbur* on Yom Kippur. So do they know me? What about the versions of ourselves that were never fully realized, but that we also didn’t entirely leave behind? The courses of study we never pursued, the professions we never chose, marriages that ended but that were nonetheless constitutive of who we are—are these not also parts of our selves? How can people possibly know us if they don’t know and understand these things?

And so it is with God. It is not just that it is impossible to know an infinite Being. Yes, our experiences with God are all necessarily fragmentary and partial. But more than that, they are also distinctive, disjointed, and prone to compartmentalization. By the time we

are done with these varied experiences, we may be unsure whether we are encountering anything with any unity at all. This is captured by the Mekhilta, the early collection of *midrash* on the book of Shemot, which notes the range of experiences the Jewish people had with God:

מכילתא מסכתא דבחדש ה

נגלה על הים כגבור עושה מלחמה שנאמר:
"ה' איש מלחמה" (שמות טו:ג)

נגלה בסיני כזקן מלא רחמים...

שלא ליתן פתחון פה לאומות העולם לומר:
שתי רשויות הן.

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*God was revealed at the Sea as a warrior
hero, as it is said, "God is a warrior"
(Shemot 15:3).*

*God was revealed at Sinai like an elder, full
of mercy...*

*[This was so] that it should not give an
opening to the nations of the world to say,
"There are two powers!"*

God appeared differently at the Sea than at Sinai. This multivalent experience of God is a strong invitation to polytheism: Is it possible that these different experiences are manifestations of different and even dueling deities? No, says the *midrash*:

אלא: "אנכי ה' אלקיך" (שמות כב), אני
במצרים, אני על הים, אני בסיני, אני לשעבר,
אני לעתיד לבא, אני לעולם הזה, אני לעולם
הבא.

*Rather, "I am the Lord your God" (Shemot
20:2)—I am in Egypt, I am at the Sea, I
am at Sinai, I was in the past, I will be in
the future, I am in this world, I am in the
next world.*

That same God who appeared as a warrior is just the One we call Hashem. "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt," says God at Mount Sinai. Why this first person introduction here? And why bring in the Exodus at this moment of revelation? In order to teach: "I, the God you are encountering here at Sinai as a merciful elder, am the same God Who took you out of Egypt, the same God Who split the Sea for you as a warrior, the same God Who will deliver you in the

future and accompany you to the next world." It is like the *midrash* has God saying, "Try to feel me!" But, by clarifying that all these different aspects of God are God, it acknowledges how hard that is for us to do.

The desire to feel God in this way also seems to be part of our plaintive yearning in the Kedushah of Musaf:

והוא ישמיענו ברחמיו שנית לעיני כל חי להיות
לכם לאלקים: אני ה' אלקיכם.

*And God will inform us in God's mercy a
second time in the eyes of all the living to
be for you a God: "I am the Lord your
God."*

Give us another taste of Your presence, and clarify for us that it is **You**, the same You that we speak about, pray to, tell stories about; give us a sense of integration and wholeness.

Perhaps it is also a call for us to do the same thing we are asking of God. Since we are created in the image of God and are meant to imitate God, this *midrash* calls on us to be integrated people as much as we can, to share with ourselves and others all the parts of ourselves that make us who we are. People may still not be able to feel us, but we can at least do our part to share the fullness of who we are with those whom we would like to know us.

Reflecting on all of this makes Yizkor a particularly humbling experience. We sit here as the custodians of the memory of the departed. Sometimes we share that custody with others, whether they sit next to us or thousands of miles away. We may even tussle over the memory of those who have passed, arguing implicitly or explicitly with others about what their legacy is—or should be. But, if we are honest, we didn't fully know those people that we memorialize in these sacred moments. For those born before us, there are whole segments of their lives we simply did not know. For those whose lifespans were tragically contained within our own, we still did not spend every waking moment with them and could not know all aspects of their time on earth. Who has not been at a Shiva and seen the mourners surprised by a friend or colleague's vignette about the deceased that fills out a picture of the beloved? Even those who have tragically lost a child in the earliest stages of life may feel this. Who can truly know what is happening behind the veil of an infant's eyes, and what emotions are captured by both the cries

and the silence that punctuates them? In short, we don't ever fully know anyone.

But God does. And this is God's critical role in the Yizkor service. There is a remarkable set of verses in Yeshayahu—quoted in part in the continuation of the Mekhilta above—that hammer home how God is the only one who is there for us every step of the way:

ישעיה מו:ג-ד

שָׁמַעְנוּ אֵלֵינוּ בֵּית יַעֲקֹב וְכָל שְׂאֵרֵי בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
הַעֲמָסִים מִנִּי בֶטֶן הַנְּשָׂאִים מִנִּי רֶחֶם: וְעַד זָקְנָה
אֲנִי הוּא וְעַד שִׁיבָה אֲנִי אֶסְבֵּל אֲנִי עֲשִׂיתִי וְאֲנִי
אֶשָּׂא וְאֲנִי אֶסְבֵּל וְאֲמַלֵּט:

Yeshayahu 46:3-4

*Listen to me, house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the people
of Israel, I have borne you
from the belly, I have carried
you from the womb. Until old
age, it is me, until gray hair,
I will bear you. I have made
you and I will carry you; I will
bear you and I will deliver you.*

Yeshayahu here places God as uniquely present for every moment of our lives, from our earliest, unconscious moments until our last breath on earth. Precisely when we feel most alone, most vulnerable, least understood, the prophet reminds us of the everpresence of divine companionship.

Not everyone sees this facet of divine continuity as implicit in our remembrance of those we have lost. And indeed, God's place in this prayer has been contested. When Yosef Trumpeldor and his comrades—among whom was a relative of mine, one Ya'akov Tucker—fell at Tel Hai in 1920, the Labor Zionist leader Berel Katznelson composed an elegy that would play the mythic chords of the liturgy while avoiding the dissonance of God for a modern, atheist, or at best agnostic audience. And so he changed the opening of the memorial prayer to "יִזְכֹּר עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַנְּשָׂמוֹת הַטְּהוֹרוֹת שֶׁל בָּנָיו וּבָנוֹתָיו" - Let the **Jewish People** remember the pure souls of its sons and daughters" who fell in battle. This formulation was adopted by the IDF as the official liturgy for state memorial services. R. Shlomo Goren, as Chief Rabbi of the IDF, objected vociferously to this secularization of the text, and eventually succeeded in getting the official text altered to read

"יִזְכֹּר אֱלֹקִים אֶת הַנְּשָׂמוֹת הַטְּהוֹרוֹת" - Let **God** remember these pure souls."

Yes, this effort to put God back into Yizkor was part of the ongoing tension between the secular state and religious practice. But God's presence in the Yizkor prayer is about so much more than that. Particularly after a year of hearing this prayer over and over again for fallen soldiers, many of them young, cut off in the prime of their lives, we perhaps can feel more than ever how we need the figure of God to help us hold the memories of those whose fullness we cannot hold on our own. How many hours have we devoted to hearing reports, to learning about their stories? And the more we learn, the more they appear to us similar to our own children—the more we feel them, and the more we

feel their loss. And yet, also similar to our own children, we don't really know them. Not them, not the nearly 1,300 slain by Hamas on October 7th, not the many innocent people who have died in this last year's war, both in Israel and in Gaza, and not the millions upon millions of our people throughout our history persecuted, hunted, and

murdered because they were Jews. Try as we might, we can't feel them. Not really.

But God can. God is the בּוֹחֵן כֻּלִּיּוֹת (*bohein kelayot*), the One with the emotional X-ray vision to see our innermost parts, the One Who can paint a cubist painting of each and every person and have it look truly multidimensional, the only One Who can truly "feel us." Somewhere, in the book where everyone's signature is recorded, God has kept an accurate account in every fine detail of every story and every life. Somehow, God is able to hold all of them. Somehow, God is able to feel every single one of them.

יִזְכֹּר אֱלֹקִים אֶת נְשָׁמוֹת קְרוֹבֵינוּ—May God remember the fullness of all the people we call to mind on Yom Kippur, and while we strive to honor and remember the lives of those we have lost, may we take comfort in knowing that each soul is eternally remembered by the God who can really feel them, and to Whom they are never lost. ♦

“WE SIT HERE
AS THE CUSTODIANS
OF THE MEMORY
OF THE DEPARTED.”