

## Yizkor

It's been a long day and a long year. The gates are closing and day is fading to dusk. It is time. Time to mourn our losses and think about what really matters to us most. It is time to acknowledge our pain and to acknowledge the love that binds us.

We have had so many losses this year. There was a point in January when it felt like everyone was losing their mother. There was that period in April and early May when I began to leave a space on Shabbat morning for people to say the name of somebody they knew who had died and every week there were friends, neighbours, cousins, friend's parents – it felt like no-one had been left untouched by this dreadful pandemic and its consequences. And then there are those who lost their life partners this year, whose absence leaves a hole not just in their lives but in the life of our community too.

And not only did we lose people but the nature of the virus meant that the way in we usually mourn was interrupted. Funerals and shiva prayers were held on zoom, and although for some people this meant they could gather with relatives and friends who otherwise wouldn't have been able to come, there is something visceral and psychologically cathartic about our usual mourning practices – the walk to the graveside, putting earth on the coffin, sitting on shiva chairs, the way everyone turns up to support you at prayers, no invitation needed, it's just announced and people turn up – and the

absence of these or their pale shadow on zoom, has made the grieving process that much harder. So I want to acknowledge just how tough it's been this year – and that although our priority as rabbis was to make sure we didn't infect or inadvertently kill anyone else, that you prioritise the living, the mitzvah of pikuach nefesh, that came at a psychological cost for the newly bereaved and I'm truly sorry.

The imagery of the last service of Yom Kippur is all about standing at gates that have been open all day and are now closing. Standing at a gateway is always a liminal moment – we are at the boundary or threshold of something – one foot on one side, one on the other. It's a good moment to think about what we've been doing all day and where we want to go from this point.

The first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, Avraham Yizhak Kook said that someone who is grieving over their past mistakes or the problems of the world, must forgive themselves first of all. They must forgive themselves, then they must forgive everyone else – those who are closest to them, their family, their loved ones, their whole generation, their world and the whole universe – and in this way the good that is hidden away in everything will be revealed.

I invite you to try it as an exercise. Who do you need to forgive? It is I have discovered, an almost entirely internal process. In order to

forgive someone, I just have to choose to do it. And if I am able to, then I feel lighter inside. It's a kind of healing.

I think we've had a tough year and on the whole, we have risen magnificently to the occasion. I think we should forgive ourselves for whatever we might have done and acknowledge, thank and praise ourselves for all we have done right.

So I'd like to share with you a positive confession, a positive vidui, written by Rabbi Avi Weiss, inspired by Rav Kook's words on forgiveness.

We have loved. We have blessed. We have grown. We have spoken positively. We have raised up. We have shown compassion. We have acted enthusiastically. We have been empathetic. We have cultivated truth. We have given good advice. We have respected. We have learned. We have forgiven. We have comforted. We have been creative. We have stirred. We have been spiritual activists. We have been just. We have longed for the Land. We have been merciful. We have given full effort. We have supported. We have contributed. We have repaired.

There's a story by Franz Kafka of a person who stands in front of a gate for years and is not allowed to enter. He grows old. Eventually he comes to the end of his life and the gatekeeper says to him - this gate is only for you, you are the only one who can enter it - but now I'm going to close it. We all stand at the gate, all our lives, and we

have to choose whether to enter in or not. I don't know what your gate looks like but we're at the threshold again now. Will you come through and enter into next year? And if so what will you bring with you?

When we were in lockdown I read a book called *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* about a boy called Oskar, living in New York, grieving for his father who was killed in 9/11. But it turns out his grandmother is also living with suppressed grief about her family who were killed overnight during a bombing raid in Germany during the War. This is an extract from a letter that she finally writes to her grandson as she remembers the last night before the raid that killed her parents and sister.

"I said, I want to tell you something. She said, you can tell me tomorrow. I had never told her how much I loved her. She was my sister. We slept in the same bed. There was never a right time to say it. It was always unnecessary. The books in my father's shed were sighing. The sheets were rising and falling around me with Anna's breathing. I thought about waking her. But it was unnecessary. There would be other nights. And how can you say I love you to someone you love? I rolled onto my side and fell asleep next to her. Here is the point of everything I have been trying to tell you, Oskar. It's always necessary. I love you, Grandma".

The Yizkor service is not about death. It's about life and it's about love. And in a way, that's what the whole of Yom Kippur is about, as we enter the closing stage. It's about life and it's about love and it's about how our time on this earth is limited and it's always necessary to say what needs to be said. Don't wait until tomorrow. You can go through the gate at any time. Together let us demand one more year of life while there is still a small opening between heaven and earth. And a better year, before the gates finally close.

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