

## Yizkor Shemini Atzeret 5777

[new girl apologies – know that you are used to remembering those we have lost in the past year. I promise we will do this for our next yizkor, which is day 8 of pesah]

A unique aspect of today's service is the prayer for rain which Ashley will chant to open the repetition of the Musaf Amidah. It marks the beginning of a process – from today we begin to include a description of God in the Amidah as being the One who causes wind to blow and rain to fall. In the prayer itself, we invoked the memory of our ancestors and their connection to water as a way of asking for the blessing of rain that will make the land fruitful and fill our storehouses and ultimately our bodies with goodness. In the ancient world, rain was regarded as a positive – a gift from God, even a reward for good deeds.

Of course, these days, the majority of us live far removed from the agricultural cycle. And yet, there is a link to be made, I think, between the invoking of rain today and the Yizkor service which we are about to enter. Because we feel an instinctive link between rain and grief, a link which has occupied writers and poets for centuries.

For a moment, make a mental picture that to you says 'grief.' How many of the pictures in your imagination are muted in color and dark in tone? If it is not already raining in your picture, add some rain...do you see how that somehow the picture becomes yet darker, the grief yet more profound? Notice how even the thought of rain has the capacity to make our grief more painful and our isolation more acute.

To give another example from an author who specialized in using the weather outside to represent the internal reality of his characters, this is part of a longer poem by Thomas Hardy entitled Rain on a Grave. In it, a person is visiting the grave of a loved one during a rainstorm. Having set the scene, the narrator of the poem cries:

*Would that I lay there  
And she were housed here!  
Or better, together  
Were folded away there  
Exposed to one weather  
We both, – who would stray there  
When sunny the day there,  
Or evening was clear  
At the prime of the year.*

Rain and grief resonate in other ways, too. The Hebrew word for ‘eye’ – ayin – is related to the word for ‘a spring’ and the ancients understood the eyes as being the source of water in the body. And there’s a story in the Talmud in which a famous rabbi orders 13 days of fasting to bring on rain, but to no avail – it is the weeping of the congregation that finally causes the skies to open.

And of course, rain and grief are linked by the common element of water. Most – though not all – scientists agree that human beings are unique in expressing our grief through tears, and we also know that tears shed during grief have a unique chemical composition – which perhaps explains why they seem to burn more than the tears that come when we simply have something in our eyes, and why, perhaps, we feel better, if exhausted, after weeping. Perhaps those of us who are more familiar with rainy climates can remember similar kinds of relief when finally getting inside, out of the rain – the sense of weary safety that comes from being protected from the elements at last.

The link to our past that is created by our tears is a tangible one. Jack Katz, in his book *How Emotions Work*, suggests that when we weep in sorrow it is precisely because we are reaching back towards our past (in contrast, he argues that when we cry with happiness it is because we are responding to the moment as if it is eternal, with all those involved frozen in a blissfully immortalized present). As we weep for those we have lost, we reach back in our memories and into our hearts once again to be with the people who were so dear to us.

And I think that perhaps a parallel can be drawn between the power of rain to animate nature and the power of tears to evoke our memories. It is not an accident, perhaps, that if we weep during the prayer in which we ask God to remember those we loved so much who no longer walk in the world with us, those tears also animate our memories of them; the faces we loved, the hands we held, the safety and warmth we might have felt in their embrace, the feelings they generated in us.

It is hard, sometimes, to give ourselves the permission to grieve. In the rush of the modern world, we ask ourselves, 'Why aren't I feeling better by now?' But grief has its own chronology and its own rhythm, and as so many of us know, it will not be rushed. I remember, when I was learning to be a chaplain, a story about a mother whose child was frightened that she was crying, and the mother explaining, 'I have to cry ten thousand tears for Grandma and I haven't cried them all yet.' In the same way as we cannot stop a rainstorm, we cannot – and should not – leave our grief unexpressed.

Indeed, our tradition gives us a timely example that we should not. Tonight and tomorrow morning, we read the end of the Torah. In the Talmud we find the teaching that Moses wrote the eight verses recording his death. For ink, he used - his own tears.

So I invite all of us to step into the rain, for these next fifteen minutes or so, and if there are tears to be cried, to let them fall. They honor our loved ones and they honor us. And perhaps, once those tears have fallen, a new landscape will emerge.

We rise as we open the Ark to begin the Yizkor service.