

Yizkor

Pesah 5779 – *Tahat Kanfei HaShekhinah*

Let me open this service by mentioning some special memories sent to me by the families of those who left the world in this past year.

Marlene and Reuben Friedman's hearts were filled with grief when our beloved friend, Rhoda Meyer Portier passed away in October. A colleague of Reuben's, Rhoda – soon to become known as "Rho" – became fast friends with Marlene. She would arrange luncheons and dinners, raising her glass and toasting everyone in the longest toasts Marlene has ever heard. She was a steadfast friend during Marlene's surgery, filling her letter box with cards and gifts and her phone with calls. Although Reuben and Marlene miss Rho dearly, we are comforted by the fact that our love for her will be everlasting.

Laurie Sterbcow wrote this about her Dad (Louis Dollin, Mayer Leib):

As the sun shines brightly this Passover, the first one without you, seven months since saying goodbye, I am reminded of your magnificent and contagious smile that matches the exquisite blossoming flowers and tree foliage blooming this spring. Springtime was a favorite time of year for dad, as he would spend hours gardening, providing him and mom with so much joy throughout the year and as a result, often earning him gardening awards. The excitement of the start of baseball season at this time of year is the other event that reminds me so dearly of dad. Consecutively attending 73 years of opening day of the Cincinnati Reds Baseball Season and a season ticket holder for more than 40 years. I deeply miss the way he shared his intense love for his family, whether in a phone call or in his arms; his great sense of humor and often embarassingly funny Yiddish jokes that always made me laugh or cringe, and his thoughtful & compassionate nature, which will stay with me forever. I love you and miss you Dad!

And we remember all those who are no longer walking in the world with us, who we hold in our hearts.

And now, a few words before the Yizkor service.

*God full of compassion
who dwells on high
grant perfect rest
under the wings of the Shekhinah
to the soul of my loved one...*

The words of this medieval prayer are so familiar to us. They are the translation of the *el male rachamim*, chanted at every Ashkenazi funeral, during every Yizkor service and, traditionally, when reading the Torah during the week of a person's *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of their death.

There's a mystery at the heart of this prayer.

When we mention *the wings of the Shekhinah*, I wonder what we each of us perceives. Perhaps those of us who learn visually see a figure, maybe a female figure, or some kind of play of light and darkness. Those of us who first experience the world as sound might hear a rustling, or the timbre of an otherworldly wind. Those of us who are tactile might experience a sense of being enfolded, or sheltered.

Whichever way, I suspect that we perceive *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* as being above us, in some way, rather than 'down here.'

This is because that word *kanfei* tends to be translated as 'wings.' In the creation narrative, birds are described as *of kanaf* - winged birds. We read elsewhere in the Tanakh of the wings of storks, eagles, doves. And supernatural creatures in the Tanakh are also winged. The cherubim - who, far from being adorably chubby little baby-figures, are more like those fearsome winged, crowned lion-headed creatures we sometimes see in people's front gardens - have at least one pair of wings each. The serafim - the burning beings who fly around God's throne room in Isaiah's vision - have three pairs each.

And so, when we think of *kanfei ha-Shekhinah*, we might be envisaging at least one pair of wings. And that fits with the next part of the prayer - *be-ma'alot kedoshim u'tehorim* - in the purest heights of holiness - to which, one assumes, one can only arrive with their help.

But *kanaf* has other meanings. In fact, one of them is literally under our noses right now. In the third paragraph of the Shema, we say *venatnu al tzitzit ha-kanaf p'til tkhelet* - they shall put in the fringe on the *kanaf* - the corner of the garment - a blue thread. In this sense *kanaf* is more like a cloak or a shawl - a garment that is intended to enfold and protect the wearer.

At midnight on the threshing floor, Ruth says to Boaz:

Ani rut amatkha - I am Ruth, your handmaiden

ufarasta knafekha al amatka - Spread your garment over your handmaiden

ki goel ata - for you are a redeemer

Rather than imagining wings, we might imagine that the *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* create a sudden rush of warmth, similar to the warmth that comes from a person opening up their coat and wrapping us into it.

To whom does this coat belong? What, or who, is this Shekhinah?

We tend to think of the Shekhinah as feminine, because Kabbalah teaches that She is the feminine part of God, God's consort, with whom the masculine part of God unites on Shabbat. But before She became Her, as it were, the Shekhinah was the part of God that lived 'down here,' the indwelling, immanent presence of God among us. The Mishkan - same word! - the tabernacle in the desert, housed the Shekhinah, as did the Holy of Holies in the Temple. And when the Jewish people went into exile, the Shekhinah was exiled too, and wanders the earth with us, resting when we rest, standing at the head of the sickbed, watching silently as we put on tallit and tefillin.

So the the *El Male Rachamim* may not only be about the person we lost, love and miss. On the one hand, we are asking God to shelter the soul of our beloved under God's wings, somewhere on high. But on the other, the *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* are down here, with us.

And since we know it for a truth that part of those we love remains 'down here,' where we are, it must follow that the comfort that comes from *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* is a comfort that we, also, seek. Even as we envisage some higher realm in which their souls are protected, we seek the presence of the Shekhinah here, in this building, in this room.

Because the proper domain of the Shekhinah is with humanity. In the Talmud [Sanhedrin 46a] Rabbi Meir teaches:

When a human being suffers, the Shekhinah says - oh, my head is hurting! My heart is hurting!

When we are in pain, the Shekhinah is in pain. When we weep, She weeps also.

And now we can understand how it all fits together. If *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* - the garment of Shekhinah - enfolds us down here as well as 'up there,' it must follow that as each of us stands here remembering our grief, we can also represent the *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* for each other. In the same way as the prayer can be understood as referring to both Shekhinah above and Shekhinah below, it can be understood as referring to an external Shekhinah - God's presence moving between us in this room - and also to the image of God in which we ourselves are formed, and which is indwelling in each of us.

And so *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* enfold us on all sides - above, below, to the right and to the left, outside us and within us.

As we remember those who no longer walk with us in this life, let us gather together under the *kanfei ha-Shekhinah*. As we listen to the prayer, let us truly hear its reverberations and feel its power.

Let us pray that our loved ones find shelter above
Let us pray that we find comfort below.

May the memory of those we lost be blessed
May we be blessed
and may we bless each other
tahat kanfei ha-Shekhinah

and let us say, Amen.