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Don't Blink
Yom Kippur 5787
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“This is the meaning of existence: to reconcile liberty with service, the passing with the lasting, to weave the threads of temporality into the fabric of eternity.”¹

This summer, my grandma died. Reva Rothman Ferman. Artist, gardener, fisherman. Baba Sookie.

First: to anyone with grief in your heart today: *HaMakom yinachem*. May God, may this place, may being together in this place bring you some measure of comfort.

And to those of you who are not mourners but who may feel unsteady approaching the subject of finality, thank you for listening. May we all be witnesses for one another in the year to come.

My grandma died this summer. She was 88 years old. She had dementia for several years, and was no longer living a life she or any of us recognized as hers.

And despite her age, and her illness, her death was shocking.

She was one of those forces, one of those figures, who – in her magic and intensity, in the vastness of mystery she noticed in the smallest details, in the beauty she created and inspired and formed all around her and within everyone who knew her – seemed like she was never going to die.

What a privilege it is for any of us who have known a soul like this. And what a profound moment it is when someone who is larger than life is suddenly subject to its limits.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Death as Homecoming.”

The only person who seemed fully aware that Baba Sookie could and would die was Baba Sookie herself.

She had been collecting wine bottles for more than thirty years so that each person who attended her future funeral could take one home. A decade ago, she showed the family where she was storing the fancy decorative paper goods she had bought to be used at her shiva.

My Baba was a prolific artist, and for most of her life, she painted portraits. But over the last ten years of her life, she radically shifted to painting almost exclusively varieties of sunsets. Her portraits also moved from canvases onto the surfaces of small smooth rocks – which, in our tradition, of course, we place on graves.

Even before her sunset era, in moments of happiness, moments of sadness, and moments that to me seemed completely mundane, Baba would sometimes say out loud – with a strange mixture of exasperation and sadness and awe – *don't blink*.

Don't blink.

It all passes by so fast.

Like the blink of an eye. *Don't blink.*

These words rang in my head over and over again during the week of shiva that followed her death.

In so many ways, those seven days felt reminiscent of countless others at Baba's house. The place was still so full of her presence, and so full of commotion – of the life she had made there, the people she had nurtured, the art and whimsy that burst from every surface and corner. Baba's shiva, at Baba's house. Alive with cousins and friends, food and stories, coming and going.

For moments during the shiva, it was easy to forget that anything had changed. Baba must just be in another room, showing off a new miniature tree house she built. We would certainly all gather around her beautiful Passover table again in the spring.

It still feels impossible that this chapter – the one in which I was formed, the one that contained all the particular magic of childhood – is over. How strange that it lasted as long as it did, and its ending nevertheless opened such an enormous hole of grief. And stranger still to realize that, God willing, our lives will continue. That, from now on, I will live on the other side of a world that once seemed simply to be the world. I'm still discovering this world – where sacred memory, sacred longing, and gratitude whistle through the trees.

I know that so many can relate. There is something staggering about getting to live through a shift like this, as devastating as it is: to have belonged to one configuration of life, to have been formed by it, and then to find yourself still here as it passes out of existence.

But, this is the way of life. And the way of life confounds me.

I spend a lot of time in shiva houses. I spend a lot of time at cemeteries. And because of that, I am given just a glimpse of the sheer magnitude of loss and grief and uncertainty that people carry all the time.

Sometimes I look around this community and I am overwhelmed by how much pain can exist in any given room. How much we lose. How much grief and uncertainty we carry while still getting up, functioning, and living every day.

And increasingly, what we carry doesn't stop at the boundary of our individual lives. On top of it all, we are living through a period of acute collective grief and uncertainty.

We have shifted into a world in which we can no longer assume that what was true and alive yesterday will be true and alive tomorrow, or that the institutions that have seemed solid – the structures around which we have organized our lives and our self-understanding – will endure.

Unprecedented political upheaval, war, displacement. Democracies tested from within and failing, sometimes through the very mechanisms designed to sustain them. Compromised political power – what governments can do, what citizens will tolerate, what institutions can withstand – all this is becoming difficult to predict, difficult to see clearly.

Simultaneously, technologies are also developing beyond the scope of our understanding – altering how we think, communicate, create, work, and comprehend reality. Even how we understand what it means to be human. We are being changed by forces we are still trying to understand, moving at a speed that leaves remarkably little time to notice what has already become different. There is a violence to this constant velocity.

And of course, there is also the actual violence. My two homes, the United States and Israel – the places I was raised to love, raised to identify with on so many levels of my being, raised to believe in and to serve – feel shockingly unfamiliar. I’m struggling to trust my own intuitions about what will happen next, or even about what is possible. I am left rich in crises, overwhelmed by a heartache whose causes are so enormous and entangled that I cannot fully fathom their implications – for the world, and for my own understanding of myself within the world. I am not sure anyone alive was raised to understand precisely the world we are encountering today and, as it seems, the world we will encounter tomorrow.

I could continue to list what feels precarious or already lost, and so could you. And I won't. I know I would leave something crucial out. The chaos, disorder, uncertainty, and pain are so vast, and touch each life and conscience differently. A list would suggest that all of this can be neatly named, accounted for, crossed off. When, how can we even begin to comprehend what is happening around us?

Not long ago, I was walking through the National Mall. There was a gentle wind, the grass was soft and green, and all around me stood structures of stone, names and words engraved deep into their surfaces.

Inscribed on the FDR Memorial: “We must remember that any oppression, any injustice, any hatred, is a wedge designed to attack our civilization.”

In the shade of Lincoln's chamber: “With malice toward none with charity for all.”

I have walked past those words on countless breezy days. But this time, the monuments felt eerily like tombstones – memorializing not only people and events, but ideas that, in our deteriorating national climate, are no longer so secure, protected, centered.

Not that those ideals were ever fully realized. Many of the very people whose words are carved into those monuments participated in grotesque contradictions of them. But ideals do not have to be realized to organize a world. They can function as premises: lighthouses we believe we are moving towards, standards against which we understand our failures, promises that allow us to imagine where we could go next.

So what happens when the premises themselves begin to give way?

This year, I have come to think that the Jewish season which brings us here today begins not with Rosh Hashanah, or even with Elul, but seven weeks earlier, on Tisha B'Av.

Before the shofar. Before Selichot. Before *Hayom harat olam*, before we announce the world's conception, the Jewish calendar gives us a book about a world's destruction.

Eicha. Which roughly means – How?

The book we call *Eicha*, Lamentations, emerges from the devastation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE. The city was besieged and destroyed. The Temple – the center of religious life, but also the main institution around which the people understood themselves and their relationship with God – was burned. People were killed, displaced, and exiled. An entire political and religious order, that people relied on to understand who they were and how they belonged in the world, was shattered.

And we read in *Eicha*:

“Lonely sits the city once great with people.”

“Zion's roads are in mourning, empty of festival pilgrims; all her gates are deserted.”

“God has ended in Zion festival and sabbath.”

Eicha. How?

How could this happen? How could the Temple be destroyed? How could so much suffering unfold? How could an entire people's organizing structure cease to exist?

Eicha confronts something that is almost impossible to make sense of: the world could, and did, become different from what the people believed it would be. What they wanted it to be. What they dreamed it could be. What they had fought for it to become.

And in the wake of such devastation, the megillah does not offer a comforting ending, or a hopeful refrain. Instead, it longs:

Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuvah, chadesh yameinu k'kedem.

Turn us back to You and we will return; renew our days as before.

Having just viscerally processed the destruction, the people are tragically aware that their world can end. It just did. And, still, what they want is another turn instead.

I find this plea almost unbearably beautiful.

Because we know too. We know not only that everything we love can end, but that, eventually, it does. People, places, whole worlds we have built our lives inside of.

And still, we would take the whole thing again. Again and again. The pride and the pain. The love and the loss. The ridiculous speed of it all. How little we get to keep.

Bring us back. Let us return.

My Baba collected many things – miniatures, marbles, trolls, costumes, sculptures. She also collected crystal dining sets, as so many of her generation did: glasses and bowls stored safely behind the doors of a china cabinet, brought out for only for select holidays, then carefully washed, dried, and returned to their shelves.

For years, I have wondered why people accumulated so much of something so fragile – so difficult to move, so easily broken. So precarious an inheritance.

And yet the glasses remain in the cabinet after the people who chose them, registered for them, carried them home, raised raucous families around them, and took such care not to drop them are gone.

When the crystal is all that is left, it becomes clear that the crystal was never the most fragile thing in the room.

Our tradition is extraordinarily protective of human life. We are commanded to preserve it, to choose it. We violate any law to save it. *Ubacharta bachayim* – choose life. And still, built into our inheritance is the knowledge that every life we are commanded to protect will end.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the world annually, perpetually reborn. And ten days later, on Yom Kippur, we turn toward the fact that our worlds always inevitably end. And we don't only acknowledge this fact. We practice it. We dress in white, the color of the *tachrichim*, the simple garments in which Jews are buried. We fast, rehearsing the body's eventual end. Like I mentioned last night, when the ark is emptied of its Torahs during Kol Nidrei, we look into that suddenly bare wooden box and see the shape of our own coffins. Our rituals take realities we know intellectually and, for one day, let that knowledge enter our bodies and our spirits.

And, we say out loud what we whisper all year: *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l'olam va'ed*. Blessed is the name of God's glory, enduring beyond us.

At Ne'ilah, as the sun begins to set, we plead for the gates to stay open. The light disappears anyway. And in those final moments, over and over again, we say it aloud: *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l'olam va'ed*.

The sun is setting. Something endures. But for us, it's time to break the fast.

I am thinking differently this year about the relationship between what lasts and what does not, in a moment when we do not yet know what will hold of the principles and systems we have organized our lives around. Structures we have relied on are shifting. Conditions and configurations that have made our particular world coherent are changing.

I am not saying our world is ending, our country dying, or that we are facing devastation like in *Eicha*. We do not know what the future holds. But I think that crucial transformation is underway.

The empty ark beckons our attention.

And as we move through Yom Kippur, I am wondering how the way we intentionally confront and practice endings on this day might teach us about how to live in the deepest, most expansive way possible despite the harshness of the decree.

In a 2017 article titled “Dying Is a Sacred Act,” Frank Ostaseski, who founded the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco and has spent decades accompanying people through the final stages of their lives, reflects on what his encounters with death have taught him about living. He writes:

“Mirrors reflect the truth of what strikes their surface. The eyes of a dying patient are the clearest mirrors I have ever known. In their gaze, there is simply no place to hide. Over the years, the habits of my life have been reflected in those eyes.”

I think of the eyes of my Baba over the last years and weeks of her life. As her stories became blurrier, her sunset paintings darker, the faces on the rocks less a little expressive. *Maybe she will be better by Thanksgiving?*

How unnerving it is to watch a body and story unravel in tandem. *Paint with me, talk with me, please, remember me.* We try so desperately to hold onto the beautiful threads that make up the people – and places – we love, until, finally, inevitably, it all comes undone. And we stand on the threshold between life and death, exposed. With no place to hide.

On Yom Kippur, our rituals place us in that exposed position in order to open us to *cheshbon hanefesh* – an accounting of the whole soul.

Looking into the face of something or someone or someplace we love as it comes undone, how do we bear our own reflections?

Our tradition guides us.

Al Chet shechatanu lefanecha – we say together. For the wrongs we have committed, forgive us. Forgive me. For all the times I didn't answer. The times I didn't call. For the ways I made myself absent because confronting your fragility would have meant being honest about my own. For trying to force coherence instead of leaning into presence, tenderness, love, and courage. For the ways I tried to avoid what I could not save instead of tending to what remained. Can we forgive ourselves? Can I forgive myself? *Take me back to the river with you, one more day. Let's wait for the fish to bite like the world isn't spinning.*

Whether what we are looking back on was beautiful, painful, fragile, or fraught – and almost certainly when it was all of the above.

Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuvah. Take us back. Take me back to her house, to the moments when the story made sense.

Chadesh yameinu k'kedem.

One more day.

Truthfully, it would never be enough. This is the way of life, and the way of life confounds me. How absolutely stunningly beautiful everything can be. Even the hard things. And so fleeting you could just cry from how quickly one moment becomes another, from the ache of already missing something while it is still right there in front of you. *Don't blink.*

This is the condition and the strange privilege of being human. We lose and we mourn, sometimes even in the middle of the happiest moments, because we feel them passing while we are still inside them. Yet it is this fragility that allows us to feel so deeply. To yearn. To notice. To fight for what we love. To apologize while we still can. *One more day!*

In an essay titled “Death as Homecoming,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: “This is the meaning of existence: to reconcile liberty with service, the passing with the lasting, to weave the threads of temporality into the fabric of eternity.”

Something endures. It is not us. And.

Maybe this is how we make meaning out of our existence when something that formed us dies. We grieve what is ending, but we do not mistake its ending for the end of everything. We do our best to accept that we do not get to continue into eternity. And we embrace that we get to live inside it! We get to witness something much larger than ourselves changing and becoming! For a little while, astonishingly, we get to touch it, participate in it, even form it. **Eternity bears the marks of our having been here.**

*“With malice toward none, with charity for all.”*²

We carve into stone, an element that will materially outlast us, when we know we have touched Truth. When we know we have been touched by something greater than ourselves.

*“We must remember that any oppression, any injustice, any hatred, is a wedge designed to attack our civilization.”*³

We carve into stone not only to remember what has been lost. We carve into stone when we recognize that something which reaches beyond the boundaries of our finite lives has impacted us. When, even in our fleetingness, we have marked eternity, and eternity has marked us.

*“Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.”*⁴

We carve into stone not simply to commemorate an ending, but when we know a truth, an idea, a legacy will outlive us.

Reva Rothman. Artist, gardener, fisherman. Baba Sookie.

On this sacred day, as we gaze into the empty ark, as we bear our own reflections in the face of finality: What are we carving into stone? What legacies are we carrying forward, and why? In this time of transformation and change how will we leave our mark on what endures? How will we impact eternity?

² Abraham Lincoln, 1865. Inscribed on the north wall of the Lincoln Memorial.

³ Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1940. Inscribed beside the Civil Liberty Pool, in the passage between the Second and Third Term rooms of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial.

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., 1963. Inscribed on the south face of the Stone of Hope at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial.

After seven days of mourning, as I pulled away from Baba Sookie's shiva house, I was struck by the sight of my mom crouching just outside the front doorway; in the same spot where I had seen my Baba countless times, simultaneously waving goodbye and pulling weeds from between the bricks in the path.

In some mixture of love and sadness and gratitude, I felt a dual pang of obligation and curiosity about what it means to tend to, to beautify, and to make safer the path that leads to Baba's house, the path back home – to pull the weeds out from between the bricks even though they will always grow back, generation after generation.

Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuva, chadesh yameinu k'kedem.

In moments of change and transformation, may we turn the urgency of our finitude toward living with greater clarity, tenderness, generosity, and presence – for ourselves and for others.

May the brevity of our lives and the fragility of our world bind us more closely to every other fleeting being.

May our capacity to accept endings engender myriad beginnings within us and beyond.

May we confront eternity with awe and wonder. May we notice where we touch it, where it touches us, and recognize our obligation to shape what will continue beyond us.

May endings help us see ourselves honestly.

And may the knowledge of our own finality make us courageous.

Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuva.

Return us. And we will return.

Chadesh yameinu k'kedem.

May we be inscribed in the book of life.