

Shmini Atzeret 5782 - Yizkor
Rabbi Alex Freedman

When my grandfather of blessed memory died while I was in college, I was surrounded by people but felt all alone. Nobody there knew him except me. Nobody there really understood what I was feeling. Those moments of real grief were surreal:

It was like my life was on “pause” while everybody around me was on “play.”

Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever been in a room full of people and still felt utterly alone?

Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated Rosh HaShanah meals possibly with family and friends. Things may have been different because of the pandemic.

No matter how many people were at your Rosh HaShanah table - 2, 5, 10, 20, 50 - some people were missing.

Think about who joined your Rosh HaShanah table when you were younger. When you were ages 2, 5, 10, 20. Who were they? How many are still alive? How many are not?

The grown-ups at your Rosh HaShanah table while you were a child chirping “Shanah Tovah!” dipping apples in honey, enjoying an unforgettable feast with special family recipes - many of them are gone.

Maybe it's your grandparents. Maybe it's your parents or in-laws. Maybe it's a brother or sister. Maybe it's G-d forbid a husband or wife or child.

The chairs at this year's Rosh HaShanah meal may have looked full but you know some were empty. The room may have been full of laughter, but maybe, perhaps just for an instant, you felt alone. Maybe you felt “Pause” while everybody else was “Play.”

Think back to your childhood Rosh HaShanah meals and remember who sat at the table.

You remember their smiles; you remember their laughs; You remember their quirks; you remember their roles at the meal; You remember the foods they loved and those they couldn't stand; You remember the foods they cooked; you remember what they talked about. You remember what it felt like to hug them. You remember these things and you miss them so, so much.

“Laugh, and the world laughs with you; Weep, and you weep alone.”

So begins Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s famous poem, “Solitude.” She was inspired to write this poem in 1883 while traveling to attend the Wisconsin Governor’s inaugural ball.

Along the way, she met a young woman who was overcome by tears. Wilcox tried to comfort this woman for the rest of the trip. Shaken, the poet felt depressed and out of place at the party.

And then something pivotal happened: she found a mirror. She bravely looked at her reflection in the mirror, which reminded her of the other crying woman. In that emotional moment, she composed the poem’s opening line: “Laugh, and the world laughs with you; Weep, and you weep alone.”

Today, this is us. We gathered here on Rosh HaShanah, some of us in person, *laughing* as we said hello to friends in shul, *laughing* as we enjoyed festive meals together with family and friends. But at this moment, we do not laugh because we see ourselves in the mirror of Yizkor.

Some of us weep with our eyes, and all of us with our hearts, as we miss and mourn the losses of our beloved family.

Here is more of Wilcox’s poem:

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone;
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
But has trouble enough of its own.
Sing, and the hills will answer;
Sigh, it is lost on the air;
The echoes bound to a joyful sound,
But shrink from voicing care.

If you’re in this room now, you’re missing someone you love. Probably someone at those Rosh HaShanah meals.

However...though part of you may *feel* alone, you are *not* alone. Because you are Jewish, and to be Jewish is to never be alone.

We are not alone because Jews affirm the presence, even in the darkest corners of despair, of our loved one's *Neshama*, soul; of the presence of the community; and of the presence of Hashem.

We believe that while a person dies and their body remains here on earth, the immortal soul ascends toward the immortal G-d. We affirm the soul's permanence when we place a pebble - not a flower - on the headstones at a Jewish cemetery. Flowers, beautiful they may be, wither and die. But a rock, like the soul, is everlasting.

I've stood by some of your sides at unveilings over the past few years. Before and after, some of you have told me that you believe that while the person has died, part of him or her is still present in this world. You hear their voice in your head. You see their face in your mind. You "talk" to them in some inaudible way. Or you talk to them aloud. And you along with your children name the next generation after deceased relatives. For part of them remains here with us. This is what you've told me. You love them so much. *Soul much*. When you feel alone, think of their *Neshama*.

We are not alone because we are surrounded by community. Look around you. See the people who are with us today, making sure we don't feel alone. Know there are others watching on the livestream at this moment. Or, you could say, we are alone, but we are alone together, in the words of Rabbi Simon Greenberg. We're all experiencing the same thing for different people in the same ways differently.

There are a dizzying number of rules, rituals, and customs for mourners. But I want you to see that many of them share this singular goal: to never let another feel alone. Here are some examples: the laws of mourning say that one should remain with a dying person to the very end. Then, a *Shomer* stays with the body until burial. At the end of a funeral, the *Shurot*, two lines formed by visitors, demonstrate that the community stands shoulder to shoulder in their support. The community then fills the mourner's house for Shiva, a seven-day hug to reassure them of their love. And whenever one says Kaddish afterward, they must first find a Minyan in order to experience the community's presence again and again. And now at Yizkor, again.

Some of you have told me that you have traveled far to find a Minyan, and you now feel a new closeness to the Jewish community - strangers who have enabled you to say Kaddish. Strangers who didn't let you feel alone. Perhaps the most powerful part of Kaddish isn't the words; it's the other people in the room. When you feel alone, look around at the community.

Finally, we are not alone because G-d is near. To be Jewish is to never be alone, even when you're by yourself.

A Midrash presents the image of a mirror, so appropriate for this Yizkor moment of reflection. The person we see in the mirror appears to be twice as far from us as it really is. But when we take a step toward the mirror, our reflection takes a step toward us. We feel that we take one step but we really take two. G-d says, "Take one step toward Me and I will meet you more than halfway." G-d is the strength we find that enables us to move even when our grief paralyzes us.

Sometimes we sense G-d's presence in the moment; sometimes we realize it after the fact; sometimes we're unaware; sometimes we feel G-d's absence. But we can only have our hand held when we extend our hand. I think this is the meaning of the verse in Psalm 27, *LDavid*, the Psalm of the High Holiday season. It reads, "Though my father and mother leave me, Hashem will gather me in."

The closest I've come to experiencing this myself was when my grandfather died while I was in college. Nobody at school knew him, and I was away from home. I felt alone, no other way to say it. Then my Hillel rabbi asked me two questions: "How are you doing? Can you tell me about your grandfather?" In that moment, in my car on a Saturday night after pickup basketball, I felt his comfort. And in his comfort, I felt G-d's too. When you feel alone, open your hearts to Hashem.

Here's what I would add to the poem "Solitude":

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;

Weep, but do not feel alone.

For you are loved by the One high above

And people, who raise you when you're prone.

Now there are younger generations at the table dipping apples in honey. Perhaps these kids are named for relatives who sat at our first Rosh HaShanah meals. These kids can never *replace* our loved ones. But at the same time, these kids add something that's never existed before. Now *we* are part of their memories as well.

Whenever you *feel* alone, remember that you are not alone. For you are Jewish, and to be Jewish is to never be alone.

That should be the final word not only on this Yizkor, but every day. Indeed, it already is. On Shabbat at this synagogue, and in some synagogues every single day, we close our service with Adon Olam. You know the final words: *BYado Afkid Ruhi B'Et Ishan VAira;*

V'Im Ruchi Gviati Adonai Li VLo Ira. I place my spirit in G-d's hand when I sleep and when I wake. And along with my spirit, my body. Hashem is with me; I shall not be afraid.

I shall not be afraid, for I am not alone.