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Yizkor – Yom Kippur 5773 September 25, 2012

“Yizkor is the Castle”

Some words for us at this hour of Yizkor – based upon a story written by the Nobel Prize-winning Yiddish author, Isaac Bashevis Singer. Its name in Yiddish is *“Der Kholem fun Menashe – “Menashe’s Dream.”*

Menashe was an orphan. He lived with his uncle Mendel, who was a poor man who couldn’t even manage to feed and clothe his own children. Menashe...had begun to ask questions as soon as he could talk. How high is the sky? How deep is the earth? What is beyond the edge of the world? Why are people born? Why do they die?

It was a hot and humid summer day. A golden haze hovered over the village. . . . Menashe quarreled with his Aunt Dvosha and left the house without eating lunch. He was about twelve, with black eyes and sunken cheeks. He wore a torn jacket and was barefoot. . . .

The village in which he lived stood in a forest that surrounded it like a sash and was said to stretch as far as Lublin. It was blueberry time, and here and there one might also find wild strawberries. Menashe made his way through pastures and wheat fields. He was hungry, and he tore off a stalk of wheat to chew on the grain. In the meadows, cows were lying down, too hot even to whisk off the flies with their tails. . . .

Once Menashe entered the forest, it was cooler. The pine trees stood straight as pillars, and on their brownish bark hung golden necklaces, the light of the sun shining through the pine needles. The sounds of cuckoo and woodpecker were heard, and an unseen bird kept repeating the same eerie screech. . . The forest was still, and yet full of voices and echoes.

He wandered deeper and deeper into the forest... He was hungry, his head ached, and his knees felt weak. "Am I getting sick?" he thought. "Maybe I'm going to die. Then I will soon be with Daddy and Mama." When he came to a blueberry patch, he sat down, picked one berry after another, and popped them into his mouth. But they did not satisfy his hunger. Flowers with intoxicating odors grew among the blueberries. Without realizing it, Menashe stretched full length on the forest floor. He fell asleep, but in his dream he continued walking.

The trees became even taller, the smells stronger, huge birds flew from branch to branch. The sun was setting. The forest grew thinner, and he soon came out on a plain with a broad view of the evening sky. Suddenly a castle appeared in the twilight. Menashe had never seen such a beautiful structure. Its roof was of silver and from it rose a crystal tower. Its many tall windows were as high as the building itself. Menashe went up to one of the windows and looked in. On the wall opposite him, he saw his own portrait hanging. He was dressed in luxurious clothes such as he had never owned. The huge room was empty.

"Why is the castle empty?" he wondered. "And why is my portrait hanging on the wall?" . . . Then doors opened where there had been none before, and men and women came into the room. They were dressed in white satin, and the women wore jewels and held holiday prayer books with gold-embossed covers. Menashe gazed in astonishment. He recognized these people. "*Aleh zeineh farshtorbeneh kroyvim*" – all of his long-dead relatives – "*tateh, mameh, bobeh, zaydeh.*" His father, his mother, his grandfathers and grandmothers, and other relatives as well. He wanted to rush over to them, hug them and kiss them, but the window glass stood in his way. He began to cry.

His paternal grandfather, Tobias the scribe, separated himself from the group and came to the window. The old man's beard was as white as his long coat. He looked both ancient and young. "Why are you crying?" he asked. Despite the glass that separated them, Menashe heard him clearly.

"Are you my Grandfather Tobias?"

"Yes, my child. I am your grandfather."

"Who does this castle belong to?"

"To all of us."

"To me, too?"

“Of course. To the whole family.”

“Grandpa, let me in,” Menashe said. “I want to speak to my father and mother.”

His grandfather looked at him lovingly and said, “One day you will live with us here, but the time has not yet come.”

“How long do I have to wait?”

“That is a secret. It will not be for many, many years.”

“Grandpa, I don’t want to wait so long. I’m hungry and thirsty and tired. Please let me in. I miss my father and mother and you and Grandma. I don’t want to be an orphan.”

“My dear child. We know how you feel. We think about you, and we love you. We are all waiting for the time when we will be together, but you must be patient. You have a long journey to take before you come here to stay.”

“Please, just let me in for a few minutes.”

Grandfather Tobias left the window and took counsel with other members of the family. When he returned, he said, “You may come in, but only for a little while. We will show you around the castle and let you see some of our treasures, but then you must leave.”

A door opened, and Menashe stepped inside. He was no sooner over the threshold than his hunger and weariness vanished. He embraced his parents, and they kissed and hugged him. But they didn’t utter a word. He felt strangely light. He floated along, and his family floated with him. His grandfather opened door after door and each time Menashe’s astonishment grew.

One room was filled with racks of boy’s clothing – pants, jackets, shirts, coats. Menashe realized that these were the clothes he had worn as far back as he could remember.

. . . .A second door opened, and he saw all the toys he had ever owned: the tin soldiers his father had bought him; the jumping clown his mother had brought back from Lublin; the whistles and harmonicas; the teddy bear Grandpa had given him one Purim... The notebooks in which he had practiced writing, his pencils and Bible lay on a table.

. . . .Menashe could hardly overcome his wonder when a third door opened. This room was filled with soap bubbles. They did not burst as soap bubbles do, but floated serenely about, reflecting all the colors of the rainbow. . . . These were the bubbles he used to blow from his favorite bubble pipe. Now they seemed to have a life of their own.

A fourth door opened. Menashe entered a room with no one in it, yet it was full of the sounds of happy talk, song and laughter. Menashe heard his own voice and the songs he used to sing when he lived at home with his parents. He also heard the voices of his former playmates, some of whom he had long forgotten.

The fifth door led to a large hall. It was filled with all the stories his parents had told him at bedtime. . . warriors and princesses, giants, dwarfs, wizards and kings.

Menashe barely had time to take them all in when a sixth door opened. Here everything was changing constantly. The walls of the room turned like a carousel. Events flashed by. A golden horse became a blue butterfly; a rose as bright as the sun became a goblet out of which flew fiery grasshoppers, purple fauns and silver bats. . . . Giants waved their swords in the air... riding lions (and) served goblets of wine and trays filled with pomegranates. For a moment, Menashe did not understand what it all meant. Then he realized that he was seeing his dreams.

Behind the seventh door, Menashe glimpsed men and women, animals and many things that were completely strange to him. The images were not as vivid as they had been in the other rooms. The figures were transparent and surrounded by mist. On the threshold stood a girl Menashe's own age. She had long golden braids. Although Menashe could not see her clearly, he liked her at once. For the first time he turned to his grandfather. "What is all this?" he asked. And his grandfather replied, "These are the people and events of your future."

"Where am I?" Menashe asked.

"You are in a castle that has many names. We like to call it *the place where nothing is lost*. There are many more wonders here, but now it is time for you to leave."

Menashe wanted to remain in this strange place forever, together with his parents and grandparents. He looked questioningly at his grandfather, who shook his head. . . . His parents silently bade him farewell, and his face became wet and hot from their kisses. At that moment everything disappeared – the castle, his parents, his grandparents, the girl.

Menashe shivered and awoke. It was night in the forest. Dew was falling. High above the crowns of the pine trees the full moon shone and the stars twinkled. Menashe looked into the face of a girl who was bending over him. She was barefoot and wore a patched skirt. Her long, braided hair shone gold in the moonlight. She was shaking him and saying, “Get up, get up. It is late, and you can’t stay here in the forest.”

Menashe sat up. “Who are you?”

“I was looking for berries, and I found you here. I’ve been trying to wake you.”

“What’s your name?”

“Channeleh. We moved into the village last week.”

She looked familiar, but he could not remember meeting her before. Suddenly he knew. She was the girl he had seen in the seventh room, before he woke up.

“You lay there like dead. I was so frightened when I saw you. Were you dreaming? Your face was so pale, and your lips were moving.”

“Yes, I did have a dream.”

“What about?”

“A castle.”

“What kind of castle?”

Menashe did not reply, and the girl did not repeat her question. She stretched out her hand to him and helped him get up. Together they started for home. The moon had never seemed so light or the stars so close. They walked with their shadows behind them.

. . . Menashe knew that his uncle would be angry at him for coming home late. His aunt would scold him for leaving without his lunch. But these things no longer mattered.

. . . Among the undergrowth and wild mushrooms... emerged... a song that is heard only by those who know that everything lives, and nothing in time can ever be lost.

We, who reach for the embrace of Yizkor, yearn for what Menashe sought. We hunger to live somehow in both the land of the here and now, and the land of our dreams and memories... to make them, perhaps, into a single place.

Menashe, a wounded orphan, like so many of us, discovers that it's possible – to wander into that magical place where nothing is lost, the castle that provides us comfort, even while we continue to bear the awesome weight of absence... a weight that can crush us, if we let it.

Is it some world of tomorrow... a place that exists only in our dreams? No, *Yizkor is the castle*. We are sitting with one another in the castle – courageously entering each chamber, pushing open the doors of our broken hearts, visiting the ones we so loved and miss... our husbands, our wives... our mothers, our fathers... our Bubbes, our Zaydes... our children, taken from us far too soon.

Behind those doors we so often fear even to touch, today we are brave enough once again to feel the kiss of their lips, the unique touch of their hand. We can actually feel them again in this castle.

And also here – and also outside these doors – lies the seventh door... where life still awaits us. And yes, there are loving mysteries that reside behind it, if we will but turn the knob. Let our Yizkor prayers on this day escort us through each door, even the seventh. And at this hour of inspiration, let us be renewed by that song “heard only by those who know that everything lives, and nothing in time can ever be lost.”