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“The Abandoned Room”

Many of you know that Allison and I sent our eldest child Micah off to his freshman year in college just a few weeks ago. In some ways, it felt impossible that we could already be at that stage in our lives – the stage where our everyday family living in our home begins to contract. And yet, in so many other ways, it was a moment whose time had clearly come. Micah was ready, and we knew it, even if our hearts were not as ready as he was.

For months, I had navigated my anxiety about what it would feel like to move him into his dorm room and turn around and say goodbye. But when the moment actually came, it was filled more with anticipation for his future than with wistfulness about the past. Allison and I got on the plane and headed home, and I thought I had weathered the big transition. But I hadn't yet walked into his bedroom in our house, nor had I really done much thinking about what that was going to feel like.

My first foray into Micah's abandoned room was something of an emotional cascade, as I turned in place, looking at every memento of his childhood – his football cards, the preschool graduation photo, his high school yearbooks, his first little league home run ball, his Harry Potter books, his black belt certificate in karate, even a few of his old stuffed animals. Everything was there in its place, and suddenly, remembering it all began to hurt – because I knew it would never be the same again.

I studiously avoided returning to that room for about two weeks. I just wasn't ready to confront it. I didn't want anything in there to move, because if it all stayed the same, I could perhaps suspend our family in that moment in my imagination, as if time hadn't progressed.

No tragedy had occurred, of course. Quite the opposite, in fact. But there was loss. There was the closing of a chapter. There was grief. And that hunger to suspend reality got me thinking about so many of you, who have sustained much more heartbreaking losses... not just the closing of a chapter, but the closing an entire life story.

When someone we loved deeply dies, we often struggle with that determination to suspend reality, to slow down the changes, so as to fend off the acceptance of what has taken place. Perhaps if I just keep that door

closed, if I don't empty his closet, or donate her books, or sort through her papers, I can stay nearer to the time when he was here, when she was with me, when everything was the way I so desperately wish it still was.

Right before Rosh Hashanah, I reached out to a dear friend on the east coast who lost her husband nearly one year ago. And when I asked how she was progressing through her mourning, she wrote back, telling me about her caring friends, her time with her grandchildren, her teaching work, her travels to France. But finally she mined downward to the bottom line: her husband's guitars, which were such an enormous part of his life and identity. As for the guitars, she wrote: "They sit, unplayed and silent, in their cases, waiting for me to send them to their new homes. I have not had the strength or resolve to face that, though I know it is something I need to do."

This hour of *Yizkor* arrives without welcome for us, especially with the dawning of a new year, because it attests unapologetically to time's passing. Indeed, it can't all stay the same without them. It hasn't. Reality has proven resistant to suspension, no matter how much we may leave things and feelings exactly where they have been, untouched, unscathed. And so this service has come to uproot all of that. For some, it is here for the very first time, a dreaded intrusion amid the raw grief of new loss. For many others, this service has returned, like clockwork, to affirm just how real the absences in our lives have become. And for us all, we are reaching upward, and outward to each other, seeking the strength and the resolve to face it – to walk back into that abandoned room, and to allow a new tomorrow to come, so that their legacies can live again... so that we can live again.

I have always been taken by Bob Dylan's suggestion that "museums are cemeteries." I think what he meant by that is that anything intended solely to preserve the past lacks the capacity to teach new lessons, to touch new souls, to inspire new wanderings. And this, of course, is never what we wanted for our departed loved ones. We want to be the ones who give them new life, not the ones who close their book, with ourselves pressed inside the pages.

So how do we do that? How do we get there? Perhaps some wisdom can be found in the words of the acclaimed contemporary liturgist, Marcia Falk, who wrote: "...you know that time, though imperfect, is diligent, and wrestles down grief, and that all things are born small and grow large – except grief, which is born large and grows small."

So even while we have been battling fiercely not to let go, to leave it all untouched, time has been loosening our grip – and this is actually a blessing, not a curse. With our hands open, not clutching what was so tightly, we have an exposed palm extended outward, ready to give away something precious of what they gave to us.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Dara Frimmer, suffered a terrible loss just two years ago, when her 29-week-old fetus died in utero without warning. Not surprisingly, she and her husband Michael descended into a deep and overwhelming grief that made it difficult even to breathe. And they fought desperately to leave that abandoned room intact – to hold fast to the dreams they had nourished for their new little one and themselves.

But with the love and support of so many, and an uneasy trust in the transformative power of time, they slowly released the grip of their hand, and discovered what was theirs to give from their stillborn son Jack – and soon also discovered the clutch of tiny new hands in their open palms... two young daughters, Madeline and Eleanor, born fifteen months later.

Reflecting upon this journey through the rapids of grief, Rabbi Frimmer taught the following: “The Torah tells us that Moses, Miriam and the Israelites burst into song as the walls of water collapsed on their Egyptian pursuers. How did they know the words to sing? When did they compose their song? Was it an ancient prayer kept alive throughout the years of suffering? Was it a spark of light that disrupted the darkness, unexpectedly drawing poetry from a broken heart?

“This is how I imagine it,” the rabbi concluded. “With heroic strength, they walked themselves out of Egypt. They carried those aspirational verses grasped in their fists, terrified they might never have the opportunity to say them aloud, yet unwilling to let them go. And then the moment came, and they had their song.”

To you – who are working up your courage to walk back into that abandoned room in your life, and to let life move forward again – your moment will come. And you will have your song. Sing it. For them. For you. And for everyone who looks to you to carry their stories into tomorrow.