



## Senior Rabbi Ken Chasen

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“More Noise Than Ever”

Last night, I suggested that each of us should live our life as if a fire is blazing, ready to consume us at any moment... because it just might be.

Indeed, this past year, like all others, has issued quite a few painful reminders of that essential truth. Far too many were the people known and loved within this sacred community who we assumed were safely tucked into the pages of the Book of Life for the whole year to come on last Yom Kippur – bitterly, we learned instead that they would be with us at this moment today only in memory. They left us from illness, from age, from accident – and some even took their own lives into eternity.

For me, and for so many of us in the rabbinic community around the world, this year brought a breathless moment, when we learned that the President of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Rabbi Aaron Panken, died completely unexpectedly just one day before he was to ordain a new class of rabbis in New York. He lost his life doing what he loved to do most on Shabbat – reveling in the wonderment of the skies while flying his plane. Aaron was a dear and longtime friend – a congregant of mine, in fact, during my years in New York. Our children grew up together when they were all very little. Such a special and vibrant chapter of our lives, we shared. So it was – and still is – unfathomable to me that he is truly and suddenly gone.

*Yizkor* is our exercise in affirming all the ways that those now gone from our sight are never truly gone from our lives – how presence is much, much bigger than the feebleness of our frail bodies. And so, this year, I want to make that affirmation of Aaron’s presence at this hour of *Yizkor*. I want to bring his soul and his teaching to you, and in so doing, renew our understanding of how all our departed loved ones continue, through us, to extend their influence into so many hearts and minds, long after they are no longer seen alongside us.

Aaron once taught that very lesson in his own words, as he reflected upon the way we memorialize famous artists nowadays – how we use our all-consumptive multimedia world to blast out their songs, their words, their wisdom in omnipresent rotation into a waiting community of grief and remembrance. Wrote Aaron,

“The very moment when the living voice of an artist is stilled becomes, paradoxically, the moment when you hear that voice the most. That is to say, just when eternal silence settles over them, they suddenly make more noise than ever.”

Aaron goes on to demonstrate how the same is ultimately true of those much less famous but who possess a much larger hold over us... those we are remembering here today... our cherished family members, our beloved friends, whose absences continue to make more noise than ever inside us. He tells the story of how, in the aftermath of his mother-in-law's death, he and the rest of his family began having random encounters with her on their various voice mail boxes and answering machines. “Nothing stunning or relationship bending,” he wrote, “simply the regular remnants of routine communication among loving family members going about their business.” Aaron described finding great solace in bumping into her voice from time to time: “It was oddly comforting to hear her familiar cadence; to catch the occasional unique expression she used to deliver ‘live’ with such inimitable intonation; to be reminded in that quotidian way of what she had meant to us when she was alive and what she still represented at a far deeper level in her death. The stunning combination of her virtual presence with her actual absence regularly caught us off guard.”

As a longtime voice mail hoarder myself, I was immediately drawn to Aaron's teaching. You see, I was never able to bring myself to delete a voice mail message from one of my children when they were little, even if it was about something pedestrian or even just pointlessly fussy. I knew that sound of theirs – its smallness, its innocence, its wondrously transparent revelation of their core, their soul – would vanish from this Earth as they grew older. It would become one of the losses life would inflict upon me, and I would want to be able to bump into them every now and again... to enable those small voices to “make more noise than ever” when I needed them most.

So my voice mail box would fill, and I would dump down the messages into an audio file on my computer, and the process would start all over again. Only the treasure trove also includes the voices of my parents, my wife, my cherished friends – voices I need to keep. Aaron seemed to understand why when he wrote that his mother-in-law's voice mail messages “rekindled facets of our relationship – her hopes and dreams for us, her guidance and advice, her helpful and loving critique. Even beyond the temporal boundaries of her life, her short declarations influenced us as we lived on without her.”

We might say that all of the remnants of our departed loved ones that awaken our senses – the voice mail messages that bring their sound back... the photos and videos that bring their eyes and their smiles back... the recipes that bring back the smells and tastes we know to be theirs – all of these are precious to us even as they sometimes pain us, because even as eternal silence has settled over those we miss so deeply, they continue to make more noise than ever inside us.

That doesn't always feel so good – to hear and feel their noise. Sometimes, the reminder is unwelcome to the heart. It taunts us, only pounding home that they are no longer able to speak, or sing, or write, or teach – or

even aggravate or provoke, apologize or heal. Their living sound or sight from yesterday serves sometimes only to point to what tomorrow cannot have or be.

But Aaron, may his memory forever be a blessing, saw it differently. He taught that just like our confessions of sins on this Day of Atonement – confessions which document acts that are consigned to our past, but which we seek also to carry into our futures anew, as promptings from yesterday that can become growth tomorrow – so, too, do the remnants of our loved ones “invite us to the boundary of here and not here.” And this is where past is brought along into future – where yesterday gets its shot at entering tomorrow.

This is why we reach so bravely to hear their voices again, and see their faces again, and read their words again – even when it causes us to cry. We do it because we so hunger to be with them at that boundary of here and not here, where we can still feel their hopes and dreams, their guidance and advice, their helpful and loving critique. And it is through that very act of courage – the willingness to go back to them, and walk ahead with them, even at the risk of being wounded again and again by their dying – it is that courageous act on our part that grants them their immortality. It’s what proves the famous teaching from the Song of Songs to be true: “Love is strong as death.”

And so here we sit – surrounded by absences that are presences – loving souls we miss and still need. And no matter how much it hurts, we are here with open hearts, letting them in. Because deep inside us, in that place in the heart made wise by grieving, we have discovered that Aaron is absolutely right. The very moment when the living voice of someone we loved is stilled becomes, paradoxically, the moment when you hear that voice the most. The days and the years are passing. And they are making more noise than ever. Hear it. Feel it. Meet them at the boundary of here and not here – and bring their love with you into tomorrow.