



LeoBaeckTemple

Rabbi Ken Chasen

“Together, Apart”

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5782 - September 16, 2021

The evening begins to beckon – and so we have been called to this moment of Yizkor... together, apart.

Together, apart is a muscle we have developed from being forced to carry a crushing weight we didn't choose. Like laborers who, at rest, can feel the ripples that have sprouted on their bodies from the harshest of their tasks, we are newly muscled from together, apart – and we can feel it with our every move.

A year ago, it was at this hour of Yizkor that I felt most poignantly the gravity of what had been taken from us by our being unable to gather in person with each other on the High Holydays. We had lost that precious chance to feel the gift of soul solidarity as we remembered. To dismember is to take apart. To re-member is to bring together... to re-commune with others whose eyes say to us, “I know”... others who walk this treacherous road of grieving right alongside us. We had lost the holy heaviness of the air in our sanctuary when it is brimming with memories, when the sound of the thick silence is punctured only by the whisper of gentle sniffles in that rarest of places where we feel so much less alone.

We are feeling the pain of that loss once again, as we gather here together, apart. And it is a haunting echo for so many of you, after a year and a half now filled with together, apart funerals. I remember how out-of-body and out-of-soul it felt when I first had to guide one of our temple families through a Covid funeral. A tiny gathering of only those in deepest mourning, surrounded by none of those who would have been there in love to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *nichum avelim*, the sacred act of providing comfort to the mourners.

Instead, you were left to try to comfort each other... or worse, yourselves... while fumbling on uneven earth with a phone on a tripod to Zoom the service to others. I've done this now with too many of you to bear, and nothing about it has come to feel normal. Trying to bow or nod compassionately from a distance, instead of taking you by the hand or embracing you. Trying to make my eyes appear sufficiently caring, since my face could not be seen. Everything about it feels profoundly wrong.

You see, grieving under the best of circumstances already foists a devastating loneliness upon us. For that day always comes – after the funeral is over, after the shiva has concluded, after everyone goes back to work or school or flies home – that day when the hugs and handholds and compassionate glances disappear, and a mourner is forced to confront the emptiness all around them and within them in startling solitude. We just don't usually start the process that alone.

There is a reason our tradition's carefully architected steps of slowly walking a mourner back to life took shape as they did, and then stood the test of time. We are not made to weather our losses in quarantine. It's not just that the presence of others brings us care and consolation. The presence of others reminds us that there is a sacred blurriness between souls that choose to append – a way in which we are more than just with each other, we work our way *into* each other. And feeling that again when we are mired in mourning reawakens us to the ways our departed loved ones have worked their way into us, too. Precious, holy re-remembering.

Journalist and historian Theodore White once pointed out that if you press a block of steel against a block of pure gold, the two metals exchange molecules with each other. They literally work their way into each other, simply by being pressed together. "When people are pressed close," he noted, "they act the same way. Part of you enters them; part of them enters you... Long after you forget the names and faces, the other times and place, they're still a part of you."

How we miss being pressed close with others. We have missed the unplanned moments of re-remembering... the stories we might have relived casually and unexpectedly while meeting at our favorite restaurant or waiting for the show to begin. Those moments when cherished friends, looking out for us as we learned to live without, would have helped us, even if just by happenstance for a few moments, to transform the tears into wistful, grateful smiles, perhaps even laughs. When we would have reminisced about that one time when his quirkiest trait created a moment of hilarity we knew we'd always recall and retell; when her soft way of noticing... just seeing what others missed or chose not to attend to... made all the difference in the world right when it counted most; even revisiting that time when they deeply disappointed us, and how we managed still to hold that hurt and find the way forward together.

There has been so much less of that kind of intimate and imminent comfort during this year of too much alone. And almost as soon as we got used to tasting the earliest hints of normal this spring and early summer, we were reminded that together, apart won't be so easily escaped. And yet you are here... we are here – survivors of a pandemic, yes, but survivors of grief combated with one spiritual/emotional hand tied behind our backs. The drive to persevere – to pull our memories near by welcoming loved ones and cherished friends into our hearts and

lives, even when we couldn't welcome them into our homes – has required an unprecedented kind of spiritual determination.

But I have watched so many of you marshal that determination. You have figured out new ways to bring us close enough for our soul molecules to penetrate into you, and yours into us... and just experiencing that again in your wounded heart has, I pray, reminded you that your departed loved ones are forever pressed together with you. They have worked their way into you. It is as William Stanley Merwin once wrote... their lives, even in their absence, have gone through you like thread through a needle. Everything you do is stitched with their color.

And so it is that you were forced in this year to develop new muscles of together, apart – muscles you never chose to build. But so, too, has your experience of mourning in this past year enabled you to develop the muscles of apart, together. And if you've learned how to be apart, yet together with those whose love and support is sustaining you now, perhaps you can be reassured that you can learn... will learn... how to be apart, yet together, with those whose absence has shaken you to your core, but whose presence is forever in you, inextinguishable.

Everything you do is stitched with their color. Apart, together – with them, you will always be.