

What Remains When Everything Changes

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The Odyssey is almost over. Odysseus returns. He vanquishes the suitors who had taken up residence in his home, hoping to marry his wife, Penelope. But rather than joyously welcoming home her long lost husband, we are told that Penelope slept through the slaughter of the suitors and, when her attendant, Eurycleia, announces the great news to her mistress that the suitors who had plagued her are gone and her husband has returned after 20 long years, Penelope doesn't believe a word of it. She goes downstairs. Odysseus is bathed by a servant and beautified by Athena and the two of them sit at opposite ends of a table looking at each other. She admits the man opposite her looks uncannily like her husband but refuses to believe it is he.

In his book, *An Odyssey: A Father, A Son, and an Epic*, Daniel Mendelsohn writes how this moment in the story raises a question we understand better with age but is really always being asked: When the exterior, the face and body, have changed beyond recognition, what remains? Is there an inner "I" that survives time?" [How do] we know who someone is when outward appearances can no longer be relied upon?

I want to name something about this moment: Yizkor is always hard, but it may be particularly disorienting this year for those in our community who've been members of Beth El for a long time. It was disorienting last year at the Carolina Theater, but perhaps less so because that was a different room in a different building altogether. But returning to this room, facing this way – even if East is “correct” – and not that way, with the memorial boards where the ark was, without the pews, without the seats where our loved ones sat, is disorienting. The room has changed. We may be wondering if the memories – of our loved ones, of all those who came before us – if they survive even when this place's outward appearance has changed so much?

In 1987, Rabbi Susan Shnur wrote a column in the Philadelphia Exponent about the about empty seats in the synagogue of her youth, Adath Israel in Trenton, New Jersey, the seats of those who were no longer living.

My grandfather and grandmother sat over against the wall, on the left. My parents sat behind them in aisle seats, then my aunt and uncle [She describes with beautiful detail the people of Adath Israel and where they sat, the way you might describe people at Beth El, and where they sat, like Rabbi Fischer who sat in the 2nd row on the aisle on the right hand side or how Charlie would sway in the back of the pews all dressed in white, or how Steve Cassell would sit with Larry and Andree or Artie or Sandy Kessler and sing along so sweetly...Rabbi Schnur continues] ...Every few years or so, someone would be missing, and we knew that something had happened to that person during the year. We had the long view on these people. We knew nothing about them from day to day, not even their names, but we knew their lives from year to year. We kept track of them over the decades. That was enough. That was a different kind of knowing....

My childhood synagogue is both a distant and near country to me, a place pregnant with geography. It seemed that everyone I knew in life, except the mailman- all my brother's friends and my mother's friends, everyone in the neighborhood and from

school and piano recitals and summer camp- were fixed like pieces of a wooden puzzle of the United States; all set down in their places, in this one still room.

But what if the puzzle pieces change? What if the pews, if the orientation, if the external appearances of the room are no longer here?

Odysseus is frustrated and tells Eurycleia to make up a bed for him which gives Penelope her opening. Penelope also tells her to make up a bed for him, but not any bed; Odysseus' own bed, which she orders to be moved into the hallway outside the royal bedchamber. On hearing Penelope's instructions, Odysseus loses control of himself; he knows the bed would be virtually impossible to move "unless a god himself came down" because "this great secret sign is wrought into the bed itself, which I made – no one else. A tree of spear-leaved olive grew inside the lot, full-grown, thriving; as massive as a pillar...[I] wrought from it the bedpost, drilled all the holes, and went on from there to fashion the whole bed, my design...I say to you clearly that this is our sign..."

Mendelsohn teaches classics at Bard College. His father took his class on the Odyssey with him during the year before he died and when they studied this moment in the Odyssey, his father spoke up because he was the only one in the class who had any idea of what "it's like to be with someone so long that they don't look anything like the person you started out with." His father explains to the class of eighteen and nineteen year olds what Odysseus means when he declares about the bed's secret construction, "this is our sign."

"There are these things you have with someone, not physical things, but private jokes and memories you gather over time, little things that nobody else knows about...small things between people can be the foundation of the greatest intimacy...When you have those things...they keep you connected long after everything else becomes unrecognizable." What are the little things you treasure about those you love? What are the small things only you and your loved one knew about?

It is those little things we remember today; they are not contained in outward appearances. As Rabbi Sager said on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, our memories don't live in his favorite piece of wood next to the ark, or in the particular pew where our loved one sat, or stood, and swayed – they are both smaller and larger than those outward appearances; they are little things like the way someone walked, or the jokes they told, or a dish only they could make for you, or that you could make for them, or the kindness in their voice or the way they gave us a hug hello.

I really loved Mendelsohn's book. It's written by a son about the last year of his father's life. I remember my own father today, along with grandparents and teachers and friends. I remember people who prayed with us at the Carolina Theater last year, not knowing they would not live to see this day. I remember shiva minyans and conversations and kaddishes we recited together for loved ones and friends whose funerals you flew to and from which you returned, coming home to Beth El to mourn and find comfort in community, together.

There is one more kernel I want to share with you: Mendelsohn explains that to understand the name Odysseus, think of the word "anodyne" which is a painkilling drug.

“[It’s] a compound of two Greek words which together mean ‘without pain’; the *an* is the ‘without,’ and so the *odyne* has to be ‘pain.’ This is the root of Odysseus’ name, and of his poem’s name, too. The hero of this vast epic of voyaging, journeying, and travel is, literally, ‘the man of pain.’ He is the one who travels; he is the one who suffers. And how not? For a tale of travel is, necessarily, also a tale of separation, of being sundered from the ones you are leaving behind.”

It is that pain we experience today as we remember, as we continue our own odysseys, our own journeys, moving forward because we must without those who’ve been sundered from us. Rabbi Schnur’s column was about the first Yizkor she observed without her grandmother, without her Nana. Before our meditation today, I want to finish with what she said that day...

[On these holy days we pray with the people] who were sacred to us from childhood; with the people we love who are no longer living; with the people whose values we adore and cherish, whose way of life we strive for; with the people who were to us what we hope to be for our children...

What I want to say is simple; that there is an empty seat, full, beside me. There is one next to all of us. A presence that we miss, an absence from which we will never recover, a wound that will always feel fresh to the touch...Isaac Bashevis Singer once wrote: "When a person who was close to you dies, in the first few weeks after that person's death, he is as far from you, as far as a near person can ever be- only with the years does he become nearer, and then you can almost live with this person." You can almost sit next to their empty seat.

When we used to look around at Adath Israel- Nana and I- when we used to look around in the great big canyon of the synagogue, we would always turn around quickly from the newly vacant seats, as if they were mirrors. Nana, right now someone is looking at your seat like that- as if it were a mirror...

But they needn't turn away quickly. Because in that seat is my heart, and you sit in it. And in your heart sits Simon, and in Simon's heart sits someone I don't know... and on and on in a great hall of mirrors, all lit by a single candle-me.

All of us here have our own hallways that go back and back and converge with others into one great sanctuary. And now in honor of these invisible people next to each of us in synagogue, in these mirrored lives in the great distant sanctuary [not of pews of wood but one] that we all carry with us, [and within us, we say Yizkor. We remember.]