

Yizkor 5774
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander

The following message was shared at Yizkor by my colleague, Rabbi Ray Zwerin, now Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Sinai in Denver, Colorado.¹ His eloquent words spoke deeply to me, and I hope you will resonate with you, as well.

It was one of those perfect summer afternoons. Picture postcard perfect. The sky, a deep blue from horizon to horizon, lent remarkable definition to the upward reach of trees. Only off in the distance, dark mountains - still bearing spotted white evidence of a long ago winter - perforated the otherwise seamless blue. The late afternoon sun, gently warming, rooted me in place - my back flat against the lush green grass of our neighborhood park.

My mind was on its own, freewheeling, as it were. "*Mah rabu ma'asecha, Adonai, kulam b'chochmah asita* - How grand are Your works, O God, in wisdom you have created it all." I am amazed at how often a phrase from the prayerbook steals into my mind at rest. I have no way of explaining why a Hebrew phrase or word just makes itself at home in a mind trained to think in English. Perhaps English is like my mind's prose, and Hebrew is its music.

Nonetheless, I smile at the suddenness of the thought, and continue to relish the blue blanket above. "*Esa einai el he-harim* - I lift up my eyes to the mountains," my reverie continues. I breathe deeply - part sigh, part satisfaction. "Life is good," my right brain tells itself.

But the left brain doesn't handle reverie very well. "It's mid-summer, why are you wasting away the afternoon?" it demands. "Aren't you supposed to be at home doing any of the myriad things on your perpetual 'To Do' list?" I breathe deeply again, this time to retrieve the meditation and chase away the pang of guilt. Out over the mountains, the sky is now brushed with white patches - cotton balls rolling slowly, coyly through the spaces between purple peaks. For a moment, I am distracted by joggers in the park, and when I look up again, I notice that cotton now comes not in puffs, but in bales - bales of white billow that play and move effortlessly across the wide expanse. I watch mesmerized. Shapes form, but before recognition, they disperse to reform. A cooling breeze brings a hint of ozone from the southwest - the clouds now move more quickly.

I am transfixed by their movement. Animal shapes form and dissolve, as do landscapes and building parts - a sort of heavenly inkblot test. The thought brings a smile. And then, without warning, the clouds become human forms ... people ... people I recognize ... people I have known. And without expectation, I am talking to them - family members, loved ones. We are engaged in a wordless, soundless, animated conversation. The clouds and I are communicating - heart to heart, soul to soul, as it were. For a moment, the edges of reverie and reality intersect and merge.

¹ Edited from his original sermon, published as "Clouds" in *The American Rabbi*.

Moisture seeks the edges of my eyes and rolls from the corners. The sky has changed, as a Colorado afternoon sky is wont to do. Azure has become royal blue ... royal blue becomes deep navy. And playful white has given way to steel gray accented heavily now with ominous, black, swirling nimbus - roiling and churning. And I am surprised by small drops falling on arms and head. Rain and tears mix and blend as I dredge myself out of the channel I made in the park grass.

And now the heavens are alive with energy. Lightning streaks slash the summer sky. Thunder attacks the quiet. I begin to trot homeward. The rain patters against the pavement. My pace picks up. The rain now splashes, as huge drops begin to fall. The sidewalk puddles. And I arrive home ... drenched, yet feeling strangely refreshed; emotionally spent, yet ... ever so strangely ... filled with a renewed inner energy. Having gone out alone to think and to meditate, I have spent the afternoon with old friends and family - I have not been alone at all.

And so a Colorado summer afternoon becomes a metaphor for mourning. For those of us who have experienced loss of loved ones, it is safe to say that most of the time (after some time), the sky is blue - life seems peaceful, manageable, even serene. There is beauty all around us. Life is filled with opportunity. Most of the time (after some time), thoughts and hopes and dreams come and go, benign - evoking neither sadness nor emotion. But like clouds in early formation, one thought leads unconsciously or subconsciously to another. Anomalous forms give way to mental formations. Inchoate thought prefigures unrecognizable shapes; and then mental associations, blending freely, begin to merge and transmute.

Unsuspecting and lost in whatever holds our attention, we rarely notice the subtle alterations of our thinking, our emotions. The inner storm builds slowly. Like a summer afternoon storm, there is a suddenness to mourning. An emotional thunder clap, it often takes us by surprise. It startles. It takes the breath away.

One moment we are clear with ourselves. An instant later, we are awash in memories. Like a gathering storm - at first unnoticed, unassuming, undemanding - mourning can become an awesome, swirling, inner nimbus. A driving, demanding torrent that overwhelms our emotional floodgates. Or, it can arrive like a fine mist ... gentling the heart - unobtrusive, imposing itself, but demanding little.

Mourning knows no time. It comes as if out of the blue. It can be evoked by conversation, smells, foods, sights, sounds. Old friends, random thoughts, reminiscences can bring it on. And when it comes, we beat a hasty retreat into ourselves. No matter the place or the circumstances, at that moment we run alone.

For certain, mourning can cripple. It can lock in focused panic those who fear the ever returning storm. But to see the storms of life as a natural part of each day or each week, to greet the clouds with thankfulness, to welcome the opportunity to relive what was sweet and pleasing about yesterday with those we loved, to face our grief without fear or trepidation can strengthen us, and it can re-energize our love of life. Memories kept in perspective clarify; they clear the air; they refresh the spirit. Memories and mourning can reawaken us to life, to enjoyment of the day.

They can remind us that it is the storm which is temporary - it is the blue sky that defines the norm.

At this time of Yizkor, when our personal grief becomes so immediate, when we invite the clouds to form and the inner thunder to roar ... may the rains of memory, that will surely come, be gentle upon the heart. May the storms of memory neither frighten nor depress, but instead refresh each of us - and bring healing, clarity of perspective, and a calming sense of peace. Amen.