

## **Sermon—Yom Kippur Morning**

Our morning service will conclude with Yizkor when we recall the merits of deceased family members and friends. Almost every religious tradition includes a similar liturgy within the annual cycle of prayer.

For some it is the deceased who pray for the living. For others it is the living who pray for the deceased. Within our own tradition both occur.

During the eleven months of reciting Kaddish following a burial, the mourners' prayers are thought to assist the soul in flight in its journey to the heavenly Garden of Eden. As we recite Yizkor the opposite occurs. We remember and invoke the z'chut ha'avot, the merit of our deceased family members and friends as they pray on our behalf.

One of the most mistaken notions about Judaism is that our theology does not embrace a belief in an afterlife. What makes a concept legitimate in Judaism are two criteria. The first is the existence of a Hebrew term. The second is its inclusion in the liturgy. The concept of immortality meets both requirements as a test of its legitimacy. There are actually three Hebrew phrases that describe the after-existence:

Olam HaBah, the world to come, the Yeshivah shel Maalah, the Seminary of the Heavenly Heights, and Gan Eden shel Maalah, the heavenly Garden of Eden. From the terminology, we realize that our ancestors were not expecting anything like the Elysian fields of Greek mythology where one would wear a white robe, play the harp and frolic with one's neighbors in a totally carefree environment. True to the Judaic honoring of scholarship heaven is a paradise for disembodied intellects who are liberated to spend night and day in the study of Torah. The second criteria for legitimacy is also met in the fact that our funeral liturgy includes the prayer known as the "Ayl Maleh Rachamim" where we express the hope that the soul of our departed will enjoy eternal repose in the heavenly garden of Eden under the protecting wings of the Shechinah, the feminine and mother-like indwelling spirit of God. Unlike the Mourners' Kaddish, which is in actuality a prayer for the living, the Ayl Maleh Rachamim is exclusively a prayer for the deceased.

Other than Moses Maimonides' essay in *The Guide to the Perplexed*, which describes the character of the heavenly abode and who will merit

it, there are few traditional or modern texts that attempt to offer us any characterization of this world to come. When people ask me whether Judaism believes in immortality my answer, in keeping with intellectual integrity, is yes, but there is always a caveat—“but we don’t have any data.” The Kabbalistic tradition is, however, radically different inasmuch as the Zohar provides us with ample ideas to ponder. According to this mystical text when we are conceived an angel places our soul in the body that it has been destined for. During the nine months of pregnancy this guardian angel accompanies us on a journey where the embodied soul is exposed to profound knowledge. At birth two experiences occur. The first is that we see light at the end of a tunnel, which is the light awaiting us as we emerge from our mother’s womb. The second is that the guardian angel strikes the infant on the upper lip and the knowledge that is gained in the womb enters the recesses of the realm of the subconscious. The only time that we have access to this knowledge is through the medium of dreams. It is not accidental that this parallels Freud’s theory of dream interpretation. Freud presented his theory at a meeting of a B’nai Brith Chapter in Vienna and acknowledged the fact that it was derived from

conversations with his grandfather who was a practicing Kabbalist. Do we ever encounter this guardian angel, the angel of conception and protection, again? Only once in our lifetime at the point of death when the angel accompanies us into a tunnel from which we emerge into a light that is more brilliant than anything that we have experienced in life. This light is not contemporary but primal. According to the Kabbalists it is the light of the first day of Genesis, the light of the world's beginning. Death is a celebration of return where we become privy to the mystery of Creation. Death is better than Tikkun HaOlam, the repair of the world in our own lifetime. The eternity that we inherit is not in the future, but in the eternal past.

The near-death experience of light at the end of a tunnel is one that has been chronicled in our time by Elizabeth Kubler Ross and Robert Moody in "Life After Life." Their interviews with individuals who have had this experience have yielded a similar conclusion; namely, that the experience was transformative. A number of individuals in this congregation, realizing that this will be the last sermon that I will be preaching from this pulpit have requested that I break a promise that I

made to myself fifty years ago: never to recycle a sermon from the past. The reflection that they requested was one that I shared on Yom Kippur in October 1987 upon my return from a month's visit to India. It concerned my experience on the River Ganges, not exactly a near-death moment, but participating in a similar mystical mode. I would like, however, to preface it with the experience of one of my most notable students, the late and great Pearl Bailey. For those of you not of her generation, Pearl Bailey was a famous, blues, gospel, and jazz singer from the late 1930s until her death in 1993. She hung with the rat pack in Las Vegas and frequently performed in concert with Sarah Vaughn and Ella Fitzgerald. Her best-known role was that of Dolly in *Hello, Dolly*, where she played alongside Duke Ellington, a production that traveled to the former Soviet Union in the 1970s. Pearl dropped out of high school when she was sixteen to work at the Cotton Club in Harlem. Her mother was the only African-American teacher in Philadelphia to be allowed to teach in a white elementary school in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. At the height of her fame, Pearl was reminded by her mother that life without, minimally, a high school degree was meaningless. In 1982 while performing the role of Dolly at

the Mark Hopkins Hotel in San Francisco, Pearl suffered a near-fatal heart attack. In her semiconscious state, she experienced the tunnel with its brilliant light at the end. She recalled that the light was eerie, similar to the reflected light that she had seen while visiting Mendenhall Glacier in Alaska, more blue-white than yellow. The sublimity of the moment was rudely interrupted by the voice of her manager of many years standing. He used a vulgar epithet as he lamented the fact that Pearl would ruin him financially through her demise. The paradox of the sublime beauty and the ugliness of the experience were transformative when she awoke. She fired her manager and bought a GED study guide. She passed the test with flying colors and made a public announcement at the Georgetown Commencement ceremony of 1993 when she received an honorary degree for her work as a roving Ambassador for the United Nations. As the academic hood was placed over her shoulders, she reported the score that she had attained on the GED exam and forewarned the gathering that she would be applying to Georgetown as an undergraduate for the class of 1998. I became her mentor when she entered my Introduction to Judaism course during her freshman year.

At the beginning of her sophomore year she switched from being a French major to a Theology major. Her explanation was that it was easier to speak to God than to speak French. The day before she died, prior to a surgical procedure the following day, Pearl phoned me to tell me three things. The first was that the commandment to honor one's parents was the most important commandment in the Bible. The second was that she would never have honored her mother's wishes to continue her education were it not for her near-death experience. The final message was that she had seen an angel minutes before she phoned me and that this was certainly the angel of conception and death. She ended the conversation by requesting that I conduct her funeral. The following morning she suffered a fatal heart attack in the operating room of the hospital and I conducted her funeral in Philadelphia where she is buried next to her mother and her brother, Bill Bailey.

The first person with whom I shared my mystical experience in India was Pearl Bailey. It is a fitting valedictory for me that I leave you with this glimpse of personal spirituality.

I awoke at 3:00 a.m. in Benares to experience the beginning of the pilgrimage activities of Hindus preparing to bathe in the holy but polluted waters of the Ganges River. The riverbank was a cacophony of sights, sounds, and smells. Floating lit candles had been placed in the river; drums and crude wind instruments provided a rather pleasant dissonance, and rose oil somewhat disguised the stench of trash and the polluted waters. As a non-Hindu pilgrim, I was convinced that I would never be able to secure a boat and oarsman to row me upstream and then downstream on the river. Ten people were climbing into boats that could safely accommodate five, and I was about to leave in despair when a boy who could not have been older than six or seven took me by the arm and led me to a boat that sat in splendid isolation hundreds of yards away from the popular point of departure. The oarsmen invited me to enter the boat and informed me that I was not to offer a tip to the child, who was his nephew. Having been warned never to enter any mode of transportation in India before establishing a price, I asked what the boat ride would cost. The answer was not to worry, which I took to be the opposite—the very reason *to worry*. I took the risk, however, and sat in the back of the boat. As we proceeded upstream, I noted the

incredible diversity along the banks of the river. Standing silently on ghats, projections along the river providing platforms, were holy men dressed in white. They were the epitome of silence and serenity.

Adjoining them were boats that reminded me of the ghost ships at Pirates of the Caribbean in Disney World. Their derelict craft reeked of the smell of marijuana and hashish, and I could distinguish the faces of individuals who were more derelict than the boats. They peered through the windows and were made even more eerie through the light of candles in the interior of the boats. My first thought was how typical this was of India, where the beautiful and the ugly intersected and where serenity shared a partnership with mayhem. My second thought was far more bizarre. As I heard shrieking emanating from the boats, I imagined that I was passing through *Dante's Inferno*, hopefully into his second volume, *The Purgatorio*. As the dawn began to appear, I was able to distinguish the face of my oarsman clearly for the first time. As I gazed upon his hollow eyes, I realized that he was blind, which led to my next imagination. I recalled my Greek mythology and the river Styx, where the dead were transported from the east bank to the west bank in a funeral barge rowed by a blind oarsman. It did not take me

long to Judaize this myth as I recalled that Jewish folklore contained a similar narrative with the exception that the river was called Sambatyon. My imaginary death experience had commenced. The sun rose as we began to turn for the trip downstream and a mist rose magically from the mystical river. At this point I was transported back to the second chapter of Genesis, which describes the mist that rises from the earth to provide the moisture to transform the dust into clay to create the body of primordial Adam. I was now with God in the act of Genesis. We passed the Palace of the Untouchable who maintained the fire that ignited the cremation pyres along the banks of the river. Not a word had passed between the oarsman and myself during the entirety of the trip. He rowed the boat ashore approximately three miles from where we had begun. He bid me exit the boat with a hand motion and I asked him what the price of the trip was. He nodded his head to indicate a negative answer. As I reached into my pocket for my wallet he finally spoke. "Nothing, kind sir, because of the privilege of your sharing your experience with me." I realized that my blind oarsman had read my mind and that he probably knew the exact progression of my reverie. I did not force the issue, but proceeded to walk away from the

boat. His departing gesture was to hold his hands together as a thankful goodbye. As I walked towards my starting point, I gazed upon a body that was being prepared for creation. It was clothed in white silk and was surrounded by flowers and candles. Mourners were anointing the body with rose oil. The sight was quite beautiful and touching. I passed the funeral pyre and encountered the paradoxical twin to the beauty of the prepared body. Wild dogs were scattered among the ashes on the other side of the funeral pyre seeking obviously pieces of flesh that had not been consumed by the flames. Again, how typically endemic to India. I thought about Pearl Bailey's transformative experience and wondered what mine was and the answer came quickly. Approaching me was a beggar walking with a crutch. I could see that his left arm appeared to be amputated in a crude way and that the same applied to his right leg. I realized that he was a leper and recalled my previous phobia towards the disease. In 1967, while doing voter registration in Louisiana I noted a highway sign that indicated that I was ten miles away from the only leper colony in the United States. Although I was familiar with the Torah's view that a leper could re-enter normal society, I was so petrified that I took an eighty-five mile detour to my

next destination. The figure came closer towards me and I did what was previously inconceivable. I removed a rupee equivalent to twenty dollars from my wallet and placed it under the armpit of the leper. He responded by brushing his disfigured left arm against my right cheek. I appreciated this gesture of love and felt that I had fulfilled all of the 613 commandments of the Torah in this one act of Gmilot Chasadim, loving-kindness. This was my out-of-season Yom Kippur, my Teshuvah of Teshuvot.