

Only The Soul Can Comprehend What The Eyes Can See
Yizkor Yom Kippur 5769
Rabbi Camille Shira Angel

As far back as I can remember my mother had a thing about birds. She believed, I mean really believed, that family members came back for brief visits as birds.

My sister and I, and my father when we was alive, poked fun at my mom's supernatural, irrational, mystical notions. We'd see the birds, yes, but we didn't attach religious meaning to them.

I think my father was actually troubled by my mother's "nonsense". He was an ardent rationalist; skeptical of anything that could not be seen, controlled or measured. As a rabbi, he appreciated the fact that the Reform Movement already by the nineteenth century had rejected resurrection as a supernatural superstition. He felt the prayer book held more integrity once it was changed to eliminate references to a person as messiah and resurrection of the dead.

My mom, however, was open to the non-rational. She believed that there was more to the world than meets the eye and that the world of the Spirit exists. My mom thought she had plenty of evidence, but she had no ability to prove her point. For the soul eludes scientific testing.

My mom, kept her attachment to the paranormal despite my dad's disapproval.

Whenever a plump quail would come to our back yard, my mom would say, "Hi Ma" greeting my beloved *zaftig* grandmother Esther, of blessed memory. When crows came and fed on our lawn, they didn't seem to carry much weight. But once, a peacock perched on our neighbor's roof and my mother felt certain it was a sign from her grandmother that she ought to spend more time arranging flowers, a hobby in which she became nationally acclaimed.

When my father died, it took some time before my mom recognized his return visits in the form of an occasional sparrow. I'm not sure if she thought that by choosing a small bird she might cause him less offense, or if given that my dad was only 5 foot three, his soul just came in a smaller package.

Siding with my father, I continued to poo-poo her beliefs with skepticism. And yet, at many poignant moments, birthdays, anniversaries, when my mother had surgery and a sparrow came and sat watch on her hospital windowsill keeping her company

throughout the day and night....when the birds would come neither my sister nor I could deny these ethereal visitors meant a little something to us.

A little less than a year ago, my family and I gathered for my mother's unveiling. Unlike the funeral, we intentionally invited only our immediate family. Neither my sister nor I felt very much like returning to the cemetery – as neither of us think of my parents as being “there” there. We've made plenty of trips over the last 31 years since my father's funeral and often visits to the cemetery are filled with ambivalence. On this occasion would I feel connected to my mother or more separated?

Phillip Roth in his novel, Patrimony, said it well, “What cemeteries prove, at least for people like me, is not that the dead are present but that they are gone. They are gone and as yet we aren't. The dead seem even more distant and out of reach than they did when you were driving in the car ten minutes earlier.”

I think it's honest to admit, that I was not expecting much from the ritual of unveiling though I came prepared with prayers, poems and even some personal recollections.

It was a gray overcast day in the San Fernando Valley, as we made our way to Eden Memorial Park. Funny the names we give our cemeteries... Hills of Eternity, Home of Peace, Eden -- as if to be assured that those, who are buried here have been transported to paradise. What do we know?

As Karen and I drove up to my parent's graves, there was a stunning sight I shall never forget. Two white doves pecking around my parent's graves.

Now, there were no other birds in the cemetery. None in the sky, none nearby. In fact over the years I've been coming to visit my loved ones, I have never seen a single bird. I'd remember.

My sister and I and everyone present stood in silence, with a shared appreciation for this marvelous sight.

We said little. I can't really remember what we said besides the *Kaddish*. The doves hung around for a while but left before we did.

It took me a few days to integrate the experience and think about what to make of this otherworldly sign from my parents. I believe my mom worked on my father for a year, “Cam, I know this is gonna be hard for you, but you're coming with me. We're

showing up as birds. I want them to know we are together; that we are fine and we love them and remember them. I want them to know.”

I'll tell you what I now believe with as much certainty as I ever will have: the soul survives and God is REAL.

What I now believe is that my actions matter not only to those who are alive but also to those whose souls have transcended this physical realm. I am my parents' living legacy.

The apparent ability of my parents to send us a message demonstrates to me that there are means of communication we cannot explain. This encounter helps me believe in the existence of a part of us -- a soul – that transcends our physical body and survives death. Belief in the survival of the soul roots me more deeply in living this life each day as a precious gift.

Why do I want to share this profoundly personal story? I'm not expecting you to believe as I do that these birds were in fact my parents' souls.

Rather, I am hoping that through my story you will open yourself to consider the reality of the existence of the supernatural and the tremendous mystery we call God. It is my hope that you will review remarkable events in your own life, which, unless consciously noticed, are as potentially fleeting and elusive as a dream.

There is mystery in the universe we can't always explain or even describe. The ineffable exists everywhere. In his quintessential work Man is Not Alone, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “The world of things we perceive is but a veil. Its flutter is music; its ornament science, but what it conceals is inscrutable. Wonder alone is the compass that may direct us to the pole of meaning” [Man in Not Alone, p. 16].

I think Heschel is telling us that if we open ourselves to believing in the world of the spirit, such belief may lead us to live our lives with more reverence, more humility, more determination to fulfill our highest potential and to live a life of noble service.

If we are willing to entertain the possibility that our souls survive, perhaps we might live with eternity in our thoughts and cultivate our souls accordingly.

In Jewish tradition, the soul is no less than an extension of God. In the crafting of Adam, the Torah says, “God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the *neshamah* of life, the soul of life; and Adam thus became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7).

The Babylonian Talmud, largely completed by the fifth century c.e., elaborated on the link between soul and its Source in this way: “As God fills the whole world, so also the soul fills the whole body. As God sees, but cannot be seen, so also the soul sees but cannot be seen. As God nourishes the whole world, so also the soul nourishes the whole body. As God is pure, so too the soul is pure. As God dwells in the innermost part of the Universe, so also the soul dwells in the innermost part of the body” [Brachot 10a].

Rabbi Ellie Kaplan Spitz, in his book, Does the Soul Survive?, writes, “soul is identified with more than the spiritual dimension. Soul encompasses all aspects of our inner lives as manifest in our daily human activities. When our deeds are linked to an inner core we are acting in a way that we would call soulful or authentic.”

Lots of people don't know for sure that God exists, until something beautiful and mysterious and complex happens to them. They fall in love with someone who, amazingly, loves them back. They give birth to a miraculous baby. They lose someone precious to death, and sense the power of their finitude. In one way, or another, they experience the awe and wonder of the universe, and then, for a moment, they know God.

Heschel called these rare moments, moments of radical amazement; moments that transcend the five senses. When we experience these amazing moments, our response to God's gift of life is to re-dedicate ourselves to a life of meaning. When we are awed beyond reason, I pray that we may live as if God expects us to make our lives a blessing.

The Psalmist had it right: “Teach us, O God, to number our days --and teach us how to appreciate our lives, whether they be short or long -- so that we may thereby acquire a heart of wisdom.” This is a most important message Judaism has for us in the face of the mystery of life and death.

The metaphors we call to mind on Yom Kippur underline this point. Our lives hang in the balance. “Who shall live and who shall die?” depends on how we live our lives in the here and now. If we live our lives to the fullest, even death cannot limit us, for our deeds will outlive our deaths.

My father believed that immortality exists as the perpetuation of the memory of the departed among the living. My mother believed in the birds. I believe both.

No more than any other human being do I know what will happen to me after I die. But what I believe will happen to me after I die affects how I lead my life today. That is why the issue of my soul's survival presses upon me each day.

I'd like to think that when my loved ones, who've preceded me, greet my soul

they will be proud of the life I lived.

I invite you now to close your eyes for a few moments and imagine a loved one who has parted from this earthly realm coming to you with a message.

What is their message to you: If a loved one's spirit came to you now... what would they most want you to know? Perhaps: an enduring sense of their love; a pervasive feeling of acceptance; a lasting sense of forgiveness; a simple reassurance that they continue to walk by your side and know your essential goodness.

In the original formula of the second blessing of the Amidah, we pray: Blessed are You, God, who revives the dead. Eternal One, You keep faith with those who sleep in the dust. So may we keep faith in You as we sense your Awesome Presence in our lives. May our service to You be considered of merit to our ancestors and our descendants. Remember us for life, O Sovereign, Who delights in life, and write us in the book of life, for Your sake. Amen.