

Role Call: Are We Missing Anybody?  
Yom Kippur Yizkor, 5773  
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"Are We Missing Anybody?"

This question rang out last Wednesday at Met Life Stadium. I had come to see a concert. How was I to know that Bruce Springsteen would create a moment of yizkor by asking, "Are we missing anybody?"

As a child in Vancouver, I knew nothing of The Boss. Asbury Park New Jersey was as far as timbuktu. But when my best friend's older brother introduced me to Born to Run, I was hooked. Signing up for the Columbia House Record Club, I bought every one of his albums for only a penny. I played them constantly, even for my grandparents. When my grandma heard his last name, she asked, "SpringSTEEN? Is he Jewish?" I just smiled.

Although Springsteen isn't Jewish, his music is. His songs promote messages of spirituality, social justice, redemption, and renewal. His lyrics speak about Promised Lands, prophetic visions and spiritual occurrences both small and large. At the core of Springsteen's music is one simple theme - everything and everyone is flawed; there is no such thing as perfection, but each of us is given opportunities to correct ourselves, to do teshuvah, to change our ways for the better. (adapted from Rabbi Scott Weiner Bulletin article, 09/2012)

Last Wednesday, as the band played "My City of Ruins," a song that became a message of hope following 9-11, Springsteen yelled out, "Roll call!" And, with the music rising bit by bit, he introduced the core of the band: Roy Bittan, Charlie Giordano, Nils Lofgren, Stevie Van Zant, Max Weinberg.(who is Jewish) . . ."

When he finished, there was a long pause. The band kept vamping.

And Springsteen called out, "Are we missing anybody? Are we missing anybody?"

Die-hard fans knew who he was speaking about: Clarence Clemons, the Big Man, the saxophonist who died last year. With Manhattan just miles away, the question "are we missing anybody?" though brought to mind victims of 9-11, members of the armed services, victims of terror and senseless hatred. But on a psycho-spiritual level, Springsteen did something profound. He made everyone think of a loved one no longer alive. And for each of us, isn't this why we are here right now, in this service of yizkor, because in our own hearts we hear the question, "are we missing anybody?"

Everyone knows exactly who they miss - a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a husband, a wife, a friend, a lover. As Springsteen spoke of ghosts, those you are afraid of and those who walk with you, I thought of those who walk with me daily- my sister, my grandparents. At this season, I thought of members of this community - those we laid to rest this year and those whose names are read upon their yahrzeit. Their presence still weaves itself into the fabric of this congregation. Are we missing anybody?

Here is how Springsteen answered his own question: "What I can guarantee tonight is that if you're here and we're here, then they're here!"

This wasn't a theological statement about angels and spirits and what happens to the immortal soul after the body comes to its natural end. It was to acknowledge a simple and profound truth, that being present for a moment of memory, saying hineini and bearing witness, we somehow make real the spiritual presence of our loved ones. We feel their presence. We are here and they are too.

Jewish mourning is both private and public. When we visit a grave or light a yahrzeit candle, we generally do so in private. This moment of Yizkor is the public observance for the community of bereaved.

Yizkor means may (God) remember. This memorial service is recited four times a year in the synagogue-- today, on the morning of Simchat Torah, on the seventh day of Passover, and on Shavuot.

Ron Wolfson of the American Jewish University teaches, "Originally, Yizkor was recited only on Yom Kippur. Its primary purpose was to remember the deceased by committing tzedakah funds on the theory that the good deeds of the survivors elevate the souls of the departed. It also enhanced the chances for personal atonement by doing a deed of lovingkindness." (A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort, Jewish Lights)

I doubt if many of us enter Yizkor with this notion that our good deeds will elevate the souls of our loved ones or that merely remembering will somehow get us sealed in the book of life. My guess is that we are here, simply to ask ourselves who is missing, to shine a light on their life, if only for a few brief moments, to feel the presence of a caring loving community who supports us as we examine old wounds, re-bandage newer ones, and take that long lonely stroll through that valley of darkened shadows. As Springsteen said it, "if you are here and we are here then they are here." and somehow, some way there is comfort in that.

But there has to be more. When things are broken, cracked and torn, how can we put them back together again? How can we rise up from our pain, from our sadness, loneliness and loss? How can we stop hurting and start healing?

I recently came across a children's book called, "Eggbert the Slightly Cracked Egg." I'm going to ask you to step into Eggbert's world with me because sometimes children's stories allow us to see truths in sharper relief. In this story Eggbert, an egg, loves to paint pictures in his home in the fridge. One day, the other foods discover that Eggbert is slightly cracked. He is eventually banished from the refrigerator. In desperation, Eggbert paints himself in a number of different ways so that no one will notice his crack, but of course, nothing works.

As he sits weeping and broken on the ground, he notices the sun breaking through a crack in the clouds. He then notices that the world is actually full of wonderful cracks because, as Leonard Cohen sang, "that's how the light gets in." (Anthem) Eventually Eggbert decides to travel the world and paint pictures of all the wonderful cracked places – the Grand Canyon, volcanoes, the Liberty Bell, and so on. The book ends with the line, "To this day Eggbert does not regret being cracked. In fact, he is even a little proud of it."

Eggbert's premise is the same as many a Springsteen song. Like Eggbert, we are all, in a sense, slightly broken in one way or another. Each time someone we love dies, another little crack forms. For many, these broken places often become sources of shame. We try with all of our might to deny them, to cover them up, to pretend that we are more whole than we actually are. But the truth is, no one is completely whole.

In the end, Eggbert learns this ironic truth: that the path to wholeness comes not from overcoming, but embracing his broken-ness. Because on some level, when we greet the difficult, painful parts of life with openness, we are embracing our essential humanity. In the words of the great Hasidic master, the Kotzker Rebbe, "There is nothing so whole as a broken heart."

We do not wish broken-ness, pain and loss on ourselves yet they are price we pay for being human. None of us is immune. Sooner or later those jagged edges of our broken world will enter our lives. Though we prefer to cling to our illusions of immunity, the real question is not if, but how.

How will we greet the broken-ness that will inevitably enter our lives? By denying it? By ignoring it? By fighting against it? Or by embracing our pain and our struggle as part of a larger truth? That broken-ness, painful and difficult though it is, is a central aspect of what makes us human.

I have often found that those who have experienced their share of pain and suffering are generally the ones who profess a deeper sense of relationship to the Divine. You might think it would be the opposite: that personal tragedy would drive people away from rather than toward God. But in fact, I believe that we tend to find God more often in the lowest depths rather than the highest heights. *Karov adonai l'mishbarei lev*, goes the famous line from the Psalms, "God is close to the brokenhearted." (Ps. 34:18) Perhaps it is when our hearts are broken that we have the potential to be the most spiritually open – to be more sensitive and mindful of the blessings in

our lives, to be more empathetic to the suffering of others. This is what the Kotzker means when he says, "there is nothing so whole as a broken heart."

This is a time we are asked to be more spiritually open. During these days, our tradition bids us to look unflinchingly into the reality of our broken-ness in order to hopefully and eventually find our way toward wholeness. Perhaps the central image of the High Holidays, the open gates of heaven, is just a mirror image of our own broken hearts. And perhaps it is when the gates close at Neilah that we ultimately experience these truths, that we all miss somebody and that there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.

May we embrace it all. May we face our broken lives and hearts. Together, may we face this broken world of ours. May we rise up together. And may we live with the knowledge we can do it because if you're here and we're here, then they're here!" And in the end, may we find that our hearts are stronger for it.