

Yizkor 5773
Yom Kippur
Rabbi Elaine Zecher

On this day, we spend most of our time focused on how shall we live. How do we fashion our lives with meaning and purpose? How do we direct ourselves toward others to offer kindness and help? How do we reconcile what we hope to be with that which we actually are?

On this day, we ponder and try to respond to these questions.

This moment, we ask a different question: not how shall we live but how shall we die? I don't mean in the physical sense because none of us have that choice. The story remains the same for our ultimate corporeal demise.

Many say that when we die, that is the end. We are no more because our physical presence ceases to exist. The vessel which held our essence, our life force no longer functions. Does this mean, then, that we evanesce into oblivion? Are we silenced into eternity? I am not so sure.

Ecclesiastes speaks of time for everything under heaven.

We know the words well:

A time for being born and a time for dying.

In a later verse, it says a time for silence and a time for speaking.

Although these particular verses are in the same chapter but ten verses apart, I want to reflect on what happens if we juxtapose them in a counter intuitive way: what if we relate being born to silence and dying as a time for speaking? We enter into this world with fists clenched and a hearty shriek to fill our lungs. Until that moment, however, we do not,

cannot give voice. We are silenced by the protective force of the womb and its fluid within our lungs. Then, with air entering our lungs, our voice speaks. The force of life goes forth into the world. What happens after we die? Is there a time for speaking even beyond our death? Is it possible for us to continue to have a voice even then? Can the sounds which emanate from our lips carry forth even after there is no breath and we are no longer physically present on this earth?

I can still conjure up his voice although it is my own I am actually hearing. There would be some thing he would be upset about--those inconsequential matters parents find crucial in the moment but cringe later on for making such a deal about it. It always came with the conjunction: AND clean up your room.

When my siblings and I got older we all laughed how if dad was frustrated or angry the rant would always end with...and clean up your room!

My children will say the same thing about me, too--actually they say it now.

There are other phrases, too. They reverberate. The ones about support when I felt miserable about the way someone treated me or how much he adored my husband, how he joked-- a lot—when David and I were dating but not yet engaged how if David and I were to break up he was willing to get rid of me and keep David.

How he told me to think, lanie, think, and not wait to finish anything.

We do hear those voices even without the sound. They are embedded in our memories. But what if their voices remain not just because of us but because of them?

Long after our physical presence returns to the dust from which it came, even after memory struggles to recall the scent of our presence, the

touch of our hand, the sight of our face, the taste of a kiss, might it be possible for our voice to remain in the universe much like energy waves, such as sound waves which continue in space forever?

Science supports us in this moment of exploration. What we know of the universe is a salve for the wound of loss. What can the science of sound offer us? Without a PhD or master's degree in the subject, from a layperson's point of view, I am struck by the metaphysical message that some aspects of physics offer us.

Sound goes forth in waves, carried through the medium of air, with its crest and trough making a wavelength. We might think at some point, the waves dissipate and disappear like waves coming to shore. But this is not the case. There is something called the "inverse square law" which says that as you go farther from the source of sound the intensity is a fraction of its original strength. It keeps multiplying and thus diminishing by that fraction but never reaches zero. Though we may no longer be able to hear the sound, the sound does not cease to exist. The reverberations of our voice continue even to the minutest fraction of the sound wave. And yes, if a tree falls in a forest and there is no one to hear it, the sound still makes waves and carries forth into the universe though it grows continually more quiet but never totally silent. Ever.

Our tradition understands such an impact even to its smallest level. The Talmud (Ned 39b, BM 30b) teaches us that visiting the sick reduces an illness by $1/60^{\text{th}}$. It doesn't take 2 years of algebra, 1 year of trigonometry, and 4 years of pre-calculus to do the simple math. The rabbis then didn't have to sit through any of those classes to ask: Then why not send 60 people to visit a sick person to remove the whole illness? The answer is similar to the inverse square law: each successive visitor removes $1/60$ of the $1/60$ and so on; never achieving a full recovery but providing an impact of lessening the pain and suffering nonetheless. The act of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick, matters even to a fractioned degree. Likewise, the sound of our voices carry an impact as well.

In 1978, Arlo Penzias and Robert Woodrow Wilson received the Nobel Prize for discovering the remnant of the “Big Bang.” 13.75 billion years ago there was a bang and the noise was big. Penzias and Wilson had come upon the trace of its existence serendipitously 14 years earlier as radio noise. First, they thought the radio noise was coming from New York City but through their own agency of discovery they found what they would call “Cosmic microwave background radiation.” More than just a refutation of Intelligent Design or a proof of the theory of evolution, they offered the spiritual world a great gift. 13.75 billion years is a really long time. It seems pretty close to eternity to me. What we learn from their work is this: If a sound occurring billions of years ago can reach us now, the cadence of our voice can extend billions of years out into the universe many generations to come. This means that the sound of our voice is never going to stop totally. The reverberation of those whose lives touched ours continues beyond their death and beyond our own as well.

The term broadcasting comes from the agricultural world. It was initially used to describe the throwing of seeds in all directions. The term was eventually co-opted by the radio world to distinguish between narrow casting which meant there would be a single receiver like a ship with “broad casting” to a general audience. As we live our lives, we “narrow cast” as we interact with specific individuals, directing our words directly to them. We also have broadcasting where what we have said plays out in some way to a wider audience. An entire family. A neighborhood. A community or in some instances, people we’ve never met. Whether from a narrow perspective or more broadly, we cast our existence into eternity through our voice.

Way out there, there must be a cacophony of chaotic noises. Though the human ear can no longer detect them all, the articulation through spoken words carried by waves continues into eternity. How is it all differentiated? Just as radio waves have receivers and transmitters which receive and forward the waves, there are those in our lives, those we

leave behind, those whose lives we have touched who become transmitters and receivers for us. Memory for sure is a vibrant and capable transmitter. Our voice, however, becomes mingled with those we have lost. A beautiful harmony rises up beyond the human capacity to hear but still adds mellifluous tones. When we remember someone's voice, a beloved's spoken words, we give voice to their voice through our own. Even after every possible human transmitter who has been directly affected by us no longer graces this earth, our voice and their voice will still remain in the noisy cosmos.

This morning we read the words of the prophet Isaiah (58:1):

Cry with a full throat,	קָרָא בְּגֵרוֹן
Do not hold back,	אֶל־תִּחַשֵׁךְ
Let your voice resound like a shofar	כְּשׁוֹפָר הָרִם קוֹלְךָ

And so it should be for us. May our voices resound like a shofar while we live, crying with a full throat with the words we offer from our lips. Words of comfort, encouragement, praise, respect, gratitude, instruction, and love.

Let us also know that our voice and the voices of those who have come before us remain. A piece of our existence does not, cannot disappear. We are not silenced into eternity.

Let us listen for it reverberating.

Let our voices join in harmonious cacophony with the voices we have known.

May their memories be a blessing offered into the soft whisper of eternity.