

Since graduating high school, I've lived in four places: New York, Chicago, (back to New York), Jerusalem, (back to New York), and now, Greensboro. In *most* of those places, I had visitors all of the time. That really hasn't been the case in Greensboro.

But, to my surprise, my brother recently came to Greensboro on a work trip. It was a quick trip, but he came over to have breakfast with us and came with me as I walked my baby, Yona, to his daycare and dropped him off in his classroom.

It was the best start to a random Tuesday. There was no fanfare, no special restaurant reservations, or celebration. It was just my little brother joining my routine-- breakfast at home, laughing at Yona trying to learn how to get food into his mouth, and a quick chat with the daycare teachers. I love that my brother, who I haven't lived with since he was ten, got a window into my very ordinary life, now understands some of its rhythms, and knows some of its characters.

Journalist Melissa Kirsch points out that we don't really get that kind of insight into most people in our lives.

"When visiting friends, it's a treat to see the highlights of their hometown, but I always find it more interesting to run errands with them, to see how they live when I'm not around. What do they listen to in the car, what's their hardware store like, who do they run into in the produce aisle? Other people's errands are revealing of their actual day-to-day lives, not the performed existence."

We probably each have a short list--maybe *very* short-- of people who are able to see past our 'performed existence,' or whose day-to-day we have meaningful access to. Most of the people we speak to get the highlights (or lowlights), but aren't beside us while we mindlessly accomplish recurring tasks. And yet: there *is* something profound in witnessing these moments that are quiet and private, but not secret or salacious.

We are all made up of all kinds of little details that differentiate us, from hallmark moments in our lives to our posture or our playlist when we are driving. God, *chacham harazim*, the Wise One of Secrets, sees past the performed existence of our lives *and* keeps track of the beauty of the mundane stretches, knows the alleys our minds wander as we go through our days. Showing up at the big life moments matters, but knowing someone's preferred manicurist or their favorite kind of bread or what they do when there is nothing on the calendar... *that* is tapping into being *chacham harazim*, a very different kind of knowing and one that deserves to be honored and recognized.

There is a Talmudic text that elevates this idea, drawing on the case of an elder who forgets their knowledge of Torah, due to circumstances beyond their control. For the rabbis, prestige was measured by the depth of a person's learning and they frequently distinguished between their learned class and the uneducated masses. In Masechet Shabbat, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi advises that even though such a person is no longer a Torah scholar, they must still be

respected for the Torah that they once possessed. In other words, even though this scholar's life is now mostly a series of mundane tasks and *not* elevated thought leadership, he should still be honored at the same level.

Why? The text continues, "As we say: Both the tablets of the Covenant and the broken tablets are placed in the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. Even though the first tablets were broken, their sanctity obligates one not to treat them with contempt. An elder who forgot the Torah knowledge they once possessed is likened to these broken tablets."

What I hear in this explanation is that both of the tablets of this elder's life are sacred--the brilliant connections they once made *and* their ability to tie their shoes... or even, simply, just continuing to *be*. All of these pieces of the elder's life are holy and need to be preserved and cherished.

Sometimes for the people we know and love best, we tend to emphasize one set of tablets over the other. When our parents are living, we might focus on the ways they overly insert themselves or absent themselves in our lives. When we are in the position of caregiving for our parents, we might feel burdened by the ways they need us, or humbled at the thought of our own aging. After their deaths, we might swing the other way, overly indexing the ways they showed up for us in just the right ways and just the right amounts. The same may be true for the tablets of our partners, children, friends, and loved ones' lives.

Rabbi Yehoshua's comparison of the elder to the tablets pushes us. It would have been neater, easier, clearer to just keep the whole tablets. After all, the broken tablets tell an ugly story--of the Israelite's frantic idolatry at the foot of Mount Sinai, right after their redemption from generations of slavery, of God and Moses's anger, of rupture and lack of faith. Why keep such weighty rubble around? But the fact that *both* versions--the broken and the whole--were resting side by side in the ark in the Temple, tells us that *both* matter. That the gift of divine commandments needs to be preserved in its unblemished state, *and* that the disastrous events that preceded it also need to be kept. That in fact *that* is what it means to have an ark--it is *meant* to carry all of the parts of the story.

Like the ark, we, too, carry multiple parts of the stories of the people we love. We carry stories of bickering with siblings and stories of siblings knowing us better than anyone else. We carry stories of sitting by the bedside of an aging parent, just as they sat by our childhood sickbeds, or in the ways we wished they had. We carry missed opportunities and joyful gatherings. We carry disappointments when people we count on didn't show up for us in the ways we need... and we carry gratitude for the times when people were there for us. We carry the memory of our partner's very particular way of ordering at restaurants and we carry the regret of the people we wanted to accompany on errands, but who never invited us into those intimacies. We carry the sounds of a child's first giggle and also the worry for all that might befall them.

We are not God, not *chacham harazim*. We are not the keepers of all of the secrets. But when you stop to consider, we are collectors of all kinds of tablets. Stories of lives fully lived and lives

cut short. Stories of people we think we know everything about and the stories of people we wish we knew better.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's comparison of the elder who has lost his Torah to the two kinds of tablets also teaches us about what it means to care for people who cannot produce. He tells us that when we are ill and aging and disabled and depressed and struggling, we need to be carefully nestled into that ark, too. We are not left behind on the side of the mountain, we are kept at the center of the community, right in the heart of everything.

And, more subtly, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches us how to care for people who are weighed down by these heavy tablets. For those of us who are grieving, who are carrying stories that break our hearts with longing or remorse, who miss people we love or feel hurt by people we wanted to be loved by differently... we, too, are tucked into the fold of community. Broken parts and whole parts carried gently inside an ark, surrounded by community, as the Israelites crossed the wilderness, until they could be housed safely in the Temple in Jerusalem.

This collective care is why we say *kaddish* in a *minyan*, why we say Yizkor on holidays. We are charged to mourn in community, to mourn surrounded by others, and to be literally held up by them, as the tablets were held aloft in an ark in the midst of the Israelites. We, too, are carrying so many tablets in this room alongside us.

In Masechet Ta'anit of the Talmud, we are instructed, "When the community is immersed in suffering, a person must not say: I will go to my home and I will eat and drink, and peace be upon you, my soul." Many people have a custom of leaving the room for Yizkor if their parents are alive, a way of honoring those living parents. If this is your custom, I invite you to consider staying, to be in this community that holds so many names and stories that are being remembered today -- and to consider the stories you might be carrying yourself. And, if you leave the room in a few moments, I invite you to think about ways you can *emotionally* stay in the room with the members of our community who *are* grieving, Not to check out of what is happening in this room as if you are going home to eat and drink, but instead to find ways to stay tethered to what those of us reciting these prayers of remembrance are doing, the different textures of heartache we will be in here unearthing.

And for those who do stay in the room, remember that, as you take out the different shards of the tablets you carry, the broken pieces and the whole pieces; as you think through memories of big, important moments and the incredible impacts your loved ones might have had on you and the world; and also silly, tender little moments like shopping for new shoes or mending a torn coat or quietly reading the paper side by side... you are carrying that ark in community, you are held and cherished and there is room in this space for whatever stories are etched on the tablets you hold.