

Standing for Michael

Jonathan Silin

OVER THE LAST YEARS I HAVE BECOME OBSESSED WITH REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING, A RESPONSE TO THE MANY AIDS-RELATED DEATHS THAT HAVE COME TO FRAME MY LIFE WORLD. EVEN NOW AS I WRITE, individual images emerge from my subconscious to struggle with one another for the primacy of memory. I try to manage this profusion of names by imposing an order, arranging them in rational categories—former lovers, close friends, more distanced acquaintances, co-workers, professional clients, famous people. My mind functions like a computer screen I must continually scroll downward in order to create new space. But the lists are a failure. They cannot help me make sense of a senseless reality.

I am an academician by training, a political activist of necessity. Reasoned argument and rational explanation are my usual modes of expression. However, of late I find myself writing small scraps of narrative, not yet whole stories, that reflect the fragmented nature of my experience. I try to integrate these narratives into more coherent expository works that provide them with meaningful contexts, places where they might be at home. These works are my attempt to bridge the gap between the personal and theoretical, between my world and yours. Sometimes I get it right, often not, but I keep going anyway.

I like to believe that I write for myself. I know better. Narrative is an essentially social project that assumes a reader, a reason for repeating the story. Perhaps this is why I find narrative comforting, it brings me into relation with others, into a dialogue. My lists were comprehensive and linear while narrative is selective and thematic, a way to seek meaning in the arbitrary events of my life. I also want to make the strange familiar. I take up narrative to insert my life into the official story, and, by being remembered, to insist on being part of a community.

But in which communities can I claim membership and which communities will count me among their members? It is our participation in many different worlds that characterizes the modern experience, making it both exceedingly rich and potentially confusing. In this narrative I explore how my Jewish and gay identities have come to intersect in new ways as I respond to the impact of HIV/AIDS on my life. I begin in the world of childhood, with memories of myself as a young boy and my father as a middle-aged man going to synagogue on the High Holidays.

I HAVE RECENTLY RETURNED FROM SUMMER CAMP AND AM NEWLY MEASURED, assessed and outfitted for the coming year. Unlike the American New Year which is primarily an adult holiday that I learn to associate with artificial merriment and the chill of winter, this fall celebration is more cerebral in its focus on introspective questioning and yet connected to nature's rhythms as it marks the end of one agricultural cycle and the beginning of another.

Still retaining the healthy glow of summer, I stand next to my father as he sways back and forth reciting the Hebrew prayers with a speed and fluidity that is the wonder of everyone in the family. It is a secure, warm place to be. My father is preoccupied, engaged with the ritual of atonement yet never too busy to respond to a child's query or provide advice on the appropriate moment to slip out of the crowded synagogue to join the group of peers that reforms every year. As we make our awkward overtures, we are strange to one another for only a few moments, sharing tales of vacation exploits and anticipatory concerns about the new school year.

Like my father, I am conscientious in my observance of the rituals and attend religious school till I am sixteen. When I am an adult, long after I have announced my dissociation from any religious practice, my father will still entreat me to attend services to listen to the shofar, the symbolic welcoming of the New Year. But for me the mystery of this holiday is not concealed in the shrill plaint of the ram's horn; rather it is contained in the overarching request of the suppliants to be inscribed in the book of life. According to the ancient texts, on the first of the holidays, Rosh Hashanah, it is written who will live and who will die, who will be sick and who will be well, who will prosper and who will suffer, and on Yom Kippur, eight days later, this fate is sealed. We are given a little over a week to plead our case, to search our souls, to ask for forgiveness and make amends for our transgressions.

My child's mind grasps neither the metaphorical language nor my father's absolute belief in a deity who distributes justice. My father is more a man of God than of poetry. He does not help me to make sense of this bibliographic request. If there is an inscription, then someone must be the inscriber; if there is an inscriber, there must be a book; and if there is a book, then there must be a place where it is kept. And how can one authority know everything about everybody? No, my feelings in the synagogue are not about God or books or sin. They are about being with family, being in a community and being in a world that is ordered and orderly.

What I do understand, perhaps because it requires no leap of the imagination or faith in a non-human being, is the time for mourners to rise and be recognized in the sight of the entire congregation. As children, we are warned not to remain during the Yizkor service. We are not to see the adults in their vulnerability, and they in turn are to be allowed to express their grief without embarrassment. We are forever curious about this time, yet relieved that we do not need to witness such a reversal of roles. If, as happens on some rare occasions, my father fails to signal our departure in time and we are caught inside, we find the intensity of emotion unsettling, frightening. It is safer to know sadness at a distance than to see it first hand.

MY FATHER MOVED TO NEW YORK CITY IN 1935 AT AGE 24. HE MARRIED MY MOTHER a year later. As a child I was fascinated by his roots in a small, Western Pennsylvania town. I could not imagine him living in a place other than the one I knew. Person and context were one and the same. Periodically I would query him about how he came to live in New York. Although he provided numerous explanations, none entirely satisfying, the most unsettling was his desire to escape the anti-Semitic slurs that punctuated his growing up. He wanted to raise a family safe from the taunts and epithets of his youth.

Thus I was raised in an urban, predominantly Jewish enclave free of explicit displays of anti-Semitism, if not from my father's continuing fear of potential persecution. Because anti-Semitism was not part of my daily life, it seemed a distant, vague and ultimately incomprehensible threat. The Holocaust was never mentioned though its images were all too clearly engraved in my memory when, as a too young child, I was taken to the YIVO Institute with other members of my small Hebrew School class. There we saw photographs of

concentration camp survivors, products made of human body parts and assorted documents of devastation. It was a trip I would not forget.

Tied in some mysterious way to the suppressed memories of the Holocaust was the more explicit anxiety over the precarious new state of Israel. I would need to wait ten years, until the summer before entering college, to understand more about my connection to this distant homeland. Then I would spend three months working on a kibbutz learning directly about the perils of life in a country surrounded by hostile neighbors, the difficulties of agriculture in the Middle East, and the pioneer spirit that would give new meaning to our history.

Ironically, it was soon after returning from Israel that I stopped going to synagogue. This was also the moment that I began to accept my homosexuality. The synagogue with its emphasis on family, children and survival in the diaspora seemed irrelevant. I was neither angry nor bitter. The Sabbath sermons were simply not addressed to me. My life was elsewhere, with others, in a different world. And that is how it remained until recently, until AIDS.

Now sadness cannot be held at a safe distance as in childhood. Now I have been impelled to find ways to express the grief that has become a recurrent motif of my life. I have learned to say Kaddish, to participate in the Yizkor service, to be part of a new community of survivors.

IN THE ABSENCE OF TRADITION AND THE PRESS OF EVENTS, IT HAS BEEN DIFFICULT for gay men and lesbians to mourn their losses. How often have I gone to a funeral at which the cause of death, the deceased's sexual orientation, or the fact of a same-sex spouse has been denied? Despite the success of new rituals such as those surrounding the AIDS Quilt, mourning has been problematic for lesbians and gay men. It has been only too easy for activists to tell themselves that mourning is a form of self-indulgence. Living in the midst of a health crisis, we need immediate forms of collective action, not prolonged bouts of individual introspection. Those who came of age within the movements of the political left take their cues from Joe Hill's injunction, "Don't mourn, organize," and Mother Jones's "Pray for the dead, but fight like hell for the living."*

*For further elaboration of this theme see: M. Bronski, "Death and the Erotic Imagination," in *Taking Liberties*, E. Carter & S. Watney, eds., (Serpent's Tail, London, 1989). Also, D. Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October 51*, Winter 1989, pp. 3-19.

However, it is impossible to escape the harm we do ourselves, the care we deny our damaged psyches and bodies, when we do not acknowledge and live through our losses. Mourning is necessary to repair that which has been broken, for making ourselves whole, for restoring meaning. This is a task compounded when there has been a rupture of an entire way of life for a community and so many individuals face the threat that HIV poses to their own lives. I have come to understand mourning as an act of resistance, a protest against the absence, the void, left by death. Mourning begins in speechlessness, the unutterable, unimaginable dissolution of meaning, and ends in the recovery of voice as we locate the words through which we can reinsert ourselves into life. Through mourning, then, we find our way back into language and into the human community.

For me, mourning has also meant a return to a particular community of my childhood. In the last several years I have begun to attend a gay synagogue. I go to say Kaddish along with the other mourners, to remember friends and lovers with the Hebrew and Aramaic words that permeated my childhood. I go to be among those who like myself have been written out of the traditional Jewish script that emphasizes reproduction within the context of the heterosexual family and stereotypical gender roles. I am pleased to be surrounded by gay and lesbian couples and single congregants, amused that the young children still provoke the same responses ranging from admiration to tolerance to impatience with their often distracting presence. I am especially touched by the seats reserved for elderly parents who invariably arrive late, taking their time to make the trip from the suburbs or uptown Manhattan to this Greenwich Village location. Thrilled by the sound of our singing and chanting as we breathe new life into old forms, I find myself alone in thought, together with others whom I do not know.

I WANT TO WRITE THAT THE GAY SYNAGOGUE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF A CHILDHOOD fantasy, but this would be an anachronistic reading of my own imagination. For although I was only too aware of my interest in particular boys during the grade school years, mesmerized by the way that Bobby rolled his jeans, Jimmy wore his t-shirt and Danny combed his hair, a more explicitly genital eroticism was only to emerge in junior high-school. This was the 1950's after all, long before Stonewall, a time when the very bravest of our forefathers and mothers, members of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles and Daughters of Bilitis in

San Francisco, were beginning to fashion a notion of gay people as a unique minority, an oppressed group with its own identity. I am proud of what we have accomplished in so few years, no longer defined by a doctor's diagnosis, defining ourselves through the culture that we are building.

Even with all my political awareness, I had not thought to say Yizkor for Michael as I prepared to go to synagogue that first New Year's after his death. But as I found a seat, carefully chosen for its unobstructed view of the pulpit, and put on the prayer shawl, I immediately knew that I wanted to stand for Michael, for myself. With this recognition I was also gripped by fear, my hands began to tremble, and I searched obsessively through the prayer book for the exact moment at which the prayer for the dead would occur.

I did not understand my own response. Was it simply the public statement of grief that I would be making, or was it something more primordial that caused these tremors—to be a man mourning the loss of another man with the same words that had been used for centuries to sanction the loss of a heterosexual spouse or blood relative? In a single moment I was not only to affirm my particular relationship with Michael but also my participation in the larger community of gay men and lesbians. Words once used to celebrate the resolutely heterosexual meanings of Jewish tradition were now to be used to sanctify my own recalcitrant sexuality, my desire for the boy at the neighboring desk in Hebrew School and the older teenager who included me in a handball game on Saturday afternoon. But there was still a moment of uncertainty, a sense of transgression against the ancient law, against my own loving but rule-abiding father.

And what would Michael make of my attempt to claim a place within the official story of Jewish life? I don't know for certain. I doubt he had ever been inside a synagogue. I do know that as a founder of the gay Zen center in San Francisco, a practitioner capable of meditating for days and weeks at a time within a precisely prescribed format, Michael understood the significance of ritual and gesture. As an activist coming of age in the early 1970s, melding Marxist theory and gay liberation practices, he appreciated the complexity of sexual politics. As a lover whose strength and commitment saw him through many difficult relationships, including our own, his caring gaze continues to provide comfort and support in moments of hesitation.

To me, reciting Yizkor for Michael, uttering his name in public, is not only to assert that we can read old traditions in new ways, that we can

choose to create an identity that was literally inconceivable thirty years ago; it is also to fulfill my status as an adult in a manner that I have never done before. For it is adults, not children, who are official mourners, charged with the task of memorializing the dead and linking the immediate loss with the larger history of the culture.

In this context redolent with childhood memories, I am grieving for my lost self as well as for Michael. I am unprepared for this kind of work. The service has become a time to examine how well I accept myself and the life I have chosen. I am made sad and thoughtful by my memories of Michael but, strangely, not unhappy. I find comfort in an inexplicable closeness to my own father, feel myself becoming my father, as I claim my place in this new kind of congregation.



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