



LeoBaeckTemple

Rabbi Ken Chasen
"Under Construction"
Leo Baeck Temple
October 2, 2025
Yom Kippur Yizkor 5786

This past spring at our annual Heroes and Angels event, Cantor Hass sang a much-loved song from the legendary Fleetwood Mac album, *Rumours*. The song is entitled "Songbird," and despite the fact that *Rumours* sold more than forty million copies and is widely regarded as one of the greatest albums of all time, the best-known version of "Songbird" is not the Fleetwood Mac original. That distinction is held by an as-then obscure Washington, D.C. singer by the name of Eva Cassidy. Now, it's not all that unusual for a talented but little-known singer to rise to fame covering a great song by a renowned artist. It is, however, unusual when the singer who does so died five years before it happens.

Those who knew Eva Cassidy before her tragic death from melanoma at the age of thirty-three marveled at the magic of her voice, her unerring phrasing, her gift for instilling a song with emotive power. But she was fundamentally shy and self-critical of her many attempts at recording, so she lived to see only one album of her own released – and even that one was funded by her personally and sold out of the trunk of her car. So when Eva Cassidy died in 1996, it seemed inevitable that her great gifts would remain largely undiscovered and underappreciated.

However, the next year, a producer from a small West Coast label who had never met Cassidy took an interest in her recordings, and he assembled an album on which "Songbird" was the title track. It was released two years after her death... and largely went unnoticed. Not a surprise for an unknown deceased singer featured by an obscure record company. But Cassidy's voice simply wouldn't go unheard, and in 2001, *Songbird* hit #1, five years after she had died.

Now, if you're thinking her rise could be explained by pity over her tragic fate, that's a tough case to make when you consider that Cassidy's thirteen posthumous albums – the most recent released just last year, twenty-eight years after her death – have sold in excess of ten million copies. The beauty of Eva Cassidy's legacy is not still growing because people feel sorry for her. The beauty of her legacy is still growing because that's how life and memory work.

Admittedly, it is hard for most of us to access that confidence at this hour of Yizkor, when we are split open and vulnerable from a full day of staring at our own mortality... and feeling so keenly the absence of those who once accompanied us through life. Some of them used to sit with us in this very room, and we can almost see them with our mind's eye, feel their embrace that our bodies memorized from blessed repetition. Whether we lost them after fullness of life or much too soon, whether following a long goodbye or a sudden shock, even when their passing felt more merciful than painful, we arrive at this moment on Yom Kippur bearing a familiar ache. We long for one more album of previously unreleased material, hungering for them to feel near again, to tell us what they think about this moment in time, or about a decision we are trying to make, or a life change we have experienced without them at our side.

The reality, which we who mourn experience in our more redemptive moments, is that our departed loved ones are always putting out new albums for us. The more we miss their unique gifts – their compassion or their wisdom or their creativity... their generosity or their courage or their grace – the more we miss what we treasured most about them, the more we know and can hear what they'd say about this moment in time or about how we are navigating our lives. We can hear it as if they were speaking in their own characteristic inflection, can we not – their glance conveying as much as their words. We can feel it. Their legacies are growing inside us – and through us, their legacies are growing into people and places they may never even have known.

One of our Reform movement's most inspiring thinkers today and the third-ever woman rabbi in France, Delphine Horvilleur, teaches about this in a fascinating way. She notes that the Hebrew word for memory, *zecher*, bears the same root as the Hebrew word for masculine, *zachar*. So, she concludes, our tradition is clearly trying to kindle our curiosity to understand what it is about memory that is associated with maleness. And she suggests that the answer is actually self-evident. *Zachar*, the masculine, is "the fertilizing agent in existence" – which is interesting, she writes, because *zecher*, memory, is something we usually consider to be "passive, a trace left on our mind by history or past encounters." But the Hebrew language, she asserts, is showing us that "the ability to remember is anything but passive. Memory (*zecher*) is an active process and the seed of new beginnings (*zachar*)."

This is how a person puts out thirteen new albums after she has died... and how a cherished family member or friend or mentor continues to advise or comfort or affirm. Rabbi Horvilleur teaches that this is not just an invention of Jewish wisdom: "Neuroscientists who study memory acknowledge that memory is far more than the capacity to store information in our brain... it depends on our... ability to build new connections with past experiences." In this way, "memory is always under construction... is an active and living process... actively fertiliz(ing) a mourner's mind."

On this Yom Kippur afternoon, with our spirits as hungry as our bodies, what is under construction in you from the life and legacy of someone who brought you to this service? A precious spouse... a devoted parent... a joyful child... a cherished sibling... a loyal friend – how are you being fertilized, reseeded, by someone you love and no longer get to see or hold, but who you continue to hear and feel and know?

The renowned contemporary Jewish poet Merle Feld answers the question this way:

Yesterday when I was on the #7 bus
I happened to look at the cuticle of my right forefinger
and for a moment I thought not that it was mine
but that it was my father's—

the same small confusion I have from time to time
when I catch sight of my daughter
in her denim skirt, size 3
and I feel lean, willowy, in her clothes.

So there I was on the #7 bus
overtaken by a longing very close to love
staring at the cuticle of my right forefinger.

I remembered how clean and short he kept his nails
and suddenly there was the whole man
reconstituted from a fingernail
standing before me, smiling broadly
his face flushed with pleasure.

Sometimes, we can be fully refertilized by something as tiny as a fingernail. Memory is dynamic like that. So you can be sure that this new year will not only bring you face to face with their absence. It will also reconnect you, if you let it, with that “longing very close to love” – which will enable you to hear the new songs not yet released to you... the new counsel, the new assurances, the new lessons in these precious bonds that remain under construction.

With love, let the story continue to be written.