

Yizkor 5776

There are many ways to get into the appropriate emotional mood for Yizkor. Today I will be telling you two different stories about people and their thoughts of the afterlife. I did not write either of these stories, by the way – unlike the other sermons I present.

This first story is a retelling of I.L. Peretz's story, Bontsche the Silent or Bontsche Shveig.

Benny was one of the lost and the lonely. Even today, despite what we have learned from CSI and NCIS about the everpresence of forensic science, it is possible for a person's end to be like Benny's.

The world did not end when Benny died. It did not even pause for one second. There are places where a gaggle of geese, or a gathering of goats will stop traffic for minutes and snarl it for hours and Benny did not even get the rolling stop you make in the middle of the night while leaving a parking lot.

Benny made no lasting impression in this world. When he was gone, if they had subpoenaed everyone who had crossed paths with him, they would not have received one verifiable descriptive sentence that had anything to do with him.

But, in the justice chamber on the way to the afterlife? You have no idea how much Benny's approach changed everybody's normal schedule. The defense team took hours instead of the usual seconds, not because they found lots of supportive documentation, and not because they could find nothing, but because they had to keep pausing in their work as the content overwhelmed them. The prosecution worked overtime as well, for the different reasons that they usually do.

When Benny entered the chamber, the Judge was already present. The Judge, who never needed to review a case to know all about it, softly explained to Benny, "Benny, I would like you to set quietly over her and watch for a while. Later, some of us might have a question or two to ask." In the presence of everyone there, Benny's life was re-enacted on holovision.

His mother had no strength to go to the places where the midwives were, and none of the midwives would come to her, so Benny was born with only his mother nearby. She died almost immediately afterwards, and a neighbor who needed a boy to match the number of children she claimed she had took him in. When the social worker asked him for his name, Benny was silent. His new mother thought he got her in trouble by not

looking enough like her, so she whacked him around a bit and once he could wonder off on his own, she kicked him out. And Benny was silent.

He did things for people because that made sense to him, and one day he helped out the town's racketeer. He became the racketeer's assistant, and soon enough had a child of his own. Benny's pay was a reflection of how much money his boss had left over; he never got a raise no matter how much work he had done. Through it all, Benny was silent.

His son's mother left him for someone else, and would occasionally send a messenger for the debts that were owed, and Benny stayed silent. For a while there was enough money coming in that all the people who took from Benny were satisfied. Yet Benny's position was not to last forever; an underling arranged to do his job better than he did. In the morning his boss left him only his clothes; in the evening his son who had searched for this hero to take him from the sadness his mother had found, found Benny in poverty instead, and in sheer disbelief and disgust took the rest of the little that Benny had left. Benny remained silent.

He made do for himself, as almost everything can under the right set of circumstances. He never amassed all that much, so he had to keep begging. He never wound up with so little as to bring him all the way to

death. He endured, staying silent, despite his surroundings or the people who took him and used him, or beat him and laughed at his plight.

Benny was just silent.

In a way it is a bit ironic. Benny's quiet strength could have moved mountains.

The tape of his life had wound to its close. In the final scene, a tornado picked up a branch and skewered him on it, depositing him at the bottom of a lake. After the storm, there was no indication that anything had happened out of the ordinary.

In the courtroom, the prosecutor's eyes were tearing, resting the case without saying a word. The defense attorney needed no defense. The Judge said, "Benny, you can now have whatever you want. What would you like?"

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Then, if it is alright with You, I would like French toast with bananas and strawberries like they serve at the restaurants. I would appreciate that every morning."

The courtroom was silent.

I learned this next story a long time ago – first in English, then in Hebrew, and then in English again. It happened that the Ba'al Shem Tov was wandering in the woods, and wondering aloud about the identity of his neighbor in the afterlife, and the quality of the good deeds that the other person had done. Well, a wish from the Besht is like a command from you or me, so that very day he was given a name and a town. That next Thursday after Shacharit he entered into his coach with a few of the Hasidim, and when the coach stopped and they asked to see where they were, they found out they were in the very village where his afterlife neighbor could be found. They asked for the location of this distinguished gentleman, and I am sorry to say that the faces of the people they were talking to fell. There was only one person by that name in the village, and nobody considered him a person for whom one should have respect.

Nevertheless, the message was clear, and the Besht with his Hasidim went to see what kind of secret Tzaddik was lurking in town.

He invited them in to the room, and asked them to sit at the far end of the table. Then he ate. No blessing before or after, not even a slight pause. Well, they thought, maybe his secret is a Shabbat secret. They stayed through Shabbat, and even with looking very closely for some hint of a saving grace, all they found was a person who ate. A lot. He worked on

Shabbat, did not do Hamotzi or Birkat HaMazon, did not do any other tefillot and seemed to perform no acts of kindness for anyone else whatsoever. He didn't even offer any of his food to his guests! It's not like he would have missed it – he looked like he easily weighed more than the Besht and his friends put together, and the food they had seen him eat could easily have fed their village for at least a week, and maybe a month. The Hasidim were wondering what the Besht was waiting for – if this person was going to be the Besht's afterlife neighbor, he really needed to fix up his act.

Finally, after the time had come for Havdallah, the Besht asked the host a single question. "Tell me, why do you eat so much?"

"Well, you brought your own food, and you haven't asked for a single thing from me, so I guess I can take the time to answer you.

"When I was a child, my father and I went traveling as rag peddlers. A Cossack nearly rode over us on his horse, and then he got off the horse. He came over to my father and hit him across the head. Then the Cossack pointed to the boots and said one word, "Kiss!" My father replied, "No!" Another hit, and another command, "Kiss!" My father said, "I sell rags. I am not one of them." The Cossack got tired after a few moments when my father would neither kiss his boots nor say anything else, so he tied him to

a tiny tree and set my father on fire. I was watching, and it didn't take long at all. As he left, I heard the Cossack say, "You were right. You were no rag. A rag would have burned longer."

"At that time, I promised myself one thing. I would make enough to be able to eat a lot, so I would become huge. When the Cossacks come for me, and they tie me to a tree and burn me, I will take a very long time to die, and I will tell them, "This is how a Jew goes out, making a light that everyone can see!""

The coach came for the group, and they went into it. The Besht wandered again, and wondered a bit. When asked, he replied, "I now know why my afterlife neighbor will be there. What I don't know yet, is what I have done to deserve to be his neighbor."

There are connections between these two stories. If you would like to me to flesh them out more, I would be glad to do so at a different time. In the meantime, as we remember our dead, we might also keep in mind the burden we struggle under between being noticed and being polite. We need to be remembered, both while we are alive and after we are dead, for having been good partners with God.