

“Do You Still Feel Me Hugging You?”ⁱ

Yom Kippur *Yizkor* 5780

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The noted author and Civil Rights hero Bryan Stevenson touched my heart with his reflection on his grandmother, of blessed memory, briefly recounted in his book, *Just Mercy*, and told most powerfully and more expansively when I heard him speak in the spring. The words of Stevenson’s grandmother, and the ways she continues to impact him, even decades after her death, offer faith and hope at this moment of our remembrance.

“When I was about nine years old,” Stevenson recounts, “[my grandmother] started coming up to give me these hugs, and she would squeeze me so tightly that I thought she was trying to hurt me. And then she’d see me an hour later again, and she’d say, ‘Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?’ And if I said ‘no,’ she would jump on me again. By the time I was ten, ... the first time I’d see her, I said, ‘Mawmaw, I always feel you hugging me.’”ⁱⁱ

Stevenson jumps forward into his early adult years: “When she was in her 90s, she fell one day, and she broke her hip. And then, she was diagnosed with cancer. And she was dying. I was a college student, and I went to see my grandmother; and it was so hard for me, because she really meant the world to me. There was something about what she said to me and did for me that was just so precious, that the idea that she wouldn’t be there saying those things any more was really hard for me... And I sat down next to her bed, and I held her hand, and I poured my heart out for over an hour. I wasn’t even sure she could hear what I was saying. I knew it was time ... I stood up to leave, and as I was about to take a step, ... my grandmother squeezed my hand, and she opened her eyes. And the last thing she said to me, my grandmother looked at me and said: ‘Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?’ And then she said, ‘I’m always going to be hugging you.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Bryan Stevenson continues, even decades later, to feel his grandmother’s embrace, and to pass her hugs on to others. As a Civil Rights attorney, Stevenson helps many people, but he cannot help everybody. Still, he insists, “When we don’t know what we can do, we can wrap our arms around people who are suffering and struggling. We can affirm their humanity; we can affirm the dignity of their lives.”^{iv}

Not everybody is a hugger, neither all of us nor all of the loved ones we remember today. Still, if we understand that “hug” to be the presence of our departed loved ones, all of us can name people, no longer living in this world, whose intimate presence remains with us today. They will always be “hugging” us.

We who are heirs to their embrace are left with two critical responsibilities.

First, we remember, and we make their memories a blessing. Whether at *Yizkor* or in a moment of sudden, even unexpected, recall, we experience their enduring presence in our lives. We know that a beloved spouse is still with us: As we tackle a task that we could not have imagined confronting without them, we still feel them “hugging” us. We know that a parent is still with us: When we live their cherished values that we have made our own, we still feel them “hugging” us. We know that a tragically taken child is still with us: When we share the joy they brought to our lives with others, we still feel them “hugging” us.

Our second responsibility reminds us of the reason that we hold *Yizkor* services on Yom Kippur. Today, we resolve to leave behind unworthy ways, and to forge a better self for the year ahead. *Yizkor* calls us to consider what our loved ones will experience when they feel us “hugging” them when we are no longer among them on Earth. If we can forge a legacy that is only a small fraction of the one that Bryan Stevenson received from his grandmother, then our memories, when our time has come, will be a blessing.

Whether the “hug” was real or virtual, each of us is blessed with sacred, loving memories today. Let those “hugs” inspire the lives we shall live as we emerge from Yom Kippur. And let us commit ourselves to passing those “hugs” and more to those who will come after us.

Amen.

ⁱ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, New York: Random House, 2014, Apple Books Electronic Version, p. 36.

ⁱⁱ <https://vimeo.com/showcase/5967490>. (This video is password protected for CCAR members only.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.