



## "CONTINUING CONVERSATIONS"

545-3664. My grandmother's phone number. It has been approximately 15 years since it was my grandmother's number. Sadly, she was incapable of really talking to us on the phone for several years before that. (For those of you trying to do the math, were she still alive, my grandmother would be far older than the oldest living member of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation.) My father remembers when the number was just the last four digits, even before they added a name and number and then later changed it to 545. My siblings, cousins and I simply and fondly remember the number as 545-3664, long before one had to always dial the area code.

Take a moment. Remember the numbers of your grandparents, parents and other family members beyond our call. (Pause)

Think about dialing the number or punching in on a keypad. Today, we know fewer numbers. So often, we simply click on someone's name on our cell phone. Specific numbers are less likely to be indelibly linked to your aunt or to your sister. We can still make calls, but do we even know our own children's cell phone numbers?

However, there is something rather direct in the connection we can make today: click on your brother's name and you call him, no intermediate steps are necessary.

545-3664, one of the sweeter numbers I ever dialed. So many conversations. So many moments. My grandmother's worry that the long-distance cost too much, even though we could afford it and, eventually, it wasn't even that expensive any more. Earlier centuries knew only a telegram or letters before those days. For much of human history, you would have only communicated with those with in a relatively short walk or ride. Most people spent most of their lives living in the same area and near to those dear to them. Yet our generations have grown up with the magic of the phone. Sure, the technology has evolved since 1876. Access has increased and cost declined. However, the magic connection across minutes or miles has forever changed our emotional linkage.

Think of the phone numbers of your best friend or your mother. Some of us are quite good at remember the digits as we need them. Others peak constantly at the back pages of a date book, or our contacts app, or the slip of paper on the kitchen wall. No matter how we conjure the information, it is the actual contact that matters. What has real impact is the contact over years, situations, phases and locations of our lives. We share discussions with those who matter to us, those whom we gather today to remember. Some of you, with memories better than mine, can remember the actual conversations, the shared laughter, the verbal hugs at moments of crisis. Sometimes you had to survive on holiday greetings shared over brief phone calls. Other times, you might get lucky and share a long slow lunch together. Regardless of format, we "live" our relationships through the sharing of thoughts, conversations, and concerns.

The great Twentieth Century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber taught:

"What counts is... the lived relationship. ... We greet those we encounter by wishing them well or by assuring them of our devotion..."

(I and Thou, Scribner's, New York, 1970 edition, p.70)

Buber was born two years after the telephone was created. He lived the first two thirds of his life in Germany. In 1965, Martin Buber died in Israel, after almost 3 decades there. His communications switched from letters to phone calls, and included plenty of telegrams. Given his generation, he most certainly understood what it meant to have relationships cut short, not only by distance, but also by death, both tragic and natural. Buber taught deeply about the value of true connections in our world, lifting up the concept of relationship even in our search for God. However, in that deceptively simple quote from his most famous I and Thou, Buber is making the point that it is through our conversations that we develop and maintain our relationships. Our connections are not abstractions. We make them real by engaging the other in conversation, be it agreement, argument, or somewhere in between.

We can cherish the family heirloom, an inherited sweater, or a recipe smudged with sauce. However, it is the lessons taught and the laughter shared that make the strongest impact. A sentiment that I often include in funerals is "how we yearned to have them close to us for yet another challenge in our lives, yet another joy, yet another precious moment together."

We might add: 'Yet another phone call or conversation.'

Such is our feeling of loss. The seemingly unbridgeable distance of death is reinforced by our inability to speak together with a parent. The absence of our cousin is felt when we drive by his house, because we can't stop and schmooze. We can't just reach out to an old neighbor and share a memory briefly. Our greatest joys and victories are a tad less jubilant, because we can't place that call and share it with the trusted loved one, now deceased.

In a beautiful poem that we will read shortly as part of this Yizkor service, the poet Grace Paley wrote:

"I needed to talk to my sister  
talk to her on the telephone I mean  
just as I used to every morning  
in the evening too whenever the  
grandchildren said a sentence that  
clasped both our hearts..."

(Mishkan HaNefesh Yom Kippur. page 563, excerpt)

How poignant and how familiar? The poet is reminding us that the dialogues we have with our dearest family and friends are not really isolated moments of interchange. We have running conversations with those closest to us, simply broken up by the time, travels, and responsibilities that send us into discussion with others; and likely provide fodder for the next conversation. Even if we didn't talk to that childhood friend often enough, we could pick back up with the very next phone call or cup of coffee while overlapping at a conference or down the beach.

The conversation never really stops across our lives, thus Rabbi Anne Brenner's observes:

"Everyone dies in the middle of a conversation."  
(Judaism and Health, edited by Jeff Levin and Michele Prince, Jewish Lights, Vermont, 2013, p.211)

Life ends in the middle of a conversation, because our lives are one ongoing dialogue, or really many different ongoing conversations. Today, we gather to feel the loss of those discussions. Rabbi Brenner actually suggests that our Yizkor prayers, that each and every Kaddish, gives us a taste of connecting with those we loved. We are almost talking with them again. She suggests:

"I believe that... the power of human words and deeds creates a metaphor that makes it possible for us to have a sense that, even after a death, we remain in dynamic relationship with those who have died.... These practices...make it possible for the conversation to continue..." (page 212)

She is not suggesting anything supernatural, rather that the power of our tradition can enable a taste of our conversations to continue. Our love and our emotional bonds can allow us hear their voices still, imperfectly and incompletely as it may be.

545-3664, I haven't been able to call that number and speak in a long time. However, here today, I continue that conversation. Here today, I find comfort in that connection.

Zecher Tzadik L'vracha, may the memories of our dearest conversations bring blessing and solace to our lives. Amen.