

I share with you a true story that occurred at a recent funeral where I was the officiant.

It was a graveside funeral and everyone was standing around the grave waiting for the casket to be fully lowered into the grave site.

As the casket was lowered in almost settled down below, with everyone in quiet attendance, suddenly, the following recorded message was heard by me and I imagine others around me –

"You have arrived at your destination."

No one had the nerve to say anything allowed.

I suppose everyone else knew that someone's GPS program was still active and for whatever reason only decided to sign off right there, at the gravesite, where the deceased had indeed arrived at his destination.

You can't make it up.

I think we all know the reason why the sanctuary is full right now, with more people in attendance, than any other service during the rest of the year.

Of course we come to honor and remember our loved ones who have died, but we also maintain great interest in reaching out and connecting with those who have died.

We not only recall them.

We not only pray for their souls to be at rest.

We also look for ways to interact with them.

Yizkor and reciting Mourners Kaddish are among some of the most popular and powerful rituals in our faith.

Imagine if there were more immediate ways to connect with those who have died.

If that were the case, and if I could guarantee it, just imagine how many people would be in shul today?

How many of you were able to view the television episode, "Be Right Back," which is one of the episodes of the Netflix series, "Black Mirror."

I hope most of you who saw the episode can already understand why I might choose to speak about this episode today, on the most powerful day of Yizkor in the Jewish calendar year.

But before I go any further with an explanation and analysis of this episode, let me share with everyone a little more about the Netflix series, "Black Mirror."

Some people compare this series to the well-known television show, "Twilight Zone."

Many of the episodes are somewhat eerie and just about all of them present situations set 10 to 15 years in the future.

The episodes imagine, how certain advancements in technology might affect us, change us, transform us as human beings, and not always for the better.

Our daughter Ariella recommended this television series to us, and continues to be very pleased whenever her recommendations elicit a sermon from me.

The episode called "Be Right Back" tells the story of Martha, a young woman and her boyfriend Ash.

Shortly after we get to know them, Ash is killed in a car accident.

Martha grieves, mourns and misses Ash terribly.

At the funeral, a friend tells Martha about advancement in technology that allows for communication via e-mail and text with an online persona of Ash.

This virtual persona will be created if Martha will allow access to Ash's online history of conversations, interests and searches.

After some initial reticence, Martha purchases the software to allow this access and the program develops responses that conform with what Martha might come to expect from the real Ash.

And so, online, in a chat format, Martha begins to converse, and this virtual Ash responds.

And so I ask you my dear friends, does this sound realistic?

Do you think we are close to this technological capability already?

I do –

I mean really, how different is this from the ways in which many of us interact with Siri or Alexa?

You might think that this type of communication is intriguing enough, but the television episode takes it even further.

As the online chats between Martha and virtual Ash deepen, Martha expresses her desire to "speak" with Ash.

And Ash responds "you can."

It will require a different setting but it is possible with new software to replicate Ash's voice.

Based on previous recordings Martha's and Ash's conversations can now be voice to voice.

Does that sound realistic? Do you think the technology exists for that to happen right now?

I do, and probably without too much difficulty.

And so, with these voice to voice conversations, the connection to virtual Ash goes even deeper, prompting Martha to want even more.

It doesn't take long for virtual Ash to inform Martha that there is an expensive possibility for even more.

There is available, for purchase, a form of virtual Ash that is - embodied.

Martha makes this purchase and therefore, now accessible to Martha, are communications in the style of Ash, with the voice of Ash coming from the body she knew as belonging to Ash.

For those who haven't seen the episode, I'm not going to share too much more about what happens, but in short, while there is an exact physical replica of Ash, even with a matching communication pattern and voice, *there is no soul to this creature.*

You should know that this embodiment of Ash does not eat, or drink, or sleep, and one time when cut by a piece of broken glass, Ash does not even bleed.

Religiously, biblically, this is significant because in the Bible, blood is frequently referred to as the nefesh, or life force of living creatures.

The fact that Ash does not bleed, might indicate, that this virtual Ash has no soul.

And, without soul, love is never fully present!

True communication, as opposed to rehearsed communication, is never fully present.

One of the reasons this episode affected me so powerfully, and that I choose to share my reaction to it with you today is because of a book I read this past summer.

The name of the book is, "Reclaiming Conversation – The Power of Talk in a Digital Age", authored by Sherry Turkle,

Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Let me read to you the summary on the back cover of the book.

Everything you hear is extremely well researched and documented throughout the entire book:

“Sherry Turkle, long an enthusiast for the promise of digital technology, now investigates a troubling consequence: at work, and politics, and in love, we have sacrificed conversation for mere connection. At the dinner table, children compete with smart phones for their parents’ attention. At work, we retreat to our screens, foregoing the water cooler conversations that once made us more productive and engaged. Online, we share opinions that our friends will agree with, avoiding the real conflicts and solutions of the public square. When we turn to our devices instead of to one another, the cost is high: a loss of empathy.”

Of all people, it is interesting that Melinda Gates, wife of Bill Gates, wrote an article making similar points that appeared in the Washington Post in late August. Google it if you want.

Let me get back to the television show – is this alternate embodiment of the virtual Ash, realistic and technologically possible?

Maybe not yet, but probably it will be, not that far into the future.

Cloning humans, at this point, as weird as it sounds, is probably just another step in the process of technological advancement, whether we like it or not.

Honestly, this television episode moved me to rethink the concept in Judaism known as T'chiyat HaMayteem - the revival or resurrection of the dead.

This idea is featured prominently in the second blessing of every daily recited Amidah - we say that God is ne-eman Atah L'hachayot Mayteem - reliable to resurrect the dead.

Why do we recite such prayers?

Traditionally, it must be because the prayer reflects our desire that God indeed can and will resurrect the dead someday.

Exactly how does that happen, and what does that mean?

In our classic texts there are many different views as to how this phenomenon might take place, which of course means that no one really knows.

Here is one famous source from the Talmud:

“In the world to come, there is no eating, or drinking, nor procreation or commerce, nor jealousy, or enmity or rivalry – but the righteous sit with crowns on their heads and enjoy the radiance of the Divine Presence.”

Now the texts are not clear on whether the “World to Come” leads to the Resurrection of the Dead or already includes it, but either way, isn't what I just read, except for the last phrase, also

very much a description of the re-embodied Ash from the television episode.

No matter how close or far we may be from something like virtual Ash, there is no doubt about the proliferation of robots in our society.

More and more we hear how robots are performing tasks that are either dangerous, complicated, or menial for human beings.

And as this proliferation of robots increases, the impact and meaning of human existence, come more and more into question.

Undoubtedly, robots or artificially embodied creatures, which can mimic our lives will be more and more common.

The question then is whether real human beings, with a measure of unpredictability and surprise, will be harder and harder to create and find.

Perhaps the notion of an ultimate fusion, connecting Olam HaBa, the world to come, and Tchiyat HaMayteem, the resurrection of the dead, is the rabbinic attempt to imagine a future where an invulnerable body is able to live along with a soul that is sweet, loving and pure.

Yes, today is Yizkor, a day of remembrance, a day to remember our loved ones in body, and to reach out to their souls.

The critical prayer we will recite a few moments, Ayl Male Rachamin, God who is full of mercy, mentions nothing about the body or its resurrection.

But the soul, yes, that we know it emphasizes, in the following phrase:

May their souls be bound up in the bond of eternal life.”

While we may very much welcome a visit or more from a body re-presentation, (spooky), without the soul what does it really mean, what might it really be worth?

We all know that the devices to which we are so attached, can re-present and re-create part of what we have done in life as performance, by following the script from the previous dramas in our lives.

The same play can be performed flawlessly night after night, without a hitch.

But life is not fully scripted by each of us alone.

We join with others, and with God, in interpreting and readjusting to the scripts of our lives.

That is the process by which we shape our souls.

All of that is what makes us human, and all of that is what we recall and remember today.

Not just the bodies of our loved ones, but even more so, we remember and still benefit from interacting with their souls.

Today, at this yizkor service we all demonstrate the need and value of revisiting our intimate relationships, with the souls of our loved ones.

It is our most sacred Jewish ritual, declaring that although at times our connection is more distant, it won't be too long before we will, as best as we can, be right back.

T'hay ...