Yizkor

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I grew up watching my father on the bimah, so it was special for me having him here in the pews with my mother watching me last week. (My parents are with my brothers and sisters-in-law now in Denver.) I remember on the high holidays as a kid being struck by two major exoduses of people from the room. The first was each of the days after the sermon. I had mixed feelings about that. I felt a little bad for the cantor that everyone was leaving, but I was proud that they were there to listen to my father, and were leaving now that that he had finished speaking. But the other exodus was more disconcerting. My father would explain at a certain point on Yom Kippur that although there is a widespread custom for people who have not yet had to mourn to leave the room for yizkor, that in fact they do not have to leave and can remain as there are yizkor prayers for all relatives and friends and we all knew people whom we can remember. But each year, as my father would encourage people to stay, hundreds of people would turn their back on him and walk out.

Of course I soon enough came to understand that those who were leaving were doing so not because of something my father did or did not say, but because of their own fathers and mothers who were there in the room, and they were taught to leave that room as their parents mourned their own loved ones. The long-established custom is to leave for Yizkor if you have not yet mourned for someone. Some say that means having mourned for one of the relationships that we are obligated to mourn, a parent, spouse, sibling or child. Others say that as long as one's parents are alive, and certainly in the room, we should absent ourselves. There are various

reasons for this. One is superstition, that if we are in the room for yizkor before having lost someone close, we will attract the evil eye and invite misfortune. Another more palatable explanation is that there is a consoling value in realizing during yizkor that the room is filled with orphans, that none of us is alone in our experience of grief and loss, and that we find strength through each other. The yizkor prayer is practically the only part of the prayer book that is a personal prayer. Everything else is communal, but the yizkor prayer is about me and my loss. But then as a I look around myself I see that there are others, so many others, who have also lost loved ones, and I feel less alone. Some explain the custom of the yizkor exodus as based in the culture of parents shielding their children from pain, that children should not see their parents cry. But there is also an elegance to the simplest explanation of all, that there is no rush to experience mourning, that we will all lose someone close eventually. There is no rush.

So both customs are respected here, either to walk out or to stay. But before we turn to yizkor I want to spend some time talking about the prayer and its meaning. I like to devote one of my high holiday sermons each year to a specific prayer. This year we will talk about yizkor.

While yizkor is probably the most popular part of the liturgy, it is also one of the most recent. Yizkor developed in the Ashkenazic communities of Europe in the last millennium, which means it is new in terms of the course of Jewish history. The practice of a memorial liturgy in the synagogue began in Germany after the destruction of the Jewish communities along the Rhine River during the First Crusade in 1096. Development continued into the seventeenth century, when the El Malei Rahaim, what we call *the* memorial prayer, was composed in Poland following the 1648 Cossack uprising in the Ukraine with its attacks on the Jews. Many supplemental reading and meditations were added in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so that yizkor is

now a mini-service of its own. We still see vestiges of the original purpose to commemorate martyrs, but the overall theme of yizkor has become that of our personal griefs.

Yizkor begins with a series of biblical passages interspersed with modern readings. *Adonai mah adam vateida'eihu. Adonai, what are human beings that You take account of them, mortals that You care for them? Humans are as a breath, their days like a passing shadow. In the morning they flourish anew; in the evening they shrivel and die. Teach us to count each day.* These words from the Psalms that open the yizkor service are blunt and direct even as they are powerful and wise. Life is short. Why should it matter? But it does matter to God. And if so, then it should matter to us as well. Help us to appreciate each day with those we love, and with our own lives as well.

When we wake each morning we are supposed to thank God for giving us another day of life, and when we go to sleep each night we are to say the Shema, just in case we don't wake up in the morning. Sleep is a mini-death, and Judaism uses the experience of going to sleep and waking up as a physical example to teach us how life can end and can begin and that we are ultimately in God's hands.

Another rehearsal for death is Yom Kippur. We fast, taking in neither food nor drink, as the living must. Some of us wear the traditional whites, used as burial gowns. We seem to dwell in these hours in an in-between place between heaven and earth. And we pray that God accept us with mercy and forgiveness, just as we would surely hope on our last day. But the rehearsal for death is supposed to teach us how to do better at living. Yom Kippur, even as it elevates us from our mundane lives, aims to bring us back here, but with an elevated perspective. If we

understand that life is like a passing shadow, maybe we will do better at appreciating it when we are in it.

My first experience of death was when I was in third grade. My grandfather died in March, of a heart attack in Florida. I had last seen him in our home in Queens maybe a couple months before. The image that I kept replaying in my third grade mind, that I can still see so clearly today, was the very temporary imprint on the couch where I last saw my grandfather sit. He and my grandmother were sitting across from me in our living room before my mother took them to the airport. We must have been talking, and then they left and I was still on the couch facing them, and I saw the creases in the leather still there, but temporarily, from where they were sitting. I remembered that after he died, and I kept going over and over in my mind that I did not know that that was the last time I was going to see him. I understood that people die, and I knew that he had suffered from a heart condition. But I was not prepared for that empty couch, for the sight of that empty couch that is seared in my brain. We can all sense the empty chairs around us that were once filled with our loved ones.

So, if I could go back to the last time I saw my grandfather, I would have said goodbye more fervently, I thought. Of course, I suppose I would have said goodbye nicely when they got up from that couch to return to Florida, but that I can't remember. All I see is the empty couch.

Since that day, I always part with the people I love in the best way I can. Of course I want to see them again many many times for years to come. But let us be frank, we will all lose each other at one point or another. That is what the yizkor tells us flat out. The variable, though, is

not only when we lose each other—something we cannot control—but more importantly how we lose each other—something we can control.

Yizkor warns us not to fail to show the people we care about that we love them. It warns us not to let arguments linger. It advises us that we should not put off for a later time something that needs to be said or done. I spoke last Friday about the importance of forgiveness, and that a refusal to forgive causes more pain for the one refusing than the one refused. Sometimes we know when our last conversation is with a loved one. But usually we don't. Any conversation could be the last. *Our days are like a passing shadow. Teach us to count each day.*

After the introductory passages and readings, the individual yizkor prayers are recited. *Yizkor Elohim et nishmat…. May God remember the soul of*…. This is the individual moment when the room gets quiet and we each reflect on the ones we have lost, the ones we miss. Commentators focus on the language of the prayer, that we call on God to remember. How could God forget? Is it not we who need the help, who need the prompting? It may be that the medievals intended to plead with God to remember and save the souls of our loved ones so that they might inherit paradise. But for us, when we call upon God we are asking God to unleash our inner reserves of strength, to help us with the difficult tasks. And in Judaism memory is a task, not a mere recollection.

The biblical scholar Nahum Sarna explained that whenever the term "remember" is used in relation to God in the Bible, the meaning is not that God recollects something but rather that God focuses on something and acts. God remembers Noah and has the waters recede and the flood ends (Gen. 8:1). God remembers Abraham in the midst of the destruction of Sodom and

Gomorroh and sends an angel to rescue Abraham's nephew Lot (Gen. 19:29). God remembers Rachel and opens her womb and she bore Joseph (Gen. 30:22). God remembers the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, hears the Israelites suffering, and delivers them out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom (Exod. 2:24). Just as remembering means action for God, so also for us.

That is why the traditional yizkor paragraph that we recite continues: *hineni noder tzedakah be'ad hazkarat nishmato, I pledge tzedakah to help perpetuate ideals important to them. Through such deeds, and through prayer and remembrance, may their souls be bound up in the bond of life.* This passage is omitted from most liberal liturgies, though it is retained in our Conservative prayer book. The liberals omit it because they question the theology that an act of charity on our part can influence the condition of the soul of one already departed. But we should understand this phrase on a deeper level. Remembering a loved one entails more than mere recollection. Memory means action. The memory of those who came before me, who made a difference in my life, continue to make a difference in my life as I am guided, and as I continue to grow and learn, from the gifts that they gave me through their love.

I talked about losing my grandfather when I was in third grade. That was the first time I experienced loss. My grandfather was a dentist. And not only that, but he loved dentistry. He loved teeth. And, as you might well imagine he always told me to brush my teeth. So whenever I would brush my teeth, after he died, I felt his presence, his approval. And if I did not brush my teeth, I felt his disapproval. Now, even as a third grader, I did not actually believe that the ghost of my late grandfather was hanging around my bathroom at night concerned with my dental hygiene. But he did instill in me, his third grade grandson, the importance of dental hygiene. When I brush my teeth, when I go to the dentist for my regular cleanings, I certainly feel my

grandfather's presence. Not that that's the only way I remember him. He loved Judaism, and I think of him when I wear my tefillin every morning, which in fact, was his tefillin which he wore every morning. The older and more mature we are when we lose loved ones, the deeper the impact will be that they had on our lives. My memory of the imprint left in the folds of the couch my grandfather sat on is really the imprint of the memory that he left in my mind and on my life. Our lives are textured around such imprints.

The pledge to give tzedakah in memory of our loved ones, then, is a determination to act and live informed by their memory. We traditionally give a donation in the synagogue where we recite yizkor, which is why we have the cards organized alphabetically on the table on the side for making a yizkor pledge. Last night Merille Siegel inspired us to give to Goodwill to support the synagogue. With the yizkor pledge today we bring our loved ones who are no longer here right back into the room with us, so that they can continue to participate in the community, just as we do. We are here in part because of the value they instilled in us, and we give on their behalf to bring their presence back, to feel them in those empty seats around us. The act of giving in their name here opens us up to acting in their name and according to their values outside of this room as well. That way they are bound up with us in the bond of life as they live on through our actions.

Yizkor's most evocative prayer is the El Malei. *Exalted compassionate God, grant perfect peace in Your sheltering presence among the holy and the pure, whose radiance is like the heavens, to the souls of those we recall today.* The silent part of yizkor is a kind of litany where we go through all the names whom we recall. Many of us lit yahrzeit candles for each of them last night, candles that burn throughout the day, just as we are surrounded by all the lit names

on the yizkor boards on the walls. But then we bring all the names together as we hear the pleading melody of the El Malei. They form a single congregation among us here, an assemblage *whose radiance is like the heavens.*

We each have names we add to that assembly, sometimes greater than the numbers of the living. I recall my four grandparents. Three grandparents-in-law. My father-in-law. My mother-in-law whom I never met but whose loving presence I feel in my and Alla's home every day.

I recall other relatives and friends. Two rabbinical school classmates who sit already in what we call the heavenly academy. As the years pass, the ones we recall become more contemporary, and closer to us. We wonder when our own chair will be empty, and whether anyone will say yizkor for us. We taste what that is like on Yom Kippur, as we go through the day parched and empty. As we seek a glimpse of the purity that awaits us when our final hour approaches.

I remember the cantor whom I adored when I was a young boy in shul. He taught me for my bar mitzvah and continued to teach me how to daven and how to sing. He is with us here because you hear him whenever I open my mouth to sing in worship. You never met him, and yet he has become a part of our service here. But he continues to coach me. I feel his hand on my shoulder giving me support.

There are two congregations in the room. There is the congregation that we see and then there is the congregation that we feel, that surrounds us from the empty chairs and spaces in our lives. We are who we are today because of the memories of those who left imprints on our lives.

Our very selves are reactions and reflections of our encounters with others. Our finest deeds are inspired by their goodness. There are two congregations in the room. Neither could be here without the other, and both are real.

Our yizkor service concludes with the twenty-third psalm and then the mourner's kaddish. *Gam ki elekh begei tzalmavet lo ira ra ki atah imadi. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for You are with me.* Our devotions to God, our call upon God to remember our loved ones, bind us to the congregation that came before, the congregation of the past. Only through that connection, the connection we make during yizkor, can we move forward, with comfort rather than fear, into the future.

Yitgadal veyitkadash shmei rabba.