

Weekly Teaching

May 12, 2017

For many years, leading into Mother's Day, I would open a sermon noting that I always thought Mother's Day was my own mother's Z'L (zichrona l'vracha—her memory should be for a blessing) favorite "Jewish holiday."

Planning would begin early. The day was quite sacred, and I think it was really the only holiday celebrated in our home where my mother really had no responsibilities other than to enjoy the day.

A few weeks ago I observed Mom's first yahrzeit.

Yahrzeit is a Yiddish word meaning anniversary of a death.

Traditionally, on the anniversary of the Hebrew date of losing a loved one, we observe the yahrzeit at home by lighting a special 24-hour candle in memory of our dearly departed.

This candle is known as a Yizkor candle because we also light them the four times a year we observe the traditional Yizkor service: Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret (end of Sukkot), end of Passover and the second day of Shavuot.

The tradition is to also observe yahrzeit by attending a minyan and reciting the Mourner's Kaddish.

Temple Sholom, like most synagogues, maintains a memorial wall of plaques bearing the names of deceased loved ones and a light is lit by the name during the week of their yahrzeit, as well as the time of Yizkor.

The plaques are purchased as a tzedakah (charity) gift to the Temple.

Because the first yahrzeit has been observed for my mother, our family will soon gather for the ceremony of unveiling the tombstone graveside.

There we will share the traditional readings and prayers, observe the mitzvah of sharing loving memories and then consecrate the stone marker.

My mother's marker will note the "date of birth—date of passing," and the declaration: "Beloved Wife, Mother and Saftah (grandmother); United in loving marriage for 54 years."

Besides the Jewish star that is at the top of the marker, the most important symbol is the "dash" that is between the "date of birth—date of passing".

In the poem, "The Dash," Linda Ellis writes:

"...what mattered most of all was the dash between those years. For that dash represents all the time that they spent alive on Earth. And now only those who loved them know what that little line is worth... when your eulogy is being read, with your life's actions to rehash... would you be proud of the things they say about how you spent YOUR dash?"

My mother's "dash" is one for which she can be very proud, as can her family.

My mother's priorities were pretty simple; family and her Judaism, and these two priorities are completely intertwined.

As we approach the unveiling ceremony and Mother's Day, I feel, as many children who have lost a parent feel, a huge amount of gratitude for all of the love shared.

I like that my mother's unveiling ceremony falls in close proximity to Shavuot, the holiday where we celebrate both family and our Judaism by reading from the Book of Ruth.

Especially powerful is when Ruth declares to Naomi:

"Do not press me to leave you, or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried."

I find Ruth's words to be one of the most poignant expressions of deep love that is found in all of our sacred texts; an expression of unconditional love.

It's also not the genre of romantic love, instead it's the unbreakable bond that can occur when we truly and wholly love another no matter the relationship by blood, extended family, etc.

This Mother's Day, let's be thankful for all of the loving relationships we possess, and more mindful to strengthen relationships where we can.

Let's open up our hearts to the type of love that Ruth possessed for Naomi; that my mother possessed for her family and faith.

And, let it become a daily discipline while our loved ones are with us.

I am, this Mother's Day, especially recalling the [commercial](#) made by the great football Coach Bear Bryant.

He opens by asking in his tough Coach voice: "Have you called your mama today?"

Then, in a transformation to complete human vulnerability, he ad-libbed: "I sure wish I could call mine."

I really do wish I could call my mother. But this year I will think of her lovingly, and most importantly in her honor, rededicate myself to strengthen the bonds of love that I possess with my family, friends, community and Faith.

Happy Mother's Day and Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Mitch

rabbimitch@templesholom.com