

Weekly Teaching

October 11, 2017

Yizkor is our service of Remembrance.

The Hebrew word, Yizkor, means: “may (God) remember.”

Originally Yizkor was observed only on Yom Kippur.

The purpose of the Yizkor recitation was to prompt the individual to pledge charity as a concrete means by which to honor the memory of the loved one who has passed away.

The rabbinic notion was that the action of remembrance combined with the good deed of charity would “elevate” the souls of the dearly departed.

The Rabbis added Yizkor to the last day of the major pilgrimage festivals—Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot—because the Torah reading for these days mentions the importance of charity.

At Temple Sholom, we will observe Yizkor TOMORROW, Thursday, October 12 at approximately 10:30 am.

Please find below the text of my 2017 Yom Kippur Yizkor sermon.

Chag Sameach,

Rabbi Mitch

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In a few minutes we will participate in our Yizkor Service; a special time when we observe some specific moments of remembering the loved ones we’ve lost.

Yizkor is a time, unique to Jews, when we practice a ritual dedicated to remembering our loved ones.

It’s a special time, but it’s not the only time, we Jews engage in the mitzvah of memorializing those we have loved and lost.

We remember them on Yahrtzeit dates when we light the memorial candle in the 24 hour glass and attend a minyan so we can recite Kaddish.

We memorialize the memories of loved ones by naming our children after them.

Each year on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Commemoration Day), we memorialize the Six Million innocents murdered by the Nazis.

In fact, all of our holidays include some way of memorializing our Jewish heroes from the past. They are part of our history, and our history shapes our eternal Jewish identity.

At our Passover Seder we recall the leadership of Moses, Aaron and Miriam. We eat Jewish history and taste the tears of our bondage, the bitterness of our slavery and the sweetness of liberation.

On Chanukah we light our menorahs and recall the bravery of the Macabees. We replay how our faith in God gives us the strength to persevere against tyranny and persecution.

So much of Jewish ritual is about tethering Jewish history to ourselves today:

- “Remember the Sabbath!”
- “If I forget Thee, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither.”
- Touching the fringes on our tallises.
- Kissing the mezuzahs on our doorposts...

These are but a few of the ritual reminders that serve as catalysts for our efforts as Jews to remember.

One of our Jewish rituals was recently witnessed by a non-Jewish journalist.

He wrote an article about it last May.

The article was a reminder that, no matter where we Jews might be in the world, we have the ability to access our rituals as reminders and to connect more deeply, and anchor ourselves more fully, with our fellow Jews.

The news article described how it came to be—during a Lufthansa flight a group of passengers, with no verbal or audible cue, all stood up at once, and drew everyone’s attention.

This group of passengers were Israelis, and even though they were thousands of miles away from Israel, aboard an airplane flying high in the sky, they all stood up at an appointed time, when throughout Israel a siren is sounded for two minutes.

All Israelis, throughout the country, stop whatever they are doing when that siren sounds.

They stand and remember all of the fallen soldiers and victims of terror.

This observance is called Yom HaZikaron and it is Israel’s Day of Remembrance.

It’s an amazing phenomenon.

No matter where you are in Israel, during these two minutes, all traffic stops.

People get out of their cars, and they remember.

On this Lufthansa flight, these Israeli passengers became one with their fellow countrymen because they were performing the mitzvah of remembering.

The news article described how this group collectively stood up in the plane.

And after the silence, the remembering, they explained to the puzzled passengers what they were doing and why.

The reporter, who happened to be on the plane, was touched by the ritual observance.

As a mere spectator, he felt that he had personally touched upon something especially holy.

Remember—Zachor.

It’s such a powerful action in our lives.

It's our power to remember that makes us pull back the spirits of our loved ones and make them present with us now.

When we remember, we bring our loved ones near to us.

And, we also acknowledge, that even with the ability to remember, we all continue to miss our loved ones, no matter how often they come to us in our thoughts or dreams.

Sometimes an association with a holiday, a birth date, a scent or a mannerism in another person brings back their memory.

Anything big or small can bring back our memory and the pain and the loss.

It's been just over a year since my mother's passing, and she's walked through the landscape of my mind frequently, and at surprising moments.

I don't need Judaism's prescribed remembrance times to think of her, yet I welcome them anyway.

Last Spring, for example, a story appeared on my newsfeed that brought my mother to my mind.

It was about a synagogue in Dayton, Ohio, called Temple Israel.

For the last 5 years, a mother duck would fly into the Temple's courtyard and build a nest behind some bushes, where she would lay her eggs.

When the eggs hatched, the mother duck paraded her ducklings, all following close behind her through the synagogue building, and out the back door to lead them to the river.

The Temple staff helps, by opening the front and back doors as mother and her ducklings waddle through the holy building.

This past spring, on April 22, the senior rabbi captured the duck parade on video.

The video shows how the duck lets the people know that she's ready to parade her brood, by pacing in front of the courtyard windows.

When the rabbi opens the doors, the mother duck leads her ducklings through the Temple, and out the back door, down to the river.

Now it's a cute story, a charming video.

But, for me it signified something different.

This story and video brought my mother, of blessed memory, to my mind.

She loved the children's book called, "Make Way for Ducklings."

It's about a couple of ducks, and their ducklings, in Boston.

She often read it to me and my brothers when we were young.

And, perhaps most poignant of all, my youngest daughter, Faith, read this story to my mother while she lay in her hospital bed.

It was the last time we saw my mother smile.

So, this cute story of the mother duck in the Dayton synagogue made me muse about my mother: her devotion to synagogue life; her finding a home in synagogue life; instilling in her own children that feeling of “home” that exists in this building we call our synagogue.

She was my mother, a Jewish educator, and a synagogue builder.

And my family and I—just like the family of ducks—we too, came to walk to the synagogue and through the synagogue.

She inspired Jewish life and Jewish love to flow through her children.

She instilled my first sense of comfort with the Synagogue and the Jewish learning that became my life’s work.

Just like that, a video about ducks brought my mother to life in my thoughts.

Remembering comes unbidden.

But, for some periods of time, it’s hard to remember or it’s painful to remember.

The memory of our loved ones are tied together with pain, sadness and loss.

Sometimes there’s also anger and sorrow, for things we said or for things we wish we had said.

We are asked to remember it all at Yizkor, at Yahrtzeit, at saying Kaddish.

Kaddish doesn’t even mention death.

It’s a prayer that praises God when we least want to praise God.

When someone dear to us is physically torn away we are to say Kaddish to praise God.

Perhaps we are praising God for having had the person we loved for the time we did.

Perhaps we are praising God for their life, and on their behalf.

Perhaps, when we say Kaddish, we wonder, “Who will say Kaddish for me when I am gone? How will I be remembered?”

Roseanne lost her mother at the age of 14.

Different, simple items cause her to remember her loss.

A song was playing on the car radio, and as she listened, tears came to her eyes.

It’s the song by Ed Sheeran, and, if we really hear the lyrics, the poignant, simple language offered, we understand how this particular song behaves just like our Kaddish.

But, instead of Aramaic phrasing, the song declares, "Praise God," with the word "Hallelujah;" the ancient word for Praise that has made its way into common English expression.

The impacting lyrics of this song also convey the idea about the proximity of God in our lives.

The song is called "Supermarket Flowers." It essentially becomes another prescribed reminder to "Remember," with its powerful words and imagery as follows:

*I took the supermarket flowers
from the windowsill;
I threw the day old tea from the cup*

•••••

*I fluffed the pillows,
made the beds,
stacked the chairs up,
Folded your nightgowns
neatly in a case*

•••••

*And wiped a tear
from the side of my face*

•••••

*Oh I'm in pieces,
it's tearing me up,
But I know
A heart that's broke
is a heart that's been loved*

•••••

*I hope I see the world as you did
Cause I know
A life with love
is a life that's been lived*

•••••

*So I'll sing Hallelujah
You were an angel
in the shape of my mum*

•••••

*When I fell down
you'd be there holding me up*

•••••

Spread your wings as you go

•••••

*And when God takes you back
we'll say Hallelujah
You're home.*

In a moment we will make Yizkor pledges, we will say Kaddish.

Let us not fall into rote behavior, nor say words memorized long ago, in a language disconnected from our hearts.

Let us stand, like the Israelis stood up on the planes last spring for their fallen brethren.

Let us praise God on behalf of our loved ones.

Though we do not need reminders, because so many things, like a duckling parade for example, will bring the person to our thoughts, we can welcome this time of prescribed remembrance.

We can invest our words with feeling to truly be present in these moments.

Remembering constitutes our individual connections with our loved ones, physically and spiritually present.

Remembering together, now, in this sacred space also further weaves us together to be an eternal people.

*“We thank You,
O God of life and love,
For the resurrecting gift of memory
Which endows your children,
fashioned in your image,
With the Godlike sovereign power
To give immortality through love.*

*Praised be You,
O God,
Who enables Your children
to remember.”*

*And,
let us say,
Amen.*