

Weekly Teaching

October 5, 2018

The following are my Sermon Notes from Yom Kippur/Yizkor.

Shabbat Shalom,
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In a few minutes we will observe Yizkor, our special service of sacred music and words that performs the Mitzvah of remembering our loved ones; those whose physical, visible presence has been torn from us, but whose loving memories eternally remain a blessing for us.

I remember many loved ones in this way.

Most of the relationships wouldn't surprise you: my mother, my grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and dear friends (many of whom I developed close relationships with as rabbi of our congregation these many years).

But one person I always remember at Yizkor might surprise you.

She was my guitar teacher whom I saw every week from the time I was eight years old until I left for Israel and then college.

She also was a Catholic Nun, and her name was Sister Mary, of blessed memory.

Some of you may recall my mentioning of Sister Mary.

She was a special woman with a very kind soul.

Sister Mary taught me both guitar and life lessons.

From her Catholic faith, I came to better appreciate my own Jewish faith.

For my Bar Mitzvah, she wrote in a card to me: *"Always practice your music; it's the gateway to your soul."*

By the way, her Bar Mitzvah gift to me was especially cool. She gave me the Led Zeppelin album with the lead song being "Stairway to Heaven". Although Sister Mary always taught me classical music, at my Bar Mitzvah she decided I could FINALLY handle Rock and Roll (at least some of it).

Music was always part of my life.

My mother z'l insisted on my learning both guitar and trumpet.

As the years passed, I came to learn that music has an additional benefit beyond mere enjoyment.

You may be surprised to know that music helps to:

- Improve visual & verbal skills
- Keep our aging brain healthy
- Make us happier
- Improve our vascular health
- Improve the quality of our sleep
- Boost our immune system
- Reduce the feeling of pain
- And, reduce depression and anxiety

Because Roseanne and I grew up playing musical instruments, we wanted to afford our children the same opportunity.

Each of our children enjoys music although our listening tastes certainly vary.

The music they like often doesn't resonate with my soul; and, my growing affinity for country music isn't a popular choice with them.

Yet we've all experienced how music—instrumental or with lyrics—evokes feelings inside us and takes us on brief journeys.

I heard a homily by Myra Brooks about music:

- How it speaks to our spirit
- How it elevates us
- How it echoes our hearts

Just like Jewish thought it exhorts us to live quality lives of worth.

She writes:

*It was battered and scarred,
and the auctioneer thought it hardly worth his while to waste his time on the old violin,
but he held it up with a smile.*

*"What am I bid, good people" he cried,
"Who starts the bidding for me?"
"One dollar, one dollar,
do I hear two?"
"Two dollars, who makes it three?"*

*"Three dollars once,
three dollars twice,
Going for three?"*

But, there was no response.

*From the back of the room,
a gray-bearded man
came forward
and picked up the bow.*

*Wiping the dust
from the old violin,
he lovingly tightened its strings.*

*He played a melody,
pure and sweet,
as sweet as the angels sing.*

The music ceased.

*Now the auctioneer
held the violin and its bow aloft.
With a voice that was quiet and low
he asked with reverence:
"What am I bid
for this old violin now?"*

*"One thousand, one thousand,
do I hear two?"*

"Two thousand, who makes it three?"

*"Three thousand once,
three thousand twice,
going and gone," said he.*

*The audience cheered
and some of them cried.*

*"We just don't understand
What changed its worth?"*

*The reply came swiftly:
"The touch of the Master's hand."*

*And much like that old violin,
many of us
with a life out of tune
battered and dusty with hardship
are auctioned cheap
to a thoughtless crowd.*

*But the Master comes,
And the foolish crowd
never can quite understand
the worth of a soul
and the change that is wrought,
by the touch of the Master's hand.*

I believe that the Master in this homily is each of us.

We have an obligation to make our lives worthwhile.

We are not to let age, loss, hard times or illness cheapen our value or define our lives.

We are the masters of our own lives.

We can make masterful changes and masterful choices—changes and choices that endow our lives with great worth and quality.

During these High Holy Days we reflect and take stock of our lives.

We make choices to master our direction, and to bring purpose and meaning to our days.

This is our task, and our privilege.

Jewish living—all that we absorb from our Torah, from our holidays, and from our Jewish values—provides a prescription for how to have a worthwhile, meaningful life.

But for some of us, at different times in our lives, our Judaism doesn't resonate with us.

We don't hear the music or get the message.

For some of us, having a worthy Jewish life is when we pursue an active relationship with God.

For some, it's helping people or raising a family of mensches: full ethical human beings.

We have small ways we contribute; the good habits by which we "give back" and they are without fanfare or notice.

At times, many of us get detoured by vanity or addictions.

We stop using our Master's Hand to shape our own lives.

We come here together, on Yom Kippur, to better remember.

Each of us has a legacy.

We touch and impact other lives.

We have lives of worth because we connect with others.

We have the opportunity to take stock of where we are; to choose our direction, to grow and to make changes.

The poet Martha Madeiros wrote these words to awaken us to what we slowly, unknowingly lose:

*You start dying slowly
If you do not travel,
If you do not read,
If you do not listen
to the sounds of life,
If you do not appreciate yourself.*

*You start dying slowly
when you kill your self-esteem,
When you do not let others
help you.*

*You start dying slowly
if you become a slave
to your habits,
Walking everyday
on the same paths...*

*If you do not change your routine,
If you do not wear different colors
or you do not speak
to those you don't know.*

*You start dying slowly
if you avoid feeling passion
and its turbulent emotions—Those that make your eyes glisten
and your heart beat fast.*

*You start dying slowly
if you do not change your life
when you are not satisfied
with your job,
or with your love,
or with your surroundings,*

*If you do not risk what is safe
for the uncertain,
If you do not go after a dream,
If you do not allow yourself,
At least once in your lifetime,
To run away from sensible advice.*

Just like Neruda's words, these Days of Awe, our High Holy Days come to us to remind us that we will have loss; that we ought to be cognizant of our loss, and simultaneously, we ought to seize life's opportunities for the coming year.

We owe it to ourselves and to the loved ones we lost to chart our course anew.

A psychologist, Steven C. Hayes, was recently interviewed about his workshop and advice on how people may move through loss without getting stuck and losing their own quality of life.

He suggests not instinctively closing down when we confront loss.

Instead, we need psychological flexibility; that is, not to avoid the sorrow and pain of loss, but to "steer into it" so to speak, as we would with a skidding car. We are to feel our grief, as well as the memories of our loved ones including their humor, joys and laughter.

He calls this state of being open emotionally the "Sunset mode".

“Sunset mode” is a mindset that is open to emotion. It allows us to take it all in, the way you would a sunset. Sunsets are temporary and will never repeat in exactly the same way.

At Yizkor, we are to experience bittersweet nostalgia, a feeling similar to when we first felt our loss.

- We think of the whole person we lost
- We think of what we are missing.

Hayes notes:

It isn't just the tears that need to happen.

It is also the laughter.

It is also honoring.

In Sunset Mode,

you are appreciating all of it,

the awe and the awful of it.

As we enter Yizkor, let's recall the greatest symphonies of our lives.

Let's hear, and keep hearing, the music of our souls. Let's hear our own music, create our own changes, feel our losses, perceive Godliness, and in remembering our loved ones. Let's truly experience sublime sunsets.

Sister Mary taught me this lesson at my Bar Mitzvah:

“Always practice your music; it's the gateway to your soul.”

Gemar Hatima Tovah: A good closing seal for a happy, healthy, and peaceful New Year!