

Sermon: Finding Renewal Through Memory

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Rabbi Jay Perlman

Temple Beth Shalom – Needham, Massachusetts

We gather together to begin another new year. A capacity congregation, to say the least. We share in this moment of meaning - sustained and inspired by melodies and prayers that have grown familiar – by the warmth of community – and by the opportunity for much needed reflection. It is a time for new beginnings – for starting over.

There is comfort in our being here. Perhaps we are sitting in seats that we happily think of as “our seats.” Simon Hall, fourth row, on the aisle. Near friends that we have sat with for years --- - people who, perhaps, we may not see much during the rest of the year, but with whom we quickly rekindle a connection before the opening song is sung. Or perhaps we are here for the first time – and it just feels good...and right...to be at temple for Yom Kippur.

Our High Holy Days hold onto us.....in no small part because these days, when most thoughtfully lived.....remind us of how difficult our life’s journey happens to be.

We just completed a morning liturgy that repeatedly asked us to consider our very humanity – the weaknesses we have experienced during the past year – or may yet experience in the year ahead. This day we are asked to honestly face our lapses in judgment that have led to word and deeds that we now regret. This day we confront our life’s many disappointments and seek the wisdom and strength to necessary overcome them. And, this day, we confront the fragility of our lives...and of the lives of those that we love...the feeling of uncertainty that comes when we open our eyes and hearts to the future.

Facing these questions about ourselves and our lives does not come easily. And so, to help us in our struggle, Jewish tradition offers us a source of enduring inspiration and comfort. This is the blessing of memory.

When crafting our calendar of holy days, our rabbis thoughtfully wove Yizkor – a service of memorial dedicated to our loved ones - into the fabric of our Yom Kippur observance. Though it is one of the shortest of our liturgies, Yizkor has become amongst the most meaningful. Traditionally, Yizkor is recited four times during the year. In addition to this day, it takes place during the pilgrimage festivals of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot – when, in ancient times, sacrifices were brought to Jerusalem.

But why the need for Yizkor on Yom Kippur? In some respects, the connection seems natural: This is a season which is supposed to remind us of the beginning of all Creation: “*Zeh...zikaron l’yom rishon.*” – says the Mishna – “It is a remembrance of the first day”- and of the potential that all beginnings hold.

As well, on this day – and during this season - we repeatedly ask: *Zochreinu L’Chayim* – asking that “Gd remember us and our loved ones for life” during the coming year. Finally, in describing this season, the Torah tells us that this is a time for “*zichron teruah*” – a time to recall the sound of the shofar – our people’s call to live more responsibly and more righteously.

And so, in many respects, one might think that Yizkor is simply an extension of this theme. However, for our rabbis...and for us...there is actually more to it than that.

In Jewish tradition, memory is understood as having a power...an ability...all its own.

Lucinda Rosenfeld is a novelist and author. Recently, she wrote about her own need to reflect following the death of her father. “(Though) it wasn’t unexpected,” she began, “...it still shocked me in a way that only a child of a deceased parent can understand. I simply could not believe that he was gone from this earth – that he’d never (make his way) up the front steps of my house again, as he did every other Sunday, and hook his cane around the interior knob of the front door. I couldn’t believe that I’d never see his face again either....The loss of my father and the resulting disorientation made me crave...photos (of him) in a way I hadn’t in years, especially ones of him (when he was healthy and vital).....(something) concrete...to counteract sensation of sloshing sea beneath my feet.”

“My mother must have felt the same way,” Rosenfeld continues. “The morning after my father died, she got out her old (photo) albums from the 1970’s and early ‘80’s – (big books) with gilded vinyl covers in turquoise and maroon, featuring page after page of fading Kodak snapshots of the family that she and my dad had raised together....I’d never been so thankful for the diligent organizer that my mom had always been.”

Henry Ward Beecher once wrote that: “What the heart has once owned and had, it shall never lose.” Our rabbis taught similarly – reminding us that memory is transcendent – providing untold comfort and strength. The Baal Shem Tov, the great master of Hasidic Judaism, even went so far as to say that “Memory is the source of redemption.” These words, by the way appear engraved at the entrance of Yad Vashem – the Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem.

Possibly the most telling example of this teaching is found in the Hebrew Bible. In several passages, the text describes how even Gd needed to engage in the act of remembering. In the Torah, the phrase “*VaYizkor Elohim*” – “And Gd remembered” – a phrase, by the way, that inspired the name of our own Yizkor prayer - this phrase appears four times in the Torah. First, it is used in reference to Gd remembering Noah – still afloat in the ark - at the end of the flood. Second, it is used to describe how Gd recalled Abraham and, in doing so, saved Lot and his family from Sodom and Gomorrah. Later, it is used to describe how Gd remembered Rachel...leading eventually to the birth of Joseph. And finally, “*VaYizkor Elohim*” is used to refer to Gd’s remembering the Children of Israel and the covenant during their enslavement to Pharaoh.

Upon reading these stories, among the first question that commentators ask is why an ‘all knowing’ Gd would need to remember. Are we to assume that Gd had somehow forgotten?

If we look at any one of these stories individually, it might be hard to discern a meaning behind Gd’s need to remember. However, when we look at all of these examples together – as a collection – we find that there is a pattern. In all of these stories – Noah, Abraham, Rachel, the Israelites in Egypt – the act of remembrance leads to a time of renewal and to successful new

beginnings for the people involved. Perhaps this is why Gd is described as remembering...not to tell us of Gd's need to remember...but to remind us of us of our own.

Interestingly enough, contemporary researchers have begun to study this very phenomenon. "Nostalgia studies" is the name of a relatively new field and was the subject of a recent article in the "New York Times" by science writer, John Tierney.

In the article, Tierney describes how, for the past two hundred years, "nostalgia" – commonly understood as being "a longing for the past" – had been understood to be an illness. According to medical experts, engaging in nostalgia a sign of depression – one that inhibited people from being able to move into the future.

However, researchers from around the world have found the opposite to be true. Rather than inhibiting one's ability to step into the future, recalling the past actually brings strength.

As Dr. Constantine Sedikites of the University of Southampton noted: '(What we have found is that) Nostalgia actually makes us feel good about our lives – reminding us that our lives have roots and continuity...and enabling us to have a positive outlook on our relationships.' When, for example, researchers studied people who were feeling lonely or depressed.....they found that remembering the past brought them joy and a sense of fulfillment. And amongst those who uncertain or concerned about their future – engaging in nostalgia made them feel better and feeling more positive about moving forward in life.

I think about this now whenever I visit someone – whether in their home - in their hospital room - or their assisted living residence. I notice the photographs that we keep around us..... and consider how they help to not only enrich our lives....and also to inspire our outlook on life.

Perhaps the most meaningful link between this newly discovered understanding of nostalgia and Judaism's traditional call to remember can be found in the Greek root behind the word "nostalgia." It is "nostos" – and it means "to return home from a long journey."

Here, it all comes together: Making our way on our life's journey --- returning home through memory---- and finding strength as we do.....These are themes at heart of our Holy Days.

A story is told about a little seven-year-old boy and his family who, many years ago, were about to leave their native Poland. The day before their departure the father took the little boy to the town where the Rebbe lived so that he could receive a special blessing from the Rebbe. As the hour was late, the Rebbe invited the father and his son to stay overnight in his home. The Rebbe and his wife prepared the couch for the little boy to sleep in the Rebbe's study.

However, because the boy was captivated by the sight of all of the holy books on the shelves, he couldn't sleep. In the middle of the night, he heard the Rebbe enter the room, and so he pretended that he was asleep. The Rebbe approached the boy and whispered: "Such a sweet child." Thinking that the child might be cold, the Rebbe took off his coat and placed it lovingly on the sleeping child.

Many years later, when the little boy became an older man of eighty, when asked to recall how it was that he had come to be so kind and compassionate, the man replied that that he remembered that seventy-three years ago the Rebbe had showed him love and comfort - placing his coat on him to keep him warm. "I am still warm from that coat," said the eighty year old man.

Just as a person's memory lives on long after he or she is no longer with us, so too does the goodness that they brought to us.

The poet says is beautifully:

Looking backward, we recall our ancestry.
Looking forward, we confront our destiny.
Looking backward, we reflect on our origins.
Looking forward, we choose our path.
Remembering that we are a tree of life,
not letting go, holding on and holding to,
we walk into an unknown, beckoning future,
with our past beside us.

During these Holy Days....we are invited to remember those who brought blessed warmth to us. To recall those who were....and who continue to be most precious to us.....We are offered the opportunity to recall their embrace.....the feel of their hand in our own.....to hear – in our hearts - the words that they would offer us were they here.

This, by the way, is the meaning of the phrase: "*Zichrono or Zichronah Livrachah*." – "May his or her memory be for a blessing." It is our prayer that through our remembrance of a loved one, that the love that they shared during their lifetime will continue to inspire and bless. In the words of Rabbi Harold Schulweis: "To hold on means to cherish every gesture, kindness, embrace of those we loved. Every recollection has its own afterlife, its own immortality of influence in our lives."

There is a very moving teaching about the Kaddish prayer that is shared by Rabbi Harold Kushner. He reminds us that even though Kaddish is a prayer of memorial, it does not mention death or loss or bereavement at all. Rather than focus on death, the text expresses - in many different ways – a hope that that Gd and Gd's name will be – "*Yitgadal v'Yitkadash*" – "expanded and made holy." When asked why this is, Rabbi Kushner responds by offering a mystical teaching. He suggests that whenever a person whose life was dedicated to goodness passes away – in some way – Gd is somehow diminished as well. The passing of this righteous soul has somehow lessened the amount of holiness in our world. And so, with this in mind, we offer words of Kaddish. It is a prayer that we – through our actions – actions inspired by the one who has passed – we will help return wholeness to Gd.

Memory is called to mind when we pause to reflect upon the lives of those that we loved. It is also kindled when we engage in experiences, activities, or rituals that were particularly special in their lives....In her poem, "My Mother's Eyes," Mona Adelman describes how she recalls her mother's love each time she lights the candles for Shabbat.

She wrote:

But in the gentle glow of the Shabbos candle flame
I see my mother's eyes,
As she saw her mother's eyes so long ago,
And her presence is all around me,
Warm and vibrant as pulsating life.

My mother stands in the flickering light,
Adorned for Shabbos, '*bensching licht*,'
While the fragrance of the Shabbos meal
Floats in the house like incense.

Her slender hands curve round the flames,
Twin ballet dancers,
And whispered secrets from her lips
Fall like sibilant flowers
On the hush of twilight.

Oh let the past embrace me
In its rich tapestry of love
And remembered tenderness,
As the sun draws forth
A blossom from its seed.

At the grave on the mountainside
Where my mother lies
I leave flowers,
But in the glow of the Shabbos candles
Where my mother smiles at me
I give my heart.

May our remembrances of love and goodness and bring us strength and inspiration as we make
our way into the new year.

May we continue to be guided by the example that they set for us.

And may the memories of our loved ones always be for a blessing – for us...and for all who
knew them.

Amen.