

Yizkor - Yom Kippur 5769
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Two Bodies - One Soul

The phone rings. It's ten minutes before my facilities meeting and I see it's Mom. I know that she is getting the results today for the biopsy on her foot. It's been a long year of odd bleeding and it just wouldn't heal, so the doctor gets more aggressive and decides to go in and take a look. He said he would be surprised if it was anything but a cyst. But the phone rings.

She's crying, crying like I haven't heard her cry before. Finally, the words come out, "It's cancer!"

I immediately do what is instinct...I go into Rabbi mode. I start questioning her, asking for more details about what exactly the doctor said.

"Mom, slow down, we're going to take this one step at a time. Slow down, it's going to be o.k."

"What stage did he say? How can that be, it doesn't make sense with what we still do not know?"

The puzzle pieces are scrambled all over the floor and I can't find the one to start with. I'm pacing outside the front of the building because my cell phone does not get good reception in my office. I see Chelle Friedman walk in and I call out, "Chelle, I have a personal emergency, I'll be in when I can." She waves a hug my way and goes inside.

I'm alone on the street with the phone in one hand and I can't touch my mom. God, I hate each mile!

Finally, she says she has to go – to where, not sure, but just has to go.

I call my sister – she's older and that's the line of who was told first. Makes sense.

I'm in Rabbi mode, she's in business mode. But darn it, she's been on the internet!

Get off the internet! Stop looking at the sites!

"Heidi, did you know that melanoma of the foot is..."

"Shelly, get off the internet, we don't know anything yet!!!!"

Again, I use my rabbi voice, "we're going to take this one step at a time. We're going to figure this out."

Should we get on a plane right now? No, there's nothing to do yet. We have to get more information.

Mom calls again, the oncologist is moving fast and will see her the next day!

I have to go...I have to go into my meeting. Why? I don't know, I just do.

I walk into the meeting and without expecting it, pour out my heart to a facility committee. Why? I don't know. Why do any of us bare our souls.

Maybe I need to get out of Rabbi mode.

The meeting is going too long for my racing head...I excuse myself and go home. But even there, I don't know what to do. There's nothing to do yet.

The calls start coming in, emails fill my box. The word is being passed around. How ironic, almost ten years to the day, ten years from when I began here at TBS, ten years after starting to take care of this congregation as your rabbi, you're taking care of me.

The story continues for the next couple of months. There are three surgeries, the last the most painful as the foot just does not stretch enough to close. My sister and I are there with Mom and Dad during the most crucial surgery, the one in which we find out if it has gone into the lymphnodes. Both surgeons assure us that all went well and we take Mom home that day. The grandkids entertain her but we still have looming over our heads waiting for the results from the biopsy.

Finally, on erev Shabbat, my sister and I are calling the doctor's office in turn trying to get an answer and before it's time to light the candles, we get the call – they're clear. My sister, Mom, Dad, Matt, Barbara, and the four grandkids all gather around and we recite Birkat haGomel, the prayer in which we give thanks to God for delivering my Mom from a life threatening experience. And then we light the Shabbat candles. Never before had Shabbat felt so good.

What keeps playing in my head since being in Colorado was a statement my Dad made while we were at their chavurah event days before Mom's surgery. He said, "we are one soul in two bodies."

How many of us here today have heard those words, "it's cancer"? How many of you here today experienced life spiraling out of control when those words were for you? It may not be uncommon any more to hear that someone has cancer, but the wound goes deep when it touches your life. There is a sense of losing control and like a diver in the water who loses the sense of direction, it's hard to tell which way is up to the surface in order to catch a breath.

Yizkor means remembering. We tend to only associate it with remembering those who have died. However, today, I see yizkor in a new light. Yizkor is remembering that we've gone through a life changing experience where the path from one moment to the next has completely changed. Yizkor is remembering that while there is an end, there is also a beginning. For some it is remembering when the body took one shape and now because of a disease, it has taken on a new appearance. For others it may be remembering the loss of life as it was before hearing a diagnosis and then the birth of a new life after treatment. And for others, Yizkor is remembering

those who fought so hard to get through the treatment and to the other side toward recovery, yet, their bodies were no longer able to take another step, and today, it is their memory that we hold on to ever so tightly.

In Deuteronomy we read as Moses speaks to the Israelites who are on the border of Canaan about to leave behind one life and begin another: “And not until this day had God given you a heart to understand, eyes to see, nor ears to hear.”

While in the moment of wandering for forty years, the Israelites never fully understood or were able to grasp that which was happening to them as they were transforming into a new people with new strengths. We never understood what was going on in the desert till we were able to get to the other side in Canaan and be able to look at those years in the desert with fresh eyes. We needed to get through the desert, through the turmoil and the challenges.

It is these transforming moments in our lives that open our heart, our eyes our ears. It is these challenging moments that we have to look beyond surface and reach ever deeper into our souls and the souls of our loved ones to truly understand, see and hear. And sometimes, it is not until we are on the other side that we are able to fully grasp the path we were just on.

“We are one soul in two bodies” – this was a moment of deep and profound love between a husband and wife, life partners needing to hold on to each other to get to the other side of this moment.

This Yizkor moment is a time for holding on to the one soul, finding understanding, seeing the world through a new lens and, and then hearing the call to love, remember and hold on.

This Yizkor moment is allowing ourselves to cross over to the other side of the border and grasp where we have been and the new journey that we now undertake.

May our hearts, our eyes and our ears be open to this Yizkor moment, not only for those who are no longer with us today, but also for ourselves as we remember our struggles and continue our journey.

Amen v' Amen