

Yom Kippur Afternoon / Yizkor 5768
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibur - Not turning our back on the past

We are about to embark on a journey together. It is one of our final journeys of the day. It began as we listened to the haunting chant of Kol Nidrei and then joined together in the morning light examining our lives and exposing our true selves to God. Together, we examined who we are, our acts, our deeds, and setting goals in order that we might start the year anew. And now, as the sun begins to make its way from the highest point in the sky toward the ocean in the west, we turn to times of Yizkor memory. But it will not end here, and this is where I will make my plea...at the conclusion of this Yizkor service I would like to invite each of you to not rise and head to the door in a final dash toward the break the fast, as the sun's journey will not yet be near its end. Rather, I want to invite you to stay – stay for *thirty minutes longer*. Stay for the most powerful moments of this intense and holy day. Stay as we together conclude this day in a crescendo of voice, prayer and joy. Do not allow your entry in the book of life to be unfinished by leaving early - missing that which is the pinnacle of all that we have said and shared together over these 24 hours. You can even count it as one of your first mitzvot of the year. I invite you, after our Yizkor service, share these final 30 minutes with your congregational family and feel yourself lifted to a higher plane ready for a new year with a new song in your heart. These few minutes will create memory and invoke remembrance.

Is this not why we are here at this moment. To remember? It has been a difficult year for so many in our congregational family and for us as a community. So many lost a parent this year. So many lost a dear family member. I have heard from so many of you cannot recall such an intense year in which there were so many losses. Yes, we know that life must unfold as it will. We know the cycle that where there is birth there is also death. We know that all that lives must die. But this year has been especially difficult for our community. While the circle of life seemed to go in tune with some, there were those who died too young, too soon.

We remember Lori Weinberg who lost her battle with multiple-myeloma. We remember Larry Altneu who left us so suddenly after doing what he loved, running. And our hearts broke as we buried together Michael Glazer and his six year old daughter, Sydney just weeks ago.

We have questions that remain unanswered just as their lives were left undone. Taken from us too soon we wander, seeking comfort and solace.

These Yizkor moments are here for us to remember and seek strength when our hearts ache for those who are no longer here with us. And the power of being together in this place with one another gives us the strength to open our eyes for the path that lies ahead. It is a journey that we take together as we remember our past, it is a path in which we seek the final piece in our High Holy day message, *Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibur*, to not turn our backs on our community and especially now, on our past and those who have gone before.

Yizkor is not only about remembering, but also about memory. These are two different and separate terms. Remembering is when we actively focus on something again in order to bring it forward in our minds. It might be as simple as a phone number of a friend or remembering the layout of our childhood home. On the other hand, a memory is stimulated by something, be it an event or contact with a person. When we walk into a kitchen and smell the chocolate chip cookies in the oven, we might be transported to our grandmother's kitchen, you know, the one with the counters that seemed to be high above our heads. When she put us on the stool or chair, we could easily hold the wooden spoon in our small hands and carefully mix the flour, butter and sugar together as we created her special recipe that was filled not only with ingredients from the pantry but the main ingredient of love.

As our memories turn to those who are no longer here with us we feel a sense of loneliness. They are no longer present for us to hold or share the events of our day. Their voice has been silenced and we long to hear the advice we might have taken for granted when we were younger. The world seems too quiet and lonely without them. However, it is through their remembrance that we are not alone. Their names, their history, their recipes and advice are as close to us as our memories. And we seek their presence in many ways.

Take a look to your left, along the wall of the sanctuary. You might have noticed earlier at Rosh Hashanah or today that the memorial wall has been moved from outside our sanctuary to in here with us. These are some of the names of those who helped build this congregation. These are the names of individuals who inspired, who taught, and who loved. And these are by no means all the names of those who we remember today. But there is something about placing this memorial wall inside of our sanctuary in order to remind us that we are not alone. These names remind us that we are rooted to generations past and our future is shaped by the foundation of those who came before us.

During the Amidah prayers in each service, we invoke the memory of our ancestors. "Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzchak, v'Elohei Ya'akov..." - We go before God and we remind God that we are connected to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Many of our prayers also begin, 'God of our Fathers and Mothers' - again reminding ourselves and God that we are not alone in the universe but rather connected to an intricately woven family web that spans many generations.

It began with Sarah in Genesis when she struggled with her own infertility and the idea that she may not be able to bring forth the multitudes that God promised Abraham. But we read, *v'Adonai pakad et Sarah ka'asher amar vai'a'yas Adonai l'Sarah ka'asher deebeir*; and God remembered Sarah as God had said and God did to Sarah as God said. In this instance, the word *pakad* and *zachor* has the same meaning: to remember. God needed to be reminded of a promise made and that this was not a promise for just one person, but for a multitude. A multitude emerged from her and the memory.

Think for a moment how from each of us a multitude also emerges. We are connected even more closely with our ancestors and our parents. Think of every person whom it took to make you. Each of us are not alone, we come from a multitude and we are reminded of this through our Hebrew names. Our names not only invoke our personal identity as an individual, but also our

identity as provided by our parents as we are *ben* or *bat*, the son or daughter of those who gave us life or sustained us as we grew and developed into the individual we are to become.

We are not alone even when there are moments that seem so bleak and dark. We only need to remind ourselves “*Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibur*” - not to turn our backs on those who came before us, just as they did not turn their backs on us.

And finally, it is during this sacred hour that we remember God does not turn away from us. We are bound to God and God wants us to remember who we are and whom we came from. And it is in this hour that we are to remind God and ourselves of all the good that is in our lives and our future. Even in the midst of sorrow we are taught to invoke God’s name through Kaddish praise of the creation of life and the gift of loved ones who establish our foundations.

Ultimately, in this Yizkor hour, this hour of remembrance, we remember God and God remembers us. In this quiet hour we remember those from our past and who were a part of our community. In this final hour of a day filled with introspection and contemplation, we seek to remember who we are as individuals and create the memories for those who will come after us. In this final hour we seek to remember that we are not alone in our world and that we are connected to a multitude who came before and who are yet to be born. In this quiet hour we invite the memories of our loved ones to wash over us, embrace us and grant us blessing.

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.

Blessed are You, God,

Who enables Your children to remember.

- Rabbi Morris Adler