

Yom Kippur 5765

Yizkor Service

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What Will Be My Kaddish

We gather in these moments of sacred memory for Yizkor - to remember. For some of us, memories of our beloved departed are fresh, as we have recently felt the pangs of loss, for others, the healing balm of time has eased the pain, though the sense of loss never really goes away. We remember together - as a community, an *Eidah* - because it is here, with people, that we can find solace and comfort and the warmth of love that can nurture and sustain us through our losses.

Yizkor has enormous power because it is at once binding and liberating. It binds us in sacred covenant to our loved ones, our people and our past. And, it is liberating, because it helps us to cast off the shackles of grief and allows us to embrace life with all its possibilities and all its risks. Yizkor is an affirmation of life much more than it is a submission to the inevitability of death and loss. It is the life-affirmation of Yizkor that holds its power for us and makes of this hallowed service one of particular significance in our tradition.

As a rabbi, I have always found great challenge and satisfaction in speaking at this time of Yizkor. It allows me to be of comfort and help to those who suffer loss and for whom this service is a pathway to healing. And, on a personal level, it is a kind of yearly catharsis - a time to wrestle with my own feelings about death and loss and the meaning of life - so fragile and precious.

I have given many, many Yizkor sermons during the years of my rabbinate and, as this may, indeed, be the final one, certainly my last here at TBS, it has afforded me the opportunity to go back over words spoken in the past and reflect on them; to see how I have grown or changed over the years.

Interestingly enough, if I were to choose my absolute favorite Yizkor sermon, it would be the very first one that I delivered here, from this pulpit, thirteen years ago. It was entitled, "What Will be My Kaddish?" It was based on an old Jewish tradition that one's child was called a "Kaddishl" in Yiddish; literally, a "little Kaddish," because it is incumbent upon a child to recite Kaddish for a parent. Thus, having a *kaddishl* insured that one would be remembered.

But, what of we childless Jews? Those of us who have no *kaddishl* - how will *we* be remembered? That was the question posed that Yizkor thirteen years ago. And, you know, that question rings out to me now more clearly than ever before.

Much has transpired since that time; we are changed as individuals, as a community and as a nation. It was a time before many of us suffered losses, or setbacks. It was a time when we were younger and may have been healthier. It was a time before 9/11 became a numeric metaphor for the precariousness of our lives. We are different now, aren't we? We have changed and, so too has our perspective on life and the meaning of our lives evolved. So I would like to reflect now, as I began with you then, asking the question for all of us, "What Will Be My Kaddish?"

Recently, Wendy and I had an interesting and most enlightening experience. After we sold our house we had to have a garage sale, followed by an estate sale. Both were necessitated by our move and the fact that we would be giving up almost 3,000 square feet of Santa Ana living space for less than 1,400 square feet in Newport Beach with an eye to our new home in Jerusalem which will, probably be no more than about 1,100 square feet.

That means that we had to divest ourselves of almost thirty years of collected *tchotchkes*, tools, memorabilia, fishing equipment, old clothes still hiding away in boxes - you know, a lifetime of living and collecting. We had to look at our material lives and ask how we could get rid of at least two-thirds of our furniture, decorations and all those things that made the house on River Lane our *home* these past years.

So, we had the sales. Wendy demonstrated a previously hidden talent as a garage sale entrepreneur, and we got rid of a lot of stuff - some of it absolute junk in my opinion. It amazed me what some people would buy! In that sale, to be honest, there was little of sentimental value.

However, the subsequent estate sale was another matter all together. Professionals were to conduct the actual sale and make all the appraisals, but Wendy and I had to evaluate every piece of furniture, every item of silver and glass, everything we owned to determine what would be sold and what we would take with us to Israel. This, as you can imagine was no easy task!

During this process, I found many people asking us how we were able to part with so many nice things, so many of the treasures collected along our married life - our clock collection, our antique furniture, and so many little but significant reminders of people, places and experiences. But, I must tell you it really wasn't that difficult. You see, we have gotten an enormous amount of pleasure from those *things* collected over the years. Yet, I really feel that we don't *need* them for our pleasure and happiness. To be honest, this was as much a revelation for me as for anyone else. And it helped both Wendy and me understand our lives a bit better.

I'll tell you what *was* difficult for me to part with. Stupid things like my father's decrepit and moldering hat collection stuffed in a box in the dusty recesses of the attic. He had hats from all over the world - a tam o'shanter from Scotland, a fur hat from Greece, a beret from the old London Shop in Hollywood, an elegant Spanish Don's hat from Spain, and an odd assortment of plain old hats and caps from who knows where. They were old, seedy and destroyed from the dust and cobwebs when I found them while cleaning out the attic. I had no choice but to throw them out, they were junk at best, a health hazard at worst. But, you know, tossing those hats into the garbage was not an easy thing to do. They brought back such memories!

And, they reminded me about the real value of what Wendy and I have collected over the years - not things, but memories. And that brings me to this place and this Yizkor of memory.

What, I wonder, will be remembered about me? What mark will I leave upon the world? What influences will I have upon others after I have gone? Lest I fall into self-centered reverie, I consider how I respond to those questions about others in my life whom I remember at this time and who have helped to make me what I am today.

I think of them now. From my father I have learned the value of honesty and integrity and the importance of personal honor - that is his Kaddish. My mother's Kaddish is her undying love and her love of tradition and family heritage. While my brother's Kaddish is the simple joie de vivre, his love of life and ability to enjoy good times and good people to the fullest. My Granny Linda, the only one of my grandparents I ever knew, left me her Kaddish of wisdom. She was a 75-year-old hippie who sent my father letters in her elaborate hand in purple French prose quoting Khalil Gibran and the Psalms as she admonished him to stop and smell the roses. Ah, those memories, oh those people...

They are all here in my memory and in the holy recesses of my soul. No words can fully express how I feel in my Yizkor soul-sanctuary. And the Kaddish that I recite following my meditations at this sacred service is but a semblance of the Kaddish that each of those souls has etched upon my own.

So, how will *I* be remembered? What will be my Kaddish? Just as I did 13 years ago, I turn to the words of the poet, Edmund Hatch -

For me -- to have left one soul
The better for my birth;
To have added but one flower
To the garden of the earth;
To have struck one blow for truth
In the daily fight with lies;
To have done one deed of right
In the face of calumnies;
To have sown in the souls of men
One thought that will not die --
To have been a link in the chain of life
Shall be immortality.

It's true, isn't it? The question isn't really "*Who* will be my Kaddish?" at all. It's really, "*What* will be my Kaddish?" What is it about my life, or the life of the ones whom I memorialize here, in Yizkor memory, that lives on, which transcends life itself? The author, Albert Pine, observed: *What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us. What we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.*

As I look back on my 13 years as your rabbi, I realize that my most meaningful achievements have not been programs that we have developed together or projects that we have accomplished. No, I pray that my Kaddish here will be the experiences that we have had, the relationships that we have nurtured and the hope that I have had a positive influence upon the lives of people for whom I have great affection. And this is not a morbid thought I am not speaking of a Kaddish that awaits me after I am dead. No, this is a living thing it is about life. That is why we teach that the Kaddish makes no mention of death, because it is not about dead memories and people who are dead to us. It is about life and cherishing memories that live in each of us, and the souls of people who animate our own. The Kaddish is an affirmation of life, and so, too is our Yizkor memory.

And so, may the memories of those whom we recall in Yizkor remembrance, be for us now and always a source of blessing and benediction. And so may we, in the way we live our lives, be a blessing for them.

Amen, amen.