

Yizkor 5764

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In these moments, as we prepare for our Yizkor remembrance, our thoughts turn to our loved ones and to those in our community who have passed from our lives. We recall people who have had an influence upon us and reflect upon the gift of their lives. That is why we Jews commemorate the Yahrzeit - the anniversary of a person's death, rather than their birth date as is the American custom in commemorating important people.

I find it interesting though, that we Americans take particular note - usually at the end of the calendar year - of celebrities who have died over the course of the past twelve months. In fact, there are several websites that you can visit on the Internet that chronicle a kind of running necrology of celebrity deaths.

A list of this year's celebrities who have died includes Fred Rogers, Richard Crenna, and astrologer-to-the-stars Sidney Omar. Most of the names are of movie stars, but there are a few politicians like Daniel Patrick Moynihan - mourned by liberals - and, in the non-partisan equality of death, Strom Thurmond - the darling of so many conservatives. Amongst the Hollywood stars there are the names of distinguished actors such as Katherine Hepburn, Hume Cronyn, Buddy Ebsen, and one of my all-time favorite actors, Gregory Peck. There were also a smattering of sports figures like Bobby Bonds, then there is David Brinkley, who distinguished himself in journalism, and I found one cleric, Cardinal Gerald Emmett Carter on the list that I read. The world of business was represented by Joseph Coors, the brewing magnate, and medicine lost Robert Atkins - who, despite some speculation, did not die of malnutrition.

All of us, I am sure can identify one particular celebrity of recent passing who stands out for us with some personal significance. For me it is Bob Hope. Now, I never met Mr. Hope personally, though I admired him greatly for his great sense of humor and patriotic spirit. No, I was moved most by Bob Hope's death because it marked the passing of part of my childhood and made me so keenly aware of my own mortality.

You see, I was born in Toluca Lake, near Burbank. We lived in a big old house on Clybourne Avenue - the first address that I ever memorized was: 4408 Clybourne Avenue. As with all children, my parents drilled that address into me and made me repeat it to them dozens of times, in the event I ever got lost and had to tell the friendly policeman or a grown up who I was and where I lived. Now, this was important, so my parents thought, because their dear little third child was born with wanderlust.

I loved to wander off, away from home, despite all the warnings and admonitions of my parents and the pointedly numerous repetitions of the story of Peter Rabbit.

For me, "Farmer Giles garden" lay about three blocks away near the verdant expanses of the huge house near my aunt and uncle's home. And, that house was Bob Hope's. It was a tremendous estate with its own golf course. Impressive - even for a three or four year old child.

We lived in the Clybourne house until I was five-years-old; and, when I first began to assert my peripatetic proclivities, I believe that I was about four years old. That's when I would venture on my own to the next door neighbors' house. As I became more confident and bolder, I traveled down the south-side of the block towards my aunt and uncle's. As it was so close to our own home, my family had often walked there for visits - and I was familiar with the route - but I was never allowed to go there alone.

My wandering ways came to a climax one day when my parents found me ambling outside the gates of the Hope mansion. But, to tell you the truth, it was not the Hope house and all its grandeur that really drew me on my adventures. That was not my destination that day - no, my Eldorado was a small, hidden pond filled with goldfish, located amidst the bushes and greenery of a neighbor's yard near my aunt and uncle's - hence in Bob Hope's territory. I wasn't looking for celebrity - even then I was looking for fish!

So, this story is not about rubbing elbows with famous people or basking in their reflected glory. In all honesty I can't tell you that Bob Hope or his wife Delores came to my rescue; they most likely were never even aware of the domestic drama unfolding in front of their house when my panicky parents finally caught up with me.

But this I will tell you - I remember that day all too well, it is indelibly etched into my memory because it was the first time that I ever got into really BIG trouble.

I lost a bit of my toddler's innocence that day. It was my first awakening to the realities of life. So, when I heard about Bob Hope's death, I couldn't help but remember that day and realize how fast my own life has flown by.

Bob Hope died at 100, that means that he was about my age, perhaps a year or two *younger* than I am today on that day so long ago. Now *that* was a sobering thought!

And that got me to thinking: how will *I* be remembered when I die? I don't expect to be listed in a celebrity necrology on the Internet, nor with a star on Hollywood Boulevard, but I do hope that I leave some lasting impression upon the world that I leave behind me.

Once, in rabbinical school, I was given an assignment to write a eulogy - my own! I don't recall what I wrote, but I *do* remember how intimidating that task was for me. At 25, what could I have said about myself? What did I know? What had I lived?

At the age of 25 it was hard for me to look at any stage of my life, save the future. As a poet (Franz Grillparzer) once observed, "As youth lives in the future, so the adult lives in the past. No one rightly knows how to live in the present."

For me, that means that it isn't so much a matter of how I will be remembered in the future that I should be concerned about so much as how I am living in the present. And, isn't that true for all of us?

This *Yizkor* observance, sanctified by tradition and time and, even now, creating an almost mystical aura in this sanctuary, is about remembering. But, it should *really* be a wake-up call to start living. It is well and good, it is fitting and right that we remember our beloved dead and give thanks for the privilege of sharing their lives. But, let us not forget to express that same love to each other *now* when we are here, alive, and able to appreciate each other and to savor the sweetness of our relationships.

Today in this sacred place, hallowed by our love for our tradition and the faith that informs it, there are those who find themselves estranged from members of family and from friends - even at this moment of spiritual connection to loved ones now departed - there are gaps and barriers that divide us from people who are still alive. Isn't it appropriate then, that we take time now to appreciate the precious fragility of our relationships and to strengthen the bonds that bind us - *now*, while we and our loved ones are yet among living?

What are the slights and offenses that separate us? Who said something or did something that offended? Does it really matter when we consider eternity - theirs and ours?

We are mortal. Our life is but a brief moment in the expanse of eternity. Let it not be ruled by our regrets and embittered by our hurts. Let me give you this Yom Kippur gift - turn to your loved ones now; those who are here with you, and tell them that you love them. Tell them how much they mean to you. If you have issues, resolve to work *together* to bind those wounds. And, when you get home call someone - that person with whom you quarreled or just lost touch with. Reconnect. Share the sweetest words of the Yom Kippur liturgy: I am sorry. That is what *Yizkor* this *really* about, much more than the wistful recollection of past relationships.

Don't risk living your life embittered by regrets over words spoken in haste or anger, or by words held back by stubbornness or pride. Make this a healing time. Make of this Yizkor a celebration of relationships made all the stronger by the realization that time is short, and the ties that bind us together, so very fragile.

This is a time to say, "Thanks for the memories," as Bob Hope would put it. It is also a time to create positive memories to nurture us in the future.

And, in this way, may the memory of our loved ones be a source of blessing for us, as that memory makes of our lives a source of blessing.

AMEN