

### Fields of Gold

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leafs a flower;  
But only so an hour  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

*Robert Frost*

In 1965, Elie Wiesel offered the world a short autobiographical tale called "The Watch." He shares the story of his first and only return to the town of his birth - Sighet, Transylvania. When he was a newly-minted Bar Mitzvah, Wiesel received the customary gift of a beautiful gold watch, his most prized and treasured possession. Then it was 1944, and after ghettos and transports, much of the town of Sighet was rounded up and sent to the camps. Though they knew not what was to come, fear hovered in the air, and Wiesel and his family began to frantically bury all of their family heirlooms in the hopes that one day they might be able to return and retrieve them. Elie had only one possession of value - his gold watch - and so he decided to bury it out in the fields behind their house, to be recovered one day.

Twenty years would pass, filled with horror and heartbreak, and Wiesel returns unannounced to Sighet in the hopes of retrieving his treasured watch. It is the middle of the night as Elie quietly enters the field of his youth, careful not to wake the family sleeping in the home that was once his. He retraces his steps to the exact location, and using his bare hands, begins to scratch and dig into the frozen ground as minutes, or maybe it was hours, pass. Suddenly his fingers hit something hard and metallic and he unearths the box containing the gold treasure of his past, the only remaining symbol of all that had been. The intervening years have not been kind to the watch: it is rusty and covered with dirt. Elie nonetheless touches it, caresses it, and raises it lovingly to his lips.

Sensing the rising of the sun and coming of dawn, Wiesel hurriedly stuffs the watch into his pocket and runs out of the garden and courtyard. He is halfway down the street when – inexplicably – he stops dead in his tracks. He does an about face, retraces his steps to that place in the field, and in his words:

[A]gain I find myself kneeling, as at Yom Kippur services...holding my breath, my eyes refusing to cry, I place the watch back into its box, close the cover, and my first gift once more takes refuge deep inside the hole. Using both hands, I smoothly fill in the earth to remove all traces...the sun

was rising, and I was still walking through the empty streets and alleys. For a moment, I thought I heard the chanting of schoolboys studying Talmud; I also thought I heard the invocations of Hasidim reciting morning prayers in thirty-three places at once. Yet above all these incantations, I heard distinctly, but as though coming from far away, the tick-tock of the watch I had just buried in accordance with Jewish custom. It was, after all, the very first gift that a Jewish child had once been given for his very first celebration. Since that day, the town of my childhood has ceased being just another town. It has become the face of a watch.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past year since his death, I have returned again and again to this story. Wiesel in many ways represented the very best of Judaism and humanity. He was our prophet of remembrance, walking the road of one who has experienced the very worst of humanity and risen to espouse the very best. The voices of the past spoke to him and through him, the horrors would haunt him even as he inspired us to dream of better days.

Embedded in this autobiographical tale there is parable of Jewish memory, perhaps illustrating the heart of Wiesel's legacy. It is altogether natural to return, to seek to salvage the sacred shards of the past, as Wiesel did with the watch that represented the treasure and trauma of bygone days. And yet, the point of the story is not so much what Wiesel reclaimed, but rather, what he left behind. One generation later, Wiesel understood that sacrosanct as the mitzvah of memory may be, some things must remain buried in the past. We retrieve, and we let go; we return, but we also move forward. Wiesel is our sage of memory because he modeled for us how to remember. For Wiesel, we are obligated to return, not for the past to become our present, but so it might inspire our future. In returning to the field of his youth, in touching the treasures of the past with his fingers, Wiesel could hear the voices, feel the movement of time reminding him of the future that lies before him. In memory, we return in order to go forth.

As Rabbi Harold Schulweis reflected:

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.

We are here to return. For some of us, we naturally fall back into the stories of the past, the landscapes of remembrance. For others, we need this push of the season to go back to those fields. We know that yes there are treasures to be unearthed. But there are also shattered hearts and traumas that linger just beneath the surface. We gather to face our pain, our sadness. We gather to sit alongside others who have loved and lost. We gather to embrace one another, to cling to our memories. We gather to recall the lives and legacies of our mothers and fathers, our siblings, our children. And we also gather to summon hope—the hope that

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<sup>1</sup>*One Generation After*, pp. 60–65

we can do honor to the memories of those we love. The hope that we may hear their stories calling to us. The hope that their stories may inspire us to journey forth.

For some these are stories of brilliance and beauty, as we remember loved ones who brought only virtue into the world. We remember their compassion, we remember their selflessness, we remember their courage, narrative landscapes that we savor.

For others, these are stories blurred by brokenness. We remember their challenging personalities, we remember the stubbornness, the frustration, the weakness. We may remember loved ones whose essential stories, the threads of experience, were masked by such tragedy and difficulty, that all we can hear are faint whispers wishing to be more, yearning to do more.

And all of this, the stories of verdant fields or stories of bleak desert, we return to now with the purpose of looking forward. We walk that difficult road of Jewish memory, learning what to leave buried and what to take with us, what moves us ever forward, and what keeps us ever-looking backwards.

The historian Yosef Yerushalmi wrote in his book *Zakhor*, while it may have been the Greeks who were the fathers of history, “the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.”<sup>2</sup> No doubt, when we read, recall, and tell our stories, we do so with an eye to what did or didn’t happen. But as much as – if not more than – the facts themselves, the Jewish act of remembrance, of *Yizkor*, is about making meaning; in other words, how we relate to the tale we tell, how we leverage that story into our own existence, and perhaps most importantly, the degree to which the story we recall does or doesn’t impact the narratives of our own lives.

All of which, of course, is precisely the point of *Yizkor*, our service of remembrance. Fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters – we recall one or more loved ones, their stories all marked by a beginning and an end. The task of *yizkor* is fundamentally different than the eulogies delivered upon their passing, the grief-filled words spoken at graveside. This service is as much about we the living as it is about the dead. It is here, in the *Yizkor* service, that we ask the question of how each one of us relates to the story of the lives of the loved ones whom we recall. Their Torah has concluded, but it continues to teach. We revisit their stories, as with the Torah, relating to them differently at every *Yizkor* service. With the passage of time, our perspective changes. We become different people and so our memories of our loved ones will inevitably change as well. *Yizkor* is not only an evolving experience, but it is meant to be empowering. We are granted the opportunity to learn anew from the lives of our loved ones, their grace, their struggles, and yes, even their shortcomings. Their humanity, no different than our own, was marked by imperfections. Each year our focus may change, a different aspect of our loved one emerges, a different gold treasure reclaimed. What we take with us depends on whether it moves us forward, or holds us back. The task of *Yizkor* is not to judge, but to understand; to understand and to learn; and then of course, to apply what we have learned. The revisitations are meant to spur our own growth—continued efforts not just to honor the lives of our loved ones, but towards making our own lives worthy of remembrance.

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<sup>2</sup> p. 8

All of Torah is the story of leaving paradise, only to hope to return to it. In Eden, humanity lives in a place of innocence and lush landscape, with rivers flowing through fields of gold.<sup>3</sup> From that point forward, humanity reaches to find a Promised Land, one flowing with milk and honey, covered in golden fields of barley and wheat. But, as we read in Genesis, humanity should never attempt to return to Eden; rather the vision of that past paradise comes to inspire the journey of future generations forwards.

Next week we will read one of the most moving scene of all of biblical literature, the verses relating the death of Moses. “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses.” (34:10) According to tradition, the final verses of his life were penned by Moses himself as his tears dropped onto the parchment below. We will read these verses, and then, seamlessly, direct our attention to the Garden of Eden, the creation of life. With a single breath we will capture the link between death and life, between how our past may inspire our future. And our future may help us find the treasures of our past.

This is what it means to remember; to feel our loved ones with us again, to feel their stories living on beyond death. Our mothers and fathers are more than mere memories slowly fading into the darkness. We feel their guidance and support here and now, at this moment of sacred memory.

Our partners are more than mere memories, more than scrapbooks of the past. They were, and remain our lives, the essence of what was best in us; the ones who, with one look, could make us whole or inspire us to do the extraordinary.

Our brothers and sisters are more than mere memories, more than recollections of playing together. When we see them here, now in the full brightness of the Yizkor, we laugh once again at a childhood still very much present.

And, impossibly, our children who have died are more than mere memories. We can still see their smiles, feel the squeeze of their hands, feel of their small arms around our necks.

In Yizkor, we return so we may journey forth.

There is the story of a young lady in her mid-twenties who receive the heartbreaking news that her father had been diagnosed with a terminal disease and had less than six months to live. Ever since she was a little girl, she had dreamed about sharing a dance with her father at her wedding. She now realized that this dream was not ever to be. At this time, she wasn't engaged, nor even dating—so moving a wedding to an earlier date was not an option.

The young lady, named Rachel Wolf, conceived of a rather unconventional idea. She decided to host a wedding without a partner, for the exclusive purpose of dancing with her father. Dr. James Wolf, who was losing his life to pancreatic cancer, was invited to his daughter's wedding in Auburn, California. Rachel wore a stunning wedding dress and her Dad was decked out in his tuxedo—and they came together for a dance on that day.

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<sup>3</sup> See Genesis 2:11

Father and daughter danced together, surrounded by adoring friends and relatives – who were hugging and applauding. As her father reflected, ““There are a lot of things that I would've liked the girls to experience with me being there," Dr. Wolf said while choking back tears.

"And I'm not going to be there... Each and every day, we have a choice," Dr. Wolf said. “We have a choice to either love that person that's in front of us or not. It's the relationships and stories that you build over the years that is the most important thing in life. Everything else is just an illusion.”<sup>4</sup>

Last year, Rachel did indeed get married, and in that moment, she returned to that first dance with her father. In his arms, she had imagined the future she wouldn't get the chance to share with him. And living in that future, she recalled the dance that would echo forward. While she would never be able to return to the treasures of her childhood, they would forever help inspire her movement forward.

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leafs a flower;  
But only so an hour:  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.  
Robert Frost

Time moves always forward, nothing gold can stay. But we forever return in memory, so that Eden may inspire our reach towards the Promised Land.

Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner was raised just outside Newcastle in Wallsend, a rough-hewn English town with ruins dating from the Roman empire. His ancestors worked in the shipyards, which loomed in his early life as places that were “toxic, dangerous, noisy, frightening... The ships leaving the river,” he wrote, “would in hindsight become a metaphor for my own meandering life, once out in the world never to return.” When he left Wallsend, Sumner dreamed of leaving the shipyards behind, becoming a musician, and vowed never to return.

He would achieve his dream, but break his vow. Sumner, known around the world as Sting, would ascend the heights of fame. But as the years would go on, his musical inspiration dwindled and he experienced a famine of creativity. After 8 years without writing any music, Sting felt flickers of his past calling to him. And he would return to Wallsend, in the hopes that walking the paths of the past would reignite his dreams.<sup>5</sup>

Our past holds our visions for the future. In memory, we shape the stories that move us forward, anchoring us to inspiration, without shackling us to what is no more. We may hear the tick-tock of the watch, reminding us of the movement of time, shocking us to recall that there is no going backwards. But the past still calls to us. Our loved ones are still with us. Their stories, their souls, are gathered with us now, urging us to take the next breath, to take the next step.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.today.com/news/dying-father-has-last-first-dance-daughter-6C10703525>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater\\_dance/sting-the-tireless-troubadour/2014/12/04/68bca592-7722-11e4-8893-97bf0c02cc5f\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.43b3771e1d73](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/sting-the-tireless-troubadour/2014/12/04/68bca592-7722-11e4-8893-97bf0c02cc5f_story.html?utm_term=.43b3771e1d73)

For some of us, we take on the mantle of legacies of inspiration; for others, we are responses to our loved ones, taking the road they did not or could not.

*Many years have passed since those summer days among the fields of barley*

*See the children run as the sun goes down among the fields of gold*

*You'll remember me when the west wind moves upon the fields of barley*

...

*When we walked in fields of gold, when we walked in fields of gold*

Like Wiesel, we return to the fields of our past. We know the stories that lie there. The feelings of both joy and grief, the sense of both love and heartbreak. We learn what to kiss and hold, and what to leave behind. And we let this return move us forward.

In Eden, there was a river that flowed through fields of gold. But ours is the tradition of a people reaching towards a Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey, hills covered with wheat and barley.

Our past inspires our visions,

our memory inspires our dreams,

our loss awakens our love.

*[Fields of Gold sung and played]*