

*Selecting Our Memories*

5778 YIZKOR

Rabbi Robert N. Levine

*Yizkor* is shorthand for *Yizkor Eloheim*—may God remember. This service was designed as a plea to God to remember our loved ones who shared our lives and gave us so much, and who, our tradition believes, live on in other ways, other places and other phases of life.

Perhaps *Yizkor Eloheim* is apt because we, in fact, remember so little, recall a mere fraction of the experiences we had with even our closest loved ones. Oh, we try to remember more, we yearn to recall, but as a study at Duke University confirms, we inadvertently alter, edit, censor, or exaggerate events in our past. Our memories must be selective and each of our personal biographies will contain some fiction because, hard as we try, we cannot avoid faulty memories.

I am not talking about the lapses that come with advancing years, senior moments, and the afflictions that can produce 20/20 memories of an event that happened sixty years ago, but make it impossible to remember if you took your pills that very morning.

So, what is it that we do remember? One man said that whenever his wife got angry with him she became historical.

“You mean hysterical?” asked his friend.

“No, I mean historical. Whenever she gets angry at me, she lists everything I’ve done wrong over the past twenty-seven years.”

These too are selected memories, but they can crowd out the redeeming features that they possess. Whenever I am doing a funeral intake for families that are consumed with negative feelings, I implore them to understand their parent in the context of their lives, what were the pressures, the neuroses, even the illnesses that made them act as they did. Can such evolving understanding bring out any compassion, forgiveness, and ultimately, love?

At this *Yizkor* hour, most of us have *positive* selective memories. We remember their virtues, excuse their shortcomings, chuckle because some of the things that drove us crazy about our parents we have adapted in our own behavior and subject our kids to the very same *meshugas*.

I tend to remember the aspects of people’s lives where they really put themselves out for me or for others. My mother and father tirelessly doing orthopedic exercises with me in an effort to strengthen my left arm and leg and help me walk as others naturally do. I remember a fifth grade teacher, Boris Schultz, gave the class desk work and took me outside to serve a volleyball at the time my brother had been named captain of the school’s volleyball team. Or a rabbi who made sure that my family had the scholarship money to send me to Hebrew-speaking camp, because he believed in me and knew my parents could not afford it. What a difference that rabbi made in my life. What a difference our loved ones made in our lives too. We never forget those who extend themselves in our orbit.

This story is entitled *Red Marbles* by Toba August:

*I was at the corner grocery store buying some early potatoes. I noticed a small boy, delicate of bone and feature, ragged but clean, hungrily appraising a basket of freshly picked green peas. Pondering the peas, I could not help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller (the storeowner) and the ragged boy next to me.*

*"Hello Barry, how are you today?"*

*"Hello, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas. They sure look good."*

*"They are good, Barry. How is your Ma?"*

*"Fine. Gittin' stronger alla' time."*

*"Good. Anything I can help you with?"*

*"No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with."*

*"Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?"*

*"All I got's my prize marble here."*

*"Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you—and give me that marble."*

*"Sure will. Thanks Mr. Miller."*

*Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over and whispered to her husband:*

*"There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are in very poor circumstances."*

*"Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes, or whatever," she said. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he does not like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one when they come on their next trip to the store."*

*Just recently I had occasion to visit some old friends in that Idaho community and while I was there learned that Mr. Miller had just died. They were having his visitation that evening and knowing my friends wanted to go, I agreed to accompany them. Upon arrival at the mortuary, we fell into line to meet the relatives of the deceased and to offer whatever words of comfort we could.*

*Ahead of us in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts—all very professional looking. They approached Mrs. Miller, standing composed and smiling by her husband's casket. Each of the young men hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her, and moved on to the casket.*

*Her misty light blue eyes followed them as, one by one, each young man stopped briefly and placed his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket. Each left the mortuary awkwardly, wiping his eyes.*

*Our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. I told her who I was and reminded her of the story from those many years ago and what she had told me about her husband's bartering for marbles. With her eyes glistening, she took my hand and led me to the casket.*

*“Those three young men who just left were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim ‘traded’ them. Now, at last, they came to pay their debt. We have never had a great deal of wealth in this world, she confided, but right now, Jim would consider himself the richest man in Idaho.”*

*With loving gentleness she lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband. Resting underneath were three exquisitely shiny red marbles.*

Think of the ways our loved ones provided a helping hand, a lifeline to someone who really needed it. Often they did so without fanfare, as if it were not a big deal, speaking volumes about their character. Their *mitzpot* come to the fore at this *Yizkor* hour.

Sifting through our memories we now have the perspective of having lived a life and often understand them better now than we did when we experienced them in real time. We celebrate their quiet heroism and, as we understand their shortcomings, we do realize how much they loved us, and that they showed it as best they could. Maybe they were not as demonstrative as they could have been. We yearned to hear words like:

“I love you.”

“I am proud of you.”

“I appreciate what you do for me.”

How infuriating it sometimes is to hear from others how proud your father was of you.

Why didn’t he tell me? Why did he keep his feelings so close to his vest, expressing things to relative strangers and never to me?

Yet, it feels good to know that he did feel this way. At this *Yizkor* hour let us ask this question: what about us? Do we keep our feelings all bottled up? Do we tell our loved ones how good they are? Or are we just like our parents in this regard?

As we hope to be inspired by our parents at this moment, we also can learn what not to do. Even if therapy makes clear why they did what they did and why we do what we do, we simply do not have to repeat their ways. We can do, be, emote differently. We can forgive them, but still resolve to be the best version of ourselves we can possibly be. So they will remain in death what they were in life, our teachers.

*Death ends a life. It does not end a relationship.* It was not some famed rabbi or psychologist but actor Gene Hackman who said these words in a memorable movie, “I Never Sang For My Father.”

How strongly those words resonate.

Of course, there are those who aren’t there yet, are still shocked by their loss. Thank God we were created with a kind of built-in shock-absorber. We simply cannot take it all in at once and we thank God we don’t have to. What a gift!

“I’m now an orphan,” a member said to me recently as he lost a second parent. “I’m now the senior member of my family.” But these were reflections that became reality only months later as grief fully set in.

Even harder to absorb is the news that we have a serious, potentially terminal disease which attacks our bodies, our souls and our entire family. In his wonderful book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, brilliant neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi discussed facing terminal illness, facing his mortality and craving influence beyond the grave. In the *NY Times Sunday Review*, Dr. Kalanithi writes:

*For a few months, I’d suspected I had cancer. I had seen a lot of young patients with cancer. So I wasn’t taken aback. There were lots of things I had meant to do in life, but sometimes this happens: Nothing could be more obvious when your day’s work includes treating head trauma and brain cancer.*

*The path forward would seem obvious, if only I knew how many months or years I had left. Tell me three months, I’d just spend time with family. Tell me one year, I’d have a plan. Give me 10 years, I’d get back to treating diseases. My oncologist would say only: “I can’t tell you a time.”*

*What patients seek is not scientific knowledge doctors hide, but encouraging nods on status. Getting too deep into statistics is like trying to quench a thirst with salty water. The angst of facing mortality has no remedy in probability.*

Countless number of readers were inspired by the courage and determination from this brilliant doctor whose life was cut way too short. I have seen countless examples of these qualities from you, the families of our congregation. This doctor wanted more:

*My worry: my daughter, Cady. I hope I’ll live long enough that she has some memory of me. Words have a longevity I do not. I had thought I could leave her a series of letters—but what would they really say? I don’t know what this girl will be like when she is 15; I don’t even know if she’ll take to the nicknames we’ve given her. There is perhaps only one thing to say to this infant, who is all future, overlapping briefly with me.*

*When you come to one of the many moments in life when you must give an account of yourself, do not, I pray, discount the fact that you filled a dying man’s days with a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more, but rests, satisfied for all time.*

That is why it is urgent to live a life we can be proud of. *Yizkor Eloheim*, may God remember. Judaism teaches that with our lives we stand in judgment:

- Do we measure up ethically?
- Did we do right in our relationships?
- Did we make amends and repent where we fell short?

Yes, it is God who ultimately sits in judgment, but so will our loved ones. Just as we sit on this *Yizkor* day, cherishing our memories and sometimes wrestling with the complexity of these relationships we must ask: What is the legacy we will leave behind? Not just what will be said at our funeral—those are selective memories as well, but what is the tableau I am creating for those I care

about the most? As our image comes to their minds and hearts, as our years are played in the tape recorders of their minds, what will they really think? How will they judge us?

Just as we cannot hide from the Eternal One, we can't really hide from those who know us almost as well as we know ourselves. Who *will* be to them? And if there is work to be done, repairs to be made, *Yizkor* urgently beckons. Hopefully, they will feel or care to feel sentiments that this poet expresses:

You can shed tears that he is gone  
Or you can smile because he has lived  
You can close your eyes and pray that he'll come back  
Or you can open your eyes and see all that he's left  
Your heart can be empty because you can't see him  
Or you can be full of love you shared  
You can turn your back on tomorrow and live for yesterday  
Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday  
You can remember him and only that he's gone  
Or you can cherish her memory and let it live on  
You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back  
Or you can do what she'd want  
Smile, open your eyes,  
Love and live.

It is indeed true that we can only remember a fraction of what happens to us. We sift through memories, editing events in ways that put our loved ones in the best possible light, in ways which help us to learn from them, be inspired by them and derive lessons that make us better relatives, better citizens, perhaps better Jews. There's an urgency to our days, knowing that we don't know how much time on earth we have left. In truth though, there never is enough time in life and there is always more that we can do.

We can be there for our mate, our parent or our child.

We can be a true friend when others keep their distance.

We can volunteer in our homeless shelter or feed the hungry.

We can help someone struggling with addiction or depression find their way out of the darkness into the light.

There is always something we can do.

Over the door in the room where autopsies are done in the Sorbonne's Medical School is a sign:

“This is the place where death serves life.”

This beautiful sanctuary is also the place where death serves life. In fact the rabbis teach that when our people were to be freed from Egyptian slavery, the slaves scurried about trying to collect everything they could. The slaves were looking for reparations, to regain what had been taken from them so brutally and so unceremoniously for decades. The Talmud teaches:

*Kol Yisrael hayu oskiim b'kesef oonzahav*

*All of Israel were busy looking for gold and silver.* Meanwhile Moses was thinking of something far less material and far less pedestrian—to fulfill the promise he made to Joseph to bury him in the Promised Land. At this moment we too can think of the higher purposes of life, the very reason we were created by God in the first place.

So what does it mean to remember? Ask the conscience of the Jewish people Elie Wiesel.

To remember is to live in more than one world, it is prevent the past from fading and to inspire in us a more caring future. It is to literally show us the way to go while there is still time.

In conclusion the great singer Natalie Cole who died this past year recorded an album singing her father's old favorite songs. The final cut is the classic song Unforgettable, which was originally recorded by her father in 1951. Through the wonders of modern technology she added her voice to his, creating a magnificent duet.

All of us can do the same. We can add our song to theirs to create a harmony, *L'dor v'dor, v'dor*.

Even if we can't remember it all we can remember their song, their trope, and sing along with joy and conviction:

Unforgettable, that's what you are.

Unforgettable, though near or far

Like a song of love that clings to me,

How the thought of you does things to me.

We sing their songs, pray their prayers, do their mitzvot and remember the best of them so we can find the best that is in us.

Amen.