

If I Only Knew

Yizkor 5779

Rabbi Robert N. Levine

The late Rabbi Milton Steinberg came out of a long hospitalization and preached a sermon at the Park Avenue Synagogue called “To Hold with Open Arms”. Here is a short excerpt:

After a long illness, I was permitted for the first time to step out of doors and as I crossed the threshold sunlight greeted me. That is my experience—all there is to it. And yet, so long as I live, I shall never forget that moment. In that instant I looked about me to see whether anyone else showed on their face the joy I felt. But no, there they walked—men and women and children, in the glory of a golden flood and so far as I could detect there was none to give it heed. And then I remembered how often I too been indifferent to sunlight, how often, I had disregarded it. And I said to myself—how precious is the sunlight, but alas how careless of it are we. How precious, how careless. This has been a refrain sounding in me ever since.

Dr. Steinberg simply couldn’t understand how the world could just keep moving on as if nothing had happened.

This same sentiment can also rush to the fore when someone we love, who is central to our lives, dies. Whether they died after a prolonged illness, or died suddenly, our world has shattered. This is an absolute amputation, a cutting off of a vital organ. At that moment of shock, we don’t seek explanation or meaning. We’re simply struggling to catch our breath.

Our life is shattered, yet all around us the world goes on: the trucks blare their cacophonous horns, people rush for the bus, the cab, Uber or Lyft, anything that will move us along on our ordinary day.

How can the world not come to a screeching halt? Our world will never be the same we think, but not only do very few people stop, New York does not even skip a beat.

The sun shines, the sky can be a radiant blue and people keep moving—not filled with awe or gratitude. Those profound sentiments would slow them down, God forbid.

Is this going to happen when *we* die? And I wonder: would these people continue to rush headlong to fulfill their daily obligations, to keep their patterned ways, their precious schedule, if they knew they had only five minutes to live?

Yom Kippur 1986, Rabbi Kenneth Berger rose to deliver the sermon. He spoke to his congregation about the tragedy that many had witnessed eight months earlier in the Florida sky. The explosion of space shuttle *Challenger*. Rabbi Berger focused on one detail, the revelation that the 7 astronauts tragically had remained alive through the terrifying 65,000-foot fall to the ocean. He called his

sermon *Five Minutes to Live*. Can you imagine knowing that in a few moments death was imminent, as our beloved Rabbi Panken surely did? Rabbi Berger said to his congregation, Rodeph Sholom in Tampa, “What would we think if God forbid, you and I were in such circumstances? What would go through our mind?”

Not quite three years later Rabbi Berger was on a flight to Chicago from Denver, returning from a family vacation. The plane’s tail engine exploded on route, crippling the controls. For forty minutes the passengers prepared for a crash landing. Rabbi Berger reached across the seats and gathered the hands of his daughter and son trying to reassure them. The plane burst into flames after it hit the ground in Sioux City, Iowa killing 112 people including the rabbi and his wife, both in their early forties. When he gave his original sermon Rabbi Berger said, “The scene still haunts me, the explosion in five minutes, if only, if only I knew. Yes,” Rabbi Berger said, “you must stop and appreciate the blessings you have. If only I could—well you still can, you still got today.”

If only we knew. It is really tough to conjure up that kind of urgency at this yizkor hour. We are tired. We are hungry. We are feeling vulnerable due to the fast.

But there is something else that impedes perspective: we resist the urgency of the hour. We fight the notion that we’re responsible for things wrong in our orbit. *We* are not the cause of our problems. *We* are not responsible for the estrangement within our family.

Yet. The liturgy is insistent, *aval anahnu hatanu*, but we have sinned. We must take at least our share of the blame.

At this yizkor hour, we feel *their* presence and we want their knowledge, their inspiration, we want our deceased loved ones to be our teachers, inspiring us with their wisdom and their courage, maybe even their ability to right wrongs and to make peace when it seems so impossible to do so.

We so admire them at this yizkor moment and wonder:

How did she go on after her husband walked out on her with three young kids?

How did he go on after the suicide of their child?

How did the family hold their head high when the husband and the father were sent to jail convicted of doing what many others got away with?

Where did they get the courage? A Holocaust survivor, a nurse under impossible conditions watched a Jewish surgeon operating on a patient. A Nazi guard burst in and ordered everyone out to roll call and selection.

“I cannot go now, my patient will die if I leave the operating table.”

“If you don’t follow orders your life will be over right now.”

The doctor did not flinch and continued the delicate operation. The bullet penetrated the back of his skull. In an instant he crumbled to the ground.

That moment, the nurse thought, I vowed that if I survived this horrible place, I would devote my life to healing, hoping that I could find even a fraction of the courage that doctor mustered and manifested in pursuit of saving a life.

At this moment we too think of the courage of our loved ones who lie in bed in their last few moments. I think of my mother in excruciating pain reassuring her children that she was at peace, calling her devoted nephews and nieces to say goodbye, reassuring them as well that she will be fine. Where did she find the courage? Poet Danny Siegel wrote the following:

You lie in bed, a human image of your diagnosis.
You put on your best face for me and the rest of your friends.
Who have come to say more than hello.
We shift from one leg to another.
Stumbling over each other to recite as if from some biblical text.
What a great season the Red Skins are having.
And all chime in on how they stomped Atlanta yesterday.
And not wanting to hurt us, you ask gently,
“What are the chances the rabbi was right back in Hebrew school?
You know, about there being a next world after this one, all peace and light?”

It’s amazing how often we think of those final scenes of life. Of course, there are times when we have to deal with a total lack of closure. We get a call: There has been an accident, an overdose, an inexplicable suicide. We freeze, go numb. God has blessed us with so many things, but we are also created with internal shock absorbers. We can’t take it all in at once. It will be a while for the extent of the loss to really hit home.

We also can go into shock when we know that the death of a loved one is coming, the reality seeps in ever so slowly. So many details to attend to: funeral home, plot, engaging the rabbi, shiva, the food of course. All a whirl. Sometimes we begin to *feel* only when most people have left, have gone back to their lives.

There is eerie quiet and often disquiet.

Why didn’t I insist that my mother get that CAT scan?

Why didn’t I stay over that last night?

Why did they have to be in so much pain?

Why didn’t we call in the palliative care team sooner?

Deep down we know we did the best we could, we demonstrated fierce devotion and caring, we know that, but takes a long time to feel it.

At this yizkor hour we hopefully have gotten beyond those last days. We don’t see them only as patients anymore, dying vestiges of their vital self. We see them in full vigor, his beautiful smile, her sage counsel.

As we age and have to navigate the issues that come with each new decade, we can admire and respect them even more—how she picked herself up after your dad died, how he fought to be independent and not burden you until he absolutely had to. It is sometimes frustrating that they wanted to hold onto the role of parent even as their bodies were giving way and their skills were diminishing. Didn't they know you were a full-grown adult capable of and wanting to care for them as they cared for you all those years?

Now, we can appreciate their fierce pride, their need to hold on to dignity, but also to maintain their traditional role of parent, to be the one to provide care and counsel, not the one in need of them.

This insight was given to us in the wonderful Biblical book of Ruth. The book teaches that a man named Eli Melech, his wife Naomi, and their two children went to the country of Moab and lived there. Eli Melech, Naomi's husband died, she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah, the other Ruth and they lived there for about ten years. Then those two boys also died so the three women were left without husbands. Famine, migration, three deaths in a single household, three widows. What to do? Mother Naomi urged the girls to leave her and embrace a new life. Orpah indeed kissed her mother in warm farewell, but Ruth clung to her, "Do not urge me to leave you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people; your God, my God." Naomi overnight is transformed into a strong, independent, courageous woman. She turned back to Bethlehem. But Ruth too, was strong and resolute, determined to begin her life anew, but with Naomi and among the people of Israel.

Ruth realizes that by going with her, Naomi will continue the role of parent. She will bear responsibility for her family's future, her people's future. She'll not be able to self-destruct, to wilt, to collapse from the pain. She'll reach inside, like so many people who have lost their precious mates to marshall all her resources, to pick herself up and decide to live—for Ruth's sake, for the sake of the Jewish people and the world so in need of hope. Remarkably, this courageous Moabite woman will, according to Jewish tradition, be the ancestor of the Messiah.

On a smaller, crucial scale, we can make a real difference even at the last moment. A nurse writes:

You are holding the telephone
for a dying woman, right against her cheek,
a woman in a coma for weeks,
now her throat open for breathing and unable to speak.

I don't know what her daughter said
but it's as if this woman were surveying the boon alleys of the town below.
She cradles the phone, makes clicking sounds with her tongue.
What does her daughter understand?

I write this to her
Your mother lay with the phone beside her ear.
Those sounds you heard were a lullaby.
You made all the difference.
She died rocking a baby to sleep.

How important a role we can play, how often *their* role will be missed.

A man comes to see the rabbi the morning after his wife died. The grief is fresh. “Yes I had her for forty-six years, rabbi. It is a blessing. But the fact I had her that long makes it that much harder for me to try to imagine life without her. “

The rabbi notices that the man is busy with his shirt collar. Sitting across from me as we spoke together, he kept checking it, adjusting the fit, straightening the back.

I finally asked, “Morris, are you having trouble with your collar?”

Morris looked at me focusing through his watery eyes. “You see it’s just that my wife adjusted my collar for me every morning for forty-six years. It reminds me of her to do this. I guess I’m going to learn how to adjust my collar by myself from now on. But when I do it, it makes me think of her.”

Remembering gestures. Remembering all the little things they did for us that we now take for granted. We keep them as a way of keeping them alive.

Billy Crystal in his play *Seven Hundred Sundays* talks about his mother’s stroke:

I went back into her room. She was staring at nothing. It was like someone had taken mom and replaced her with a duplicate. It was her but not really her. I wanted to yell, GIVE ME MY MOTHER BACK.

I keep thinking about the very first time she had been in this very hospital. I was nine years old. She had pneumonia and they took her out the front door to the ambulance waiting in the driveway. “Don’t worry,” she called out, “I’ll be okay.” They put her in the ambulance as sirens wailed and she was gone. I was terrified. Just the way I felt now. They day after she checked in I caller her,” Mom, I’m coming over to see you. I have a new Charlie Chaplain routine that’s really funny. I want to make you laugh.”

She said, “You can’t come here, you have to be sixteen.”

“I’ll do it outside,” he pleaded.

“No, it’s pouring, don’t come.”

“Mom, you can’t stop me.”

And she didn’t.

Years later when she was in serious decline, Billy came back to the hospital. Again it was pouring and he remarked about doing Charlie Chaplain in the rain.

“Remember that Mom? You were so mad. Remember when I did Chaplin in the rain? Do you?”

Suddenly her eyes opened wide: “You’re Billy Crystal! What are you doing here?”

Crystal continues,

About a year before my mom passed away, it was a Saturday night in Los Angeles, very late about 12:45, which actually makes it Sunday. The phone rings and I panic, because when you're a Jew and the phone rings late at night it means somebody is dead, or worse, they want money. But no, it's mom calling from the house.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine dear."

"But Mom, it's 3:30 in the morning."

"I know, I just wanted to hear your voice, Bill, that's all. I woke up your brothers too, but I wanted to hear *your* voice."

Crystal continues:

I'm an insomniac myself. I've been up since 1948. I wanted to find out why she couldn't sleep because somehow it might help me.

"Mom, why can't you sleep?"

There was a pause, and then...

"I'm just listening for you boys."

We do that too, don't we?

Remembering all they meant to us, Rabbi Jack Riemer asks a profound question, "When does death really occur?" He says, "In a sense it is not when the brain stops functioning or the heart stops beating, but when the person is no longer remembered by anyone, if no one listened for them."

What a tragedy that would be. Our presence here is our answer, a rebuttal to the profound concern, "Will I be forgotten?"

So how can we ensure that they will not be forgotten?

Every Friday night, we invite you to hear the name of your loved one who has died recently or at that time of year. You rise as if to say, *Hineni*, I am here.

Then you may come forward if you wish to place stone on slate, producing that distinct loud sound that reverberates through the sanctuary or chapel.

The sound is a statement: No, Mom, Dad, sibling, children, you are not gone. Words, smile, influences are ever-present in my life. You have not lived and died in vain. You have shaped my life in incredible ways. I don't know how to thank you, don't know if I ever adequately expressed to you what you have meant to me.

While the world rushes by, while my schedule is impossibly busy, you do take the time, enter the sanctuary inspired by the beautiful cantorial music, the rabbi's words of Torah, the majesty of the sanctuary, the still small voice of God that wells up inside of you, inspiring you to do what otherwise

you might resist. I think about my loved ones and wonder how much time do I have? If only I knew. What if my time is short? What is the urgency of now? What is that thing, that gesture, that act of repentance, that attempt at family peace that now calls out for action? Can I hear your urgent call? Can I heed the message you are sending from the grave or perhaps from another realm where your soul resides in eternal, blessed life.

I think of these things as I listen for your name. The rabbi recites it and I say it. I say it over and over again. I rise in honor, tears may flow, we are now in relationship. I walk to the front of the sanctuary, take the stone, place it on the slate, the sound is powerful. I feel it throughout my body. Our souls reconnect and I say to you, *Hineni*, I am here and so are you.

You made a real difference in the world and in my life and I am eternally grateful.

Don't we hope that our loved ones will remember us in precisely that way? How much more can any of us hope for? It is a measure of a life well lived, no matter the length of our days.

We rise now to praise them, we rise to praise God with Kaddish.