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Yizkor 5785
October 12, 2024

Memorbuch – A Jewish Answer to Dust in the Wind

Libby Cohen Meguri was 22 when she arrived at the Supernova music festival with her close friend Adi. When the rocket fire began, the two tried to flee the site of the rave in their car. As Hamas terrorists fired at them, Libby called her family on the phone. She was shot in the arm and in the stomach. As she bled, she spoke her final words to her family, "Ima, Ima - Mom, mom, they shot me. Mom, I'm going to die...I love you." They heard the final volley of gunshots that stole Libby and Adi's lives.

Libby's mother Shelly describes Libby as "the happiest person this world has ever known. She was a chunk of energy, happy, light, and laughing, from the moment she woke in the morning until the moment she went to sleep."

Libby was buried in the Kiryat Shaul cemetery in north Tel Aviv. Her gravestone reads "Our sun was extinguished."¹

For many of us, our Yizkor service is a time for the most personal. In these moments we elevate the memories of our most beloved. We hold our grief, recalling their life, noting their absence, and a world forever shadowed by their deaths. Some of us return to the very seats where they sat, recalling the anchoring of space alongside memory. We bring forward their names, recall the timbre of their voices, the fancies and foibles, the textures of their being that brought imprint in our own existence. By being here, we bring significance to their spirits, and live out the biblical maxim that love is as strong as death.

And we know that it is in the most personal that we feel the weight of their humanity, the immeasurable loss experienced with every final breath. The act of memory becomes a bold declaration of defiance – our loved ones are more than dust to be scattered, more than whispers that fade from sight. They are names and heartbeats, they are moments of heroism and simplicity. We may remember their scent, their fashion-sense, their culinary cravings. We may recall their laugh, the sight of their tears, the anguish in their voice. We bring it all to the fore, bring their many facets into mind, so we may honor the significance of their existence. We make this time about the most personal so we may elevate memory to the most profound.

But the history of the Yizkor service points to a darker valence of memory. The first explicit appearance of Yizkor as a service originated in western Germany in the 12th Century. At that

¹ <https://thebrownandwhite.com/2024/04/01/oct-7-survivor-shares-his-story/>;
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/libby-cohen-meguri-22-god-sprinkled-her-with-charisma-powder/>

time, it was used as a ritual to grieve the masses of Jews slaughtered during the 1st and 2nd Crusades. In the face of the banality of evil, the Jewish community sought to center the sacredness of the thousands slain with wanton abandon.²

At the dedication of a new synagogue in Nuremberg in 1296, the scribe Isaac ben Samuel of Meiningen presented a *memorbuch*, a memory book, listing the names of each person that had been killed.

In so doing, he linked their lives and their deaths into the importance of the new sacred space. A reminder of the purpose that cries out from such loss. The First Crusade in 1096, the Rintfleisch massacres in the summer of 1298, and the Black Death massacres of 1349. The origin of Yizkor was the reading of this *Memorbuch*, and the elevating of a collective consciousness in grief.

Debra Kaplan explains that it “created a common heritage for diverse communities, and linked generations together in a shared history. German communities in the early 1900’s were still reading the names of those who [died] in Worms and Mainz 800 years earlier; for them, the names of the past were not part of the past at all.”³

Scholars and historians have been fascinated by this practice, for the tone and language of the *Memorbuch* speak of these massacres with a combination of defiance and grief. One such line about the city of Worms tells of “Master Shemaryah who was buried alive, and whose wife, sons, and daughters were slaughtered.”

The names of the dead were repeated in synagogues far and wide, even centuries later. Memory became the vehicle for a communal embrace. And by linking the personal to the collective, a sense of peoplehood across time and space was created out of grief.

After the Holocaust, the practice returned. Survivors worked tirelessly to create *Yizkorbooks* dedicated to telling the story of the communities erased by the Nazis. In speaking name, in elevating color and hue to the lives lost, they let memory be an eternal act of both honor and defiance. We continue this practice today. Our Roll of Remembrance is simply a continuation of the Holocaust *Yizkorbuch* and the original *Memorbuch*. We reject death as the act of erasure, and scribe and speak the names of our loved ones to feel the ways their light and life lives on. We refuse the notion that we are but momentary lifebeats that disappear, we reject the triviality of death. And we also bear witness, noting that we are, in this moment, woven with millions others around the world, holding this ritual of grief, feeling the sense of connection and purpose that emerges out of pain.

² <https://www.commentary.org/articles/theodor-gaster/yizkor-the-living-and-the-dead-the-community-as-woven-by-memory/#:~:text=The%20history%20of%20the%20Yizkor,the%20First%20and%20Second%20Crusades.>

³ <https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/371041/1400-yizkors/>

As we mourn the first yartzheit of the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, we return to the *Memorbuch*. We bring the personal back into the collective, and the collective back into the personal. We recount a year in which we have been reminded of both the most brutal and brave, of both the most humane and inhumane. And we shoulder the weight, the existential weight, of massacre that posited the worthlessness of life, and instead elevate the sacredness of each soul.

Ernest Becker captured this duality in reflecting on the essence of people:

This is the paradox: [the human being] is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it. His body is a material fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways—the strangest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with.⁴

A year ago we witnessed as bodies were ravaged and ruined. Each murder close, personal, intentional.

Even as the ensuing war has already added tens of thousands of horrific deaths, even as there is so much more to grieve and mourn, the brutality of Jewish massacre must be named. Must be centered. And added into our *Memorbuch*. Each name both a treasure and a testament. Each remembrance both an anguished grief and a powerful defiance. These people. These bodies. These names. We raise them. We speak them. We honor them as did our ancestors.

27 year old Noam Mazal Ben-David one of the survivors of the Nova massacre raised her voice in the heartwrenching documentary “We Will Dance Again,” which we screened here just weeks ago. She recounts on October 7th as she and her boyfriend fled, they chose to hide in a large garbage container with a dozen other people.

They waited inside for three hours and recalled hearing the horrors taking place beyond the container. “We were all calling our family and friends on our mobile phones, sharing our location and begging for help.”

As the terrified group lay there, one person shouted: “They saw me.” Noam continued: “As the Hamas gunmen approached, [my boyfriend] took me and threw me to the back of the container telling me to get as deep as I could and to hide. One of them jumped inside and ... started shooting non-stop.” Her boyfriend David shielded her, and as bullets rained and

⁴ *The Denial of Death*, Free Press Paperbacks, New York, 1973, p. 26.

bodies fell, Noam was shot in the foot and hip. But David, though dead, saved her from slaughter.

Noam, who now is sharing her experience, brings stickers in memory of her boyfriend David, telling everyone she meets: "I want you all to grab one and stick it all over the world." She added: "David was my hero from the beginning until the end... The fact that I'm on my feet is because I have David in my head, in my heart, in my body. ... Now I know that energy doesn't die, and people that you love [are] still here with you. I can talk to David every single day. I get so many signs from him."⁵

We reject the banality of evil and the baseness of death by raising up our lights, our loves, our heroes. We answer a world that may minimize our pain and may desecrate our bodies by declaring that our memories will blaze with purpose and resolve. We let honor be our answer. We make grief our galvanizing torch. And we return in memory to remember that we are not alone.

But all around us we feel the press of profaning life. Numbers in the gristmill of data, propaganda to be rejected. We center some lives, ignore some deaths. We glorify or debase. Who is innocent and who culpable, who a perpetrator and who a victim. But all of these are the tropes of explanation. Of justification. But in Yizkor, we push against this. We claw back our willingness to name the preciousness of life. We fortify ourselves against the sweeping winds of hate that suggest we are but dust and ashes to be scattered and forgotten. We choose instead to draw on the sacred response of our tradition, of *Memorbach*, to direct our anger, our wound, our heartbreak. In speaking name, in remembering legacy, we transform it all into the energy of creation.

In the words of Rav Avraham Kook, writing in reflection about waves of hate against Jews around the world at the turn of the 19th Century:

Therefore, the pure righteous do not complain of the dark, but increase the light; they do not complain of evil, but increase justice; they do not complain of heresy, but increase faith; they do not complain of ignorance, but increase wisdom.⁶

This is our Jewish response to personal and collective loss. We grieve and mourn. We face the fires of destruction and become the waters of creation. We speak name, we scribe legacy, we elevate memory, to be shining beacons. And we return sacredness to the notion of life.

The book of Ecclesiastes mostly paints a stark picture of this world. It casts our worldly pursuits as foolish vanities and challenges notions of meaning and purpose. And yet next

⁵ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1831444/hamas-israel-boyfriend-killed-skip>;
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/we-will-dance-again-documentary-survivors-1236008053/>

⁶ Arpilei Tohar, p.2.

week amidst the joy of Sukkot, we will elevate these verses as the wisdom of our festival of gratitude. We are but dust in the wind, and yet life is utterly precious. Every pursuit is ephemeral, and yet God gazes at everything with meaning. Sitting in our flimsy huts that by definition may be blown over in the winds of the world, we will respond to existential uncertainty by savoring our blessings. And this, this is our Jewish response of memory.

We gather into this space the shining lights of hope. Our memories point the way to lions of courage. They surface a path through valley and over peak that has already been paved by those before us.

Hashiveinu. We return. We return to their memories. We refuse the banality of death and instead return to sacralizing the power of life. We return.

When the world and our fear tells us we are merely dust in the wind, we raise the sanctity of the human spirit. When we feel like we are mere drops in an endless sea, we remember the vast ocean of each soul. When we notice the minutes slipping by, our obligation to memory anchors us in the shining and lasting lights of legacy. Though all we do may one day crumble, in remembrance we reify love eternal.

We can feel their hands, the beats of their being.

Their names a treasure and a testament.

We return again,

writing our *Memorbuch*,

ensuring their light,

their sun,

rises again

before our eyes.