

Yizkor 5779

As we say yizkor this morning and think about the people who came before us, the people we miss, we think about the meaning of their lives. What did they leave us? What do any of us leave behind? What is the purpose of our lives? In what way, if any, can we give to them now that they are gone?

In a few minutes, when we say unetaneh tokef, we will read, “Each person’s origin is dust and his end is dust. Our lives are but a broken shard, withering grass, a shriveled flower, a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattered dust, a vanishing dream.” We are here today and gone tomorrow and life is short. Is this the sum of life’s meaning — a broken shard? a blade of grass?

In a fascinating book that came out earlier this year, *Eternal Life*, the novelist Dara Horn wrestles with the question of the meaning of life. The main character in the book, Rachel, is born in the 1st century CE during the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem but, for reasons too complex to enumerate here, she finds herself living eternally, reborn time and time again into one new century after another. The book begins in the present — Rachel has, at this point, married countless husbands and birthed and buried even more children. Like the Jewish people, she has survived pogroms, inquisitions and gas chambers, wandering the earth until her next incarnation.

At the outset of the book, Rachel wants nothing more than to die. Life, as Ecclesiastes argues, is endlessly repetitive and she wants out of the cycle of birth, death and endless care-taking. As the novel progresses, however, both Rachel and the reader explore other understandings of life’s purpose.

As it happens, in her first incarnation, Rachel was the mother of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai, the first head of the rabbinic academy after the destruction of the Temple. As legend has it, during the siege of Jerusalem, Yohanan counseled peace which enraged some of his fellow citizens. He therefore arranged for his disciples to smuggle him out of Jerusalem in a coffin to evade his enemies. Once outside the city, Yohanan sought an audience with Vespasian, the Roman general in charge of the siege, in order to broker a peace. Yohanan predicts to Vespasian that the current emperor, Nero, will be desposed, and that Vespasian will become the emperor. Vespasian likes this far-fetched prophecy. A few days later, when these events come to pass, Vespasian has Yohanan brought back to him and offers to grant him whatever he wishes. Yohanan, knowing that Jerusalem is all but destroyed, famously responds: Give me Yavneh! At Yavneh he establishes his academy of disciples, thus launching the enterprise of rabbinic Judaism.

In the novel, Rachel, in her second incarnation, visits the dying Yohanan and lambastes him. “You could have saved the country, You could have saved the city, You could have saved the Temple. You could have saved the Holy of Holies, the House of God. And instead — you saved a story?” She derides him for what she sees as foolish and childish.

Yohanan argues back: The Temple would have been destroyed anyway. The Temple is only a thing. I saved the only thing that matters. The story is forever.

People live and people die; temples are built and temples are destroyed. But the story is forever. In chapter 10 of the book of Exodus, prior to the eighth plague, God tells Moses that he will harden Pharaoh’s heart, in order that you may tell this story to your children and their children. In other words, the point of the exodus was not necessarily the receiving of the law or freedom from tyranny or going to the land of Israel, although all of those things are arguably important.

The point, though, was for us to tell the story. Our lives are short but because we part of a larger story, because our names are linked to God's, we taste eternity. We are part of a story that goes on forever.

As I said on Rosh Hashana, I believe, more than ever, that the story— telling the story, living the story — is what matters. In ancient Hebrew, we have no real word for religion. Even the Talmud — centuries later — knows no such word. What we have is a narrative and rituals and people and memories that connect us to a story. As long as we continue to tell and live the story, the story goes on — it doesn't depend on believing in God or how we keep kosher or what synagogue we join. It depends on us taking our place in the story.

Stories are different than laws. Everyone thrills to the words, "Once upon a time..." Many of us recall the feeling of sitting with a beloved parent or grandparent, nestled under their arm, under the blankets, waiting expectantly for the book to open and the magic to begin. "Telling stories ...will arouse the sleeping self. ...stories have endless facets of meaning: they gain admission to our inner world because they are polymorphous, plastic, familiar and strange at the same time. Once within, they begin their work, turning around and around, inviting us to play with their meanings." (Zornberg) Stories mean new things all the time. They invite us, not to obey, as a legal code does, but to play. We construct our sense of meaning through the stories we tell.

Remembering those for whom we say yizkor today, we tell our family's story and we think about our place in that story — what they passed on to us and what we will pass on to those who will one day, God-willing, say yizkor for us.

[Pause and tell neighbor about someone you are saying yizkor for.]

To say yizkor is to acknowledge our place in the endless story.

Today, I want to share two stories with you. One is the story of Simcha Bunim Unsdorfer, an inmate at Buchenwald, who, in 1945, as Passover approached, obtained some scraps of paper on which he wrote a haggadah from memory and acquired a small amount of flour from which he baked 3 matzot. On the night of Passover, he celebrated the seder with his fellow inmates, using a rusty cup of coffee to stand in for the traditional four cups of wine... Unsdorfer writes of how the celebration of the seder was a source of courage and hope for him, reminding him that in every generation our people had suffered and had, by God's will, been redeemed. He notes the wisdom of the rabbis who kept alive these rituals, repeated each year, to give us hope even in our darkest times.

Unsdorfer, drawing upon his faith and imagination, reframes the horror of Buchenwald, seeing himself as if he were an Israelite in Egypt, transforming his oppressive reality into a promise of redemption.

Although Unsdorfer attributes the continued existence of the Jewish people in the face of adversity and oppression to divine intervention, it is clear, even from his own writing, that it was the Jewish people who kept the Passover alive, who chose to celebrate year in and year out, who were, as it were, indispensable agents in their own redemption. As Unsdorfer himself writes, without the seder "where would we have gained the courage to survive?"

But, what is meant here by survival? At some level, Unsdorfer clearly understood that many if not most of those he celebrated that seder with, would not, in fact survive. What was their redemption? Unsdorfer, in fact, never writes of his own survival but rather of **our** survival. He understood that the redeeming power of God as reflected in the story of the Exodus and the strength that it gave him and his fellow inmates did not guarantee that they would leave

Buchenwald alive. The promise it held for him was that whether he made it through or not, the Jewish people would live on. And though he did not quite say it, he clearly understood that this would come about in part because of his willingness, in the spring of 1945 – in the shadow of death – to write a Haggadah, bake matzot, and organize a seder. That is, as long as Jews were willing, in whatever circumstances they found themselves, to make seder, the Jewish story and the Jewish people would go on.

Unsdorfer teaches us that the seder is important simply because I do it, because I announce, “I am here. I am taking up the story entrusted to me by the Jews who came before me, and I am passing it on to my children and my children’s children” The telling of the story is itself redemption. We were redeemed from Egypt and from countless tribulations because we tell the story, in order to tell the story.

Like you, I give my children many things — a roof over their heads, an education, hard-earned wisdom for them to take or leave, mostly they leave it, a bevy of electronic devices that barely even existed until I was well into my 40’s. But the most important thing I give them, I believe, is a story, a sense that they are part of a larger narrative, personal and communal. I hope more than anything else that one day I will sit down at their table where they hold seder. I imagine it will be entirely different than my own seder and I will wonder at their strange food choices and the ways they choose to tell the story. If I am really lucky, they will sing a song and say this was how Abba sang it, or make a dish I made, or share a ‘drash on the haggadah that they heard from one of us or our parents. But they will add their own tunes, dishes, drashes. Giving them the story, means they are its owners. They are free to change it. But they have the story. Our people’s life goes on and God willing they will take up their place in the great narrative.

None of us is an island. Our individual stories are woven with the stories of our people. We take our place at the table. We become the narrator in our story.

One more story. This summer in Israel I heard Kobi Oz in concert. Oz’s parents are Tunisian and he grew up in the working class town of Sderot. His grandfather was a hazan, a cantor, and a paytan — a composer of Jewish liturgical poetry. Oz, like many children of immigrants, grew up embarrassed by his families’ strange accents, their old-fashioned religious practice, their smelly food. He would become Israeli.

Oz tells the story of his wedding weekend. His grandfather has suggested to him that he chant the haftarah in synagogue on the Shabbat prior to his wedding. The day arrived, Kobi was walking with his grandfather to shul, and his grandfather asked him if he had prepared the haftarah. He shrugged “no”; his grandfather said nothing. Oz didn’t chant the haftarah.

Oz said that his Grandfather’s silence in that moment became an underground river of silence in his life. Wherever he was — playing a concert, celebrating his son’s bris, at the happiest moments of his life and the hard ones too — that river of silence and shame was there underneath, reminding him of his failure.

After his grandfather died, the family discovered a box of cassette tapes on which the grandfather had recorded himself singing hundreds of piyutim — liturgical poems — he had written. The family never knew the tapes existed. Oz ultimately took one of these recordings and used it in his own musical composition called Elohai, my God. The song begins with the recording of his grandfather, singing in his nasal, heavily Tunisian accent: You are my God, the God who gathers his far flung people from the four corners of the earth...” Oz then picks up the song in his own words, singing a kind of duet with his late grandfather. Oz’s song goes, in part:

I have so much to tell you, yet you know everything
I have so many requests to ask of you, but anyway you want the best for me

I give you a little smile for everything beautiful I notice, large or small
And I'm a little confused about what to call you — God or Hashem?

I have so so many thank you's lined up at your door.
But my thank you's always come out a little corny.
I am full of requests. Please. Please. Please,
Although, all told...
Everything's OK.

Oz's prayer is the prayer of a secular Jew. He goes on:

Lord if you hear my prayer, maybe you can send my love to my grandfather
Tell him that the Sephardi moderation he stood for,
has become zealotry and extremism.

But despite everything, tolerance is bubbling beneath the surface
Look how slowly, slowly people are letting go of the tension and just want to be
together

In this great synagogue that is called the land of Israel...

I am not sure I can convey how moving it was to hear this song and story. To hear Oz tell of a grandfather whom he loved as a child, but whose ways he did not fully respect; to hear him tell of his failure to do what his grandfather asked; the pain of the grandfather, the indifference of youth, and the price of that indifference; to listen to the duet of him and his grandfather singing; to see Oz reviving both the Tunisian poetry of his grandfather and his grandfather's prayer, albeit in a new key, with new words. Oz said that his grandfather believed that his traditions and music would die with him — now, thanks to Oz and other singers, they are among the most popular music in Israel. The song is such a precious gift back to the deceased. In simple words, Oz tells his grandfather — I'm still telling your story. Like Unsdorfer at the seder table. Like Yohanan ben Zakkai. The story goes on. On his 40th birthday, Oz finally chanted the haf-tarah in his grandfather's memory.

The living, it turns out, need the blessing of the dead to live their lives fully, and the dead, as it happens, still have gifts to give. Our relationships don't end with death. Time is like a river — it needs to flow freely from past to present for the future to be whole. As another Oz, Amos, points out, Hebrew is a little funny around time. Kedem means ancient, before as in hadesh yamenu k'kedem —renew our days as of old. It also means forward, kadima just as l'fanim both means that which came before and that which lies ahead. Past and future have a way of co-mingling, often, most profoundly, when we name a child, staring into the unknown future, bestowing a name and qualities from a past we hope to transmit to the next generation.

At the end of Horn's novel, *Eternal Life*, Rachel, in a new incarnation, with a new baby in her arms, holds up the child and says, "Yohanan, I am watching." The reader catches her breath. Not only are these the very words Rachel's own mother said to her on her deathbed, but we also learn, in that moment, that Rachel has named this baby Yohanan after her very first son, Yohanan. What she is watching is both this baby's future as well as the original Yohanan's dream of a story that spools out forever, more precious than a Temple, more enduring than rubies and gems; the two stories are one. This baby Yohanan is the latest chapter in the 2000-year-old story the original Yohanan chose to save. Past and future meet and the story gets another chapter — for Yohanan ben Zakai, for Unsdorfer's descendants, for Kobi Oz's grandfather.

As we say yizkor today, I invite us to think about what chapter we will write for the people we remember. What story did they tell with their lives? How does that story live in us? How will we pass it on to our children and grandchildren? What can we give back to them? God took us out of Egypt so that we could tell the story. When you take out your grandmother's dishes for the holiday, when you wear your father's tallis, you tell their story. When you live their values, when you treat others as they taught you to, when you love as they loved, you keep their legacy alive. When you consciously decide which of their ways of being to fully incorporate and which to set aside, you link yourself in the chain. Kobi Oz's God is not precisely the same God as his grandfather's God, but they sing together. In Oz's song, he tells his grandfather, I'm still telling your story. Even though you are gone, you are a part of this next chapter. What can we give back to those who came before us? What of their legacy do we pass forward? What story are we telling? What story will they yet tell? As we remember them today, we are not just remembering, we are adding our piece to the timeless story they gave to us.