

YOM KIPPUR 5778 – YOU’RE NEVER ALONE

Rabbi Michael Pont

Once every few years, Yom Kippur and Shabbat coincide. While it feels odd to fast on a day when we are used to eating well, there is nevertheless a strong connection between these two holy days, a connection involving memory. The word *yizkor* reflects the meaning of the fourth commandment: “**Zachor** *et yom ha shabbat l’kadsho.*” “**Remember** the Sabbath Day to make it special.” (Exodus 20:8)

The Hebrew word *zachor* encompasses more than its plain meaning. In his commentary on the Book of Exodus, scholar Nachum Sarna wrote, “It means to be mindful, and signifies a sharp focusing of attention, on someone or something. *Zachor* embraces concern and involvement, and it leads to action.” (See *Etz Chayim* p.326) Multiple times in the Torah God tells us to remember that we were slaves, so that we will act with compassion. For us, *zachor* means remember and *act* – memory leads to *doing*.

It is easy to remember Shabbat which comes every week, and the *seder* reminds us of freedom and empathy. But how do we keep loved ones in the forefront of our minds? According to neurological research, they are always there.

Douglas Hofstadter, a science professor at Indiana University, wrote about memory in his book entitled I Am a Strange Loop. He claims that when one person shares their hopes and dreams, those aspirations don't disappear upon death, rather they live on in others. This isn't just wishful thinking, it's how the brain works – our loved ones are in there! Each of us is a 'strange loop,' constantly receiving feedback, making it a part of ourselves, and in turn affecting the world. Our loops become intertwined with those of others. As Hofstadter wrote, "Every normal adult human soul is housed in many brains at varying degrees of fidelity, and therefore every human consciousness ... lives at once in a collection of different brains, to varying extents." (Loop, p.259) We exist in others' brains, and others reside in ours – we are literally in each other's heads! On Hofstadter's work, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso commented, "We are distinct individuals, so of course you are you and I am

I ... But we also overlap. In some ways, I am I *because* you are you. I am changed by what you say to me, by how you embrace or shun me, by the way you move with me in the dance of life. When your life intersects with mine, I am transformed.” (May God Remember, p.207)

Who is in your head? I want to tell you about someone who is in mine, someone who in part made me who I am – my grandpa, Irv Wasserman. We were very close: Shabbat dinner every Friday, all holidays Jewish and secular, and much more. Grandpa Irv inhabits a major space in my brain.

When I was nine years old I asked him, “Grandpa, why don’t you have a middle name?” In his raspy voice and with a straight face he replied, “Well Mike, when I was a kid my family was so poor that we couldn’t afford one.” “Oh,” I said and walked away. Whenever I tell a story or a joke, Irv is with me.

In the thirty plus years I knew my grandfather, I only heard him raise his voice once - when my sister and I were bickering.

Upon hearing him and seeing the look on his face, I was scared, but also sad that I had caused it. While that memory is in my head, it is crowded out by the many happy moments we shared. If I am frustrated with my own children, Irv is there, reminding me how important family is, how much I love my kids, how to be patient and keep it all in perspective.

My interactions with Grandpa Irv made me a different person, a better person, than I would have been otherwise, and I believe that he's still with me. In a few minutes, we will recite an English reading entitled, "We remember them." The authors, Rabbis Sylvan Kamens, who served here at MJC in the '80s, and Jack Riemer, wrote, "As long as we live, they too will live; *for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.*" (Machzor Hadash p.572) Clearly, they understood this notion of memory.

And now we will take the time to memorialize our loved ones during *Yizkor*. We might shed tears as we reflect upon the joys they brought to us, and upon the many ways they inspired us. We might be regretting things we never said, or apologies we

never made or accepted. We might be thinking about a parent who is no longer alive, and we yearn to feel their presence again. How ironic that our Sanctuary is crowded today – every seat is taken. And yet, we see empty chairs everywhere – chairs which our loved ones no longer occupy.

Keeping with the full meaning of *yizkor*, remembering our loved ones today should inspire action. The liturgy reflects this sentiment: the individual *yizkor* passages read, “In her memory I pledge to do acts of charity and goodness.” They are no longer here physically, but they are *inside* us, urging us to act in this world and uphold their values. As you say *yizkor* for your parent, spouse, or friend, know that they are with you, guiding you. May they help us become the people that will make them and us proud. *G'mar chatimah tovah.*