

Use My Years Also: Yizkor 5778

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg tells the story of a high-school senior who, upon receiving a diagnosis of terminal cancer, began drawing up his will. He listed each of his possessions in turn and bequeathed them to someone especially dear to him – a DVD collection to his younger brother, a portfolio of artwork to his grief-stricken parents, an old football jersey to the coach who had transformed him from anxious rookie to self-assured starting line-man. The young man’s most poignant legacy, however, was to his closest friend, the boy with whom he had grown up and shared childhood, the buddy with whom we had spent countless lazy afternoons and made audacious plans for the future. “Dear Michael,” he wrote simply in his bequest. “Be sure to use my years also.”

If only it were so easy! The agonizing cry that so often screams forth from the lips of someone who has just lost a loved one echoes the heart-breaking words of King David in the Bible, “Oh my son, Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I have died in your stead, Absalom, my son, my son!” (II Samuel 19:1). As Greenberg writes, “If years were transferable, no child would ever die.”¹ And how often the rest of us, too, wish we could add time into another’s account – allowing them to meet the grandchild they never knew, or to attend the graduation they so yearned to see, or simply to witness the everyday mundanities and blessings that we so often take for granted. We’d be willing to grow a little less old ourselves, if they were but here by our side. We’d surely give them some of our own years in a heartbeat.

¹ <https://americanrabbi.com/using-other-peoples-years-by-sidney-greenberg/>

It is not only King David who wished to exchange his life for that of another; indeed, Jewish tradition is replete with examples of relatives martyring themselves in order to save those whom they love. In the Joseph story, first Simeon and then Judah offer to remain captive in Egypt so that the rest of their family may get food and their youngest brother, Benjamin, be spared from harsh treatment. In both the story of the *Akedah* (Binding of Isaac) and the tragic tale of Jephthe's daughter, children are literally willing to be sacrificed in service of their fathers' faith commitments. And in the *haftarah* for this very afternoon, from the Book of Jonah, the prophet becomes so aggrieved at the loss of his beloved gourd plant that he says, "I would rather die than live...[I am] so deeply [grieved] that I want to die" (Jonah 4:8-9). Love both makes us want to give ourselves in place of another and, in moments of tremendous loss, can even temporarily take away our will to live. "Be sure to use my years also." Would that we could do just that!

This afternoon we gather together for Yizkor, reciting words of affection and honor for those whom we have loved and lost. While these individuals are in our hearts and minds most, if not all, days their absence is especially pronounced at holiday time when there is an empty seat at the family table, a vacant place next to us in shul, a conspicuous break in the routine with Zayde no longer there to recite Kiddush and the break-fast noodle kugel not tasting quite right without Mom to make it just so. Holidays cause us to remember earlier years, when celebrations were enhanced by their presence, and to mark the passage of time, revealing milestones they never lived to reach. They are opportunities to count our blessings, mourn our losses, and take stock of our lives – all activities which lead us right back to missing them all the more so.

When Michael's sick friend told him, "use my years also," I believe that he was not only bestowing a wish of longevity – may you have the privilege to grow old in a way that I will not – but also a wish of

intensity – since I will not be around, please make your life count for double. And this, I believe, is the wish that our loved ones, now departed, have for us as well. Regrettably, we cannot give others more time by transferring years into their account. But they, perhaps, can give us more time by inspiring us to live the days we have left with increased awareness, purpose, and intention as we carry their memories along beside us. So often, in the face of great loss, we seek to withdraw, retreat, to not feel joy since they're no longer there to share it, to not find love since they're no longer there to give it. When in fact, most often, this is the very opposite of what our dear ones would wish for us, wanting only our continued happiness and success, our help in finishing projects they never lived to complete, our passionate embrace of life since they no longer get to live it. "Be sure to use my years also." Let's make our days count for double in honor of those now departed.

It is not only the Yizkor service itself, each holiday season, which might inspire us to live out the rest of our time on this earth with renewed energy and purpose. Indeed, much of the ritual and liturgy of Yom Kippur is intended to heighten our awareness of human mortality, reminding us that longevity is both unpredictable and finite so we must live each day that we are fortunate to have with meaning. The white *kittels* – or dress robes – of the clergy echo the *tachrichim* – or burial shrouds – traditionally worn by those who have passed; the denial of food and water remind us of our fragility while abstaining from sexual relations precludes the possibility of new life being generated on this sacred day. Most importantly, the Yom Kippur liturgy is punctuated with ten different recitations of the *Viddui*, or Confessional, a prayer which we say not only on the High Holidays but also with the very ill when death is imminent. While the specific words of the *Viddui* are different on Yom Kippur than they are when approaching death, the notion of confession is quite the same. We cannot know with any certainty which day will be our last, so we try our best to ensure that we'll leave this world with a clean slate and a clear conscience.

Confronting our own mortality can be a most sobering thing, as anyone who has faced a serious illness or narrowly escaped a situation of grave danger or simply been present to the vagaries of aging, can tell you. And yet, recognizing our limited time in this world can not only inspire feelings of anxiety and sadness but also feelings of motivation and resolve. If we don't know how much time we have left, we will want to make each day count – to make our days count for double – and we will be less likely to push off plans and goals to an unknowable future. This may mean that we want to embrace a spirit of *carpe diem*, seizing the day – to work a little less and relax a little more, to finally take that trip that's been sitting on our bucket list, to indulge or splurge or take a big risk. But it should definitely mean that we want to embrace a spirit of seizing the opportunity - to set the important relationships in our lives right while we are still able to do so. So often we push off apologies or words of acknowledgement, procrastinate the conversations we really know we should have or the relationships we really know we should fix, plan to visit him later, when it's less busy, to attend to her shortly, when things slow down a bit. Yom Kippur comes to remind us that there's no time like the present. In fact, it may be the only time that we have at all.

And so we now come to Yizkor, turning our minds and hearts to those whom we have loved and lost. We may not be able to put years into their account, but it is on account of them that our years will now measure double. We are using theirs as well.

Zichronam livracha – May the memories of our loved ones be for a blessing, inspiring us to live out our days with increased awareness, purpose, and intention. The Yizkor service now begins on page ___ as we rise while the Torahs are lifted.

