

How in the World? – Yizkor Shavuot 5777

It is said that the people of Rome spoke of the great artist, Michelangelo, as a man with four souls because he excelled in architecture, sculpture, poetry, and painting. His vast skill produced many of the world's most beautiful buildings and statues including, of course, his iconic rendering of the Biblical King David. When Michelangelo was on his death bed, a group of friends gathered at his side. One said sadly, "Michelangelo, how in the world will Rome ever get along without you?" With a weak wave of his hand in the direction of the window, pointing vaguely towards the landscape of the city below, Michelangelo answered: "Rome will never be without me." And so it was and so it remains, over 400 years since the great man's death.

How in the world will we ever get along without you? Those of us who have lost someone dear to us are all too familiar with the impossible question. How in the world will I ever make it through the initial days of grief, my entire life upended by your absence? How in the world will I ever make it through the months that follow, when life has ostensibly returned back to "normal" yet, of course, is anything but. How will I ever be able to celebrate milestones and achievements and times of great joy without you there to share them with me? How will I ever make it through the dark moments without you there by my side for support? One need not have created some of the most famous sculptures ever known to humankind in order to leave a gaping absence when she ultimately passes on; indeed, it is generally the small, everyday moments of connection and intimacy that we miss most about our loved ones once departed more than even the grand gestures or major life accomplishments. How in the world will we ever get along without you? It is so very hard to imagine it.

This morning we gather together for Yizkor, Judaism's sacred hour of remembrance and honor. We call to mind those treasured individuals without whom we thought we could never get along, the loved ones so integral to our very being that life in their absence seems impossible. At Yizkor we feel the full weight of our losses, the quiet missing that accompanies each day invited to claim its full power. And at Yizkor we also marvel, just a bit, at the resilience of the human spirit – the fact that we have, indeed, continued to move forward in the wake of terrible grief. We have found a way to carry on even without our dear ones here beside us.

Some of us this morning are marking losses that are quite new, the pain still fresh and raw, lives not yet fully adjusted to the dramatic change in circumstances. Others of us mourn for those who have been gone many years, patterns and routines long since shifted to accommodate the absence no matter how still deeply felt. Over the years there have been graduations and weddings and births where, despite the missing seat at the table, we surprised ourselves by feeling genuine happiness. There have been difficult decisions that we somehow were able to make on our own, Jewish holidays that we managed to get through even without our favorite seder-leader present, tasks around the house that we've learned to do by ourselves. You'd be so proud that I figured out how to make a meal that involves more than boiling water; you'd be amazed that I actually went down to our place in Florida all on my own for a few weeks this winter; you wouldn't believe it but I've actually become quite good at working the lawn-mower and shoveling snow. Our anniversary was hard this year but the kids were great and took me out to dinner. We really missed you at Thanksgiving but boy, your daughter has come to carve a mean turkey. I wasn't sure where to sit for Shabbat services at first but I moved to be near the Sisterhood ladies and it has actually been quite nice. How in the world will we ever get along without you? It sure hasn't been easy but we're slowly making our way.

When Michelangelo said, “Rome will never be without me,” perhaps there was in his statement a note of hubris, a sense that he alone could transcend the limits of human mortality because of the greatness of his works, but I rather see in the artist’s words a note of comfort. Rome will never be without Michelangelo because he’s left something behind which will endure, a legacy to be enjoyed even after the sculptor passed on. And our friends and relatives, now departed, have done the very same for us. Rather than statues or buildings, our cherished ones have left us with stories and memories, lessons and encouragements, unfinished works for us to help them complete, hopes and dreams for us that we will try our best to realize. And often our loved ones, too, have left us with physical reminders of their presence whether it is letters they wrote to us in our youth or favorite recipes we now make in their honor, a well-worn *tallit* passed down from one generation to the next, a new baby which bears her auntie’s name, a growing toddler whose lopsided smile looks just like his grandfather’s did. We wear their jewelry and don their ties, tell their jokes and give to the charities they valued, keep their pictures on the mantel-piece and wear the bands that they gave to us in marriage. We may miss them dearly and yearn to hug them or laugh with them or listen to their sage advice once more, yet we’re never really without them. They are instead a part of us.

And so this morning we turn to the Yizkor prayers, words of honor for those whom we love so deeply and whom we miss so much. How in the world will we ever get along without them? By carrying their memories close as sources of great strength. *Zichronam livracha* – may those that we recall this day always be for a blessing.

We now rise for the Yizkor service on page _____.