

Yom Kippur 5779/2018
What happens after you die?
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This summer, I had the pleasure of going back to school. In the Navy, we call it “RefTra” or Refresher Training. Yes, even us rabbis need some RefTra every once in a while. For several weeks, I attended Yeshivat Pardes in Jerusalem. Sitting in class in this wonderful non-sectarian, egalitarian Yeshiva in the heart of Jerusalem was an amazing opportunity to reconnect with texts and topics from our faith. One of the philosophy classes I took was called “Jewish Views of the After-Life”, a fascinating topic if only because it was all based on texts and conjecture... no firsthand accounts!

My own views of what happens after we die have been molded from two main sources. One, my studies in yeshiva and rabbinical school. And two, my growing up in Mexico and while not celebrating or observing the Dia de los Muertos, the Day of Dead, this very Mexican feast had a tremendous impact on me growing up and as I formed my rabbinic ideas.

Dia de los Muertos, in Mexico, is a celebration in every sense of the word. Families gather at the graves of their relatives, building beautiful altars of flowers and bringing offerings of the favorite foods of the deceased. The families then spend all night talking to the dead and recounting for them everything that happened during the past year, to catch them up on all the goings-on and gossip of the family. According to this Mexican tradition, the dead will come and visit them to see the altar, eat

the food, and most important, hear their stories... but there is a catch... the dead will come back ONLY if anyone is left in this world that remembers them and can tell stories about them.

I cannot tell you how thrilled I was to see that Pixar's latest movie, *Coco*, is based on this beautiful tradition.

Coco is the story of a little boy named Miguel, from a family of shoemakers, who wants to be a mariachi, but his family forbids it. Many years earlier, Miguel's great-great-grandfather had abandoned his family to become a singer-songwriter... and when Miguel's grandmother, now the head of the family, finds her grandson's guitar, she smashes it. Miguel, furious, does something foolhardy and finds himself magically transported to the Land of the Dead.

While there, he's determined to find his guitar-strumming ancestor, prove his musical chops, and make it back to the land of the living before the end of *Día de los Muertos* while the dead await for someone to remember them so they can come visit. Remember that the conceit is that if someone's picture isn't on an altar, *ofrenda*, that person can never return. Miguel meets someone who desperately wants to see his still-living family... but that will only be possible if Miguel places their photo on the altar before the last person who remembers them dies. It's quite a movie.

We live in a fast-paced world that constantly demands our attention. The regular barrage of headlines makes it hard to remember last week's breaking news, let alone the memories of a lifetime. In a world that moves so quickly, remembrance is

often a liability, especially when our memories hurt. But that is precisely why the tradition of the Day of the Dead has a special place in my heart. This film reminded me of our need to remember, even the painful parts we'd prefer to forget.

Like many of you, I have a love-hate relationship with memories. Memories of my youth, camping with my dad, or sharing a special birthday with my family are co-mingled with horrible memories of my combat experiences. And yet, they are both there, many times popping up when you least expect them.

Watching and re-watching the movie *Coco* provoked in me some thoughtful questions about the significance of memory that as we approach Yizkor, we should perhaps revisit.

Why should we remember? What do we lose by forgetting? And perhaps most importantly, how do we remember the hard things of life without forgetting the beauty in the process?

In a strange way, both Dia de los Muertos and Yizkor remind us that in a way, the deceased depend on their living families to maintain their memory. If lost, the dead dissolve into ethereal dust and drift away, forgotten forever. Forgetfulness is a powerful force both in the present and the afterlife.

The tendency is for us to try to forget the painful memories. No one wants to re-live that kind of pain. But Yizkor also reminds us that removing all memory creates a pain of its own, one that carries consequences for the future. Forgetting what caused us pain also causes us to forget that we have the power, and perhaps the obligation, to change our world so ourselves and others will not suffer in the future. And so, we must reflect on

how do we remember in a way that embraces both the pain and the joy of the past.

All of us reciting Yizkor here, together, resolve the tension... we remember through the support of family and community. Remembering rightly will be hard, but we do not have to bear that weight alone.

The movie *Coco* made me think about relationships in my life that have helped me embrace my past in a way that is both true and also instructive. I remember relatives and friends not only for what they did, but for what they continue to do for me as they inspire and guide me.

On this Yom Kippur Day, I miss my friend and mentor Len Cahan. It's hard for me to look at that side of our sanctuary and not see him sitting there or hearing his voice during the davening. I miss his jokes, his sense of humor and his wisdom on some many different things. Rabbi Cahan is but one of many who we remember during Yizkor. In a way, I want to celebrate Dia de los Muertos, and put together a little altar, and sit all night telling him all that he has missed during this past year. But alas, I know that I really don't have to; every time I remember one of his jokes, or share a piece of his Torah wisdom, he comes to visit and every time we use one of his melodies, he is here.

In the Jewish tradition, we don't built altars with flowers and food; instead, we say of the deceased, "May their memory be a blessing". May their memory and our actions they fostered be the altar we build.

May we all be blessed this coming year, with the words, the wisdom, the laughter and tears of those whom we remember during the recitation of Yizkor. May their memory be a blessing.

Amen.