

*God, help us to remember*

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5783

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

I received a voicemail message at 3:14 PM on Friday, May 21, 2021 that I have not deleted. In fact, until a few days ago, I didn't even want to listen to it. I have gotten a new phone since then-and the unopened voicemail message migrated from the old one to the new one; I've received hundreds of subsequent voicemails, texts, emails that I have listened to, read, and deleted. But not this one. It is all of 13 seconds long. For the past 16 months I saw it there in my voicemail queue, with that blue dot next to it, indicating that it had not been played yet. I wasn't ready to play it. I couldn't bring myself to hear once again the sound of the voice that has been stored in the internal memory of my iPhone for all this time, as well as in the deepest recesses of my heart. Recently though, I decided it was time to listen to it.

The message was from my father-in-law, of blessed memory, who died unexpectedly just a few days after leaving me that message. I have played it several times now. No matter how hard I try, I cannot detect even the slightest hint in his voice that he was ill; I have listened carefully for any inflection in that might have disclosed that death was so near. In fact, it was anything but. The voicemail, like so many from my father-in-law was playful and humorous. He used to tease me about my outgoing message. He would say: "I am sorry I missed your call but it is very important to me," and then, with a slight change in tone he said, "If you have time give me a call back, otherwise I'll talk to you after Shabbat." That's it. 13 seconds. I scrolled back on my calendar at May 21, 2021 to see what in the world I could have been doing that afternoon that prevented me from answering the phone. What I would do to be able to go back in time to pick up that call; What I would do now to have had one more conversation, one more opportunity to talk

to him. There's nothing on my calendar that Friday afternoon. Sometimes you just miss a call.

I think for the first year or so, I refused to play the message because I felt so guilty for missing that call. I felt so ashamed that I forfeited the opportunity to speak to him, that I almost felt that I didn't deserve to listen to his message. But then, over the past several months, I thought that listening to the voicemail might be a capitulation to another fear. The fear of forgetting him. Of course, I'll never actually forget my father-in-law, but I don't want to forget *anything* about him...not one detail, not one facet of his larger-than-life persona. And I certainly didn't want to rely on the assistance of an electronic recording device to hold onto something as precious as the sound of his voice--I wanted to be able to all do that on my own, thank you very much. It's the least I could do for a man who I miss so acutely, so sorely every single day.

Memory is a very Jewish thing. "Remember the Sabbath day," "remember the exodus from Egypt," "remember what that ruthless tribe Amalek did to you when they attacked in the wilderness..." Nearly every Jewish holiday contains a reenactment, a ritual, a script for preserving and perpetuating memory. Moses instructs the Jewish people at the end of his life: *V'ata kitvu et ha'shira ha'zot ve'lamda et b'nai Yisrael*—Write this down! He says to them. Write down this Torah, and teach it to the people of Israel! *Simah be'fihen*, literally 'put it in their mouths, put this Torah on their tongues so they never forget it!' <sup>1</sup> The great historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi counts 169 times the where the Hebrew word *zachor*, remember appears in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Very often, Yerushalmi writes, the

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 31:19

<sup>2</sup> Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. *Zachor; Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, 1989. p. 5

command is not just to remember, but remember and do not forget...*z'chor al tishkach*. Just to be absolutely sure: remember and don't forget!

We go to similar great lengths to remember people. Yizkor, Yahrzeit...there is something about these moments that still have a strong pull on our hearts. In the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur the question we are always asked far more than any other is "What time is yizkor?" We visit the graves of our loved ones, we erect monuments to their memories. We give their names to new babies, new generations in our families.

Jews are masters at the art of memory, and not just in ceremonies and rituals! Judaism has a vast "oral" tradition or "Oral Torah," that includes the Mishnah, the Talmud, countless midrashim that were all preserved and repeated entirely by memory, centuries before a single word was ever written down. This tradition goes all the way back to Mt. Sinai, when Moses was presented with the written text of the Torah but also a whole digest of unwritten interpretations and explanations that he then taught to the Jewish people, and they in turn taught to the next generation in perpetuity. Before there were any libraries of books, there were libraries in the minds of people who committed vast amounts of material to memory. To memorize those teachings and stories and parables and laws was an act of love and devotion. It was considered a concession to human frailty to have to eventually have to write them down.

The truth is that no matter how much we want to hold onto every minute detail, not matter what memory aides or mnemonic devices we employ, we are all susceptible to forgetting. And that brings us to today, to this moment. We usually refer to this service as Yizkor, but the very next word in that memorial prayer is *Elohim*.

*Yizkor Elohim*. May God remember. Not may I remember, or may you remember, or may we remember...May God remember our loved ones who have died. On

Rosh Hashanah, we said that God is *Zocheir et kol ha'nishkachot*, God is “the one who remembers even what we have forgotten.” We said *Atah zocheir ma'asei olam*, “You God remember everything that has ever happened in the world.” *Ki tavi chok zikaron*, “God you’re the one who invented memory to begin with!” So why are here asking a God who remembers everything, who is incapable of forgetting, to remember our loved ones? Doesn’t it go without saying that God remembers them?

I mentioned earlier that *zachor*, the word remember occurs 169 times in the Bible. But the phrase *Yizkor Elohim*, May God remember, only appears four times. What is remarkable about those four times is that in every single instance, remembering is paired with action. God remembered Noah in Genesis 8, and God then rescued Noah’s family and the animals on the ark. God remembered the promise God made to Abraham and because of that God saved his nephew Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. God remembered our matriarch Rachel and God opened her womb so that she could become pregnant in Genesis 30. God remembered the covenant with our ancestors and God freed them from bondage in Egypt in Exodus 2. While human beings may remember something intellectually, when God remembers, God does something about it. Memory for God is a call to action.

When we say *Yizkor Elohim*, I think what we are saying is ‘God, teach us to remember the way You do.’ The very next line in the prayer is *hineni nodev tzedakah b’ad hazkarat nishmato*; I will not only remember my loved one, but I am going to do something good in the world, in this case giving tzedakah, in their memory. Just as God remembers and then acts on that memory, we should turn our memories into actions as well...actions that honor the legacies of our loved ones; actions that increase goodness in the world because of them.

My father-in-law's name was Bob Levinson. In our family, Bob Levinson has become phrase. If you say, "I really pulled a *Bob Levinson*" what you mean is that you killed someone with kindness. My father-in-law always greeted someone who wasn't so friendly or wasn't so helpful with over the top kindness. I can't even count how many times we would watch in amazement as he would be able to extract a smile or a laugh from a previously downcast, un-helpful or unfriendly clerk or waitress or salesperson. Sometimes we say that we had a *Bob Levinson moment*. That means that we expressed so much interest in another person, where they came from, where they grew up, what they do for a living, that by the time the conversation is over, we have made a new friend in the world. And we regularly talk about what Bob Levinson would have done as we try to make difficult decisions...Bob, who refused to carry any debt; Bob who said "if you can't afford it, don't buy it;" Bob who always had the most pragmatic approach to any number of life's conundrums, even when we didn't want to hear it, because he knew he was right. *What would Bob do?* is a mantra we often recite. Yes, we pledge *tzedakah* in his memory, and yes we observe *yahrzeits* and *yizkor* for him. And we also try to remember him in the way that God remembers people...not only in our hearts, but with specific actions that keep him very much alive, and his values interconnected with ours.

As you prepare to remember your loved ones, I certainly hope you will give *tzedakah* in their memory. But I also encourage you to take this time to think about one or two specific actions that your loved one performed in their life that you could incorporate into your life and daily practice. How did they, in their own special way—whether it was how they spoke to others, how they treated other people, what their unique values were in the world—add to the sum-total of goodness in the world. Could you consciously replicate those behaviors in your

life? Could you honor their memories by being more like them, by living the way they did?

I still haven't deleted that voicemail. And I don't think I ever will. It was just his way to give me a gift that keeps on giving. And I am reflecting on how when I first played the message, tears streamed down my face. And now, somehow, those same 13 seconds make me smile. Though I can never go back in time and answer the phone at 3:14 PM on May 21, 2021, what I can do is pledge to live the rest of my life as an answer to that call...to link my memories with words and deeds that keep him and other loved ones who have gone from this world to the next a vital part of life and values.

*Yehi zichram Baruch...* may the memories of all the loved ones we are about to remember be a blessing, and inspire us to many righteous deeds.