

“The Yizkor Suit”

Yom Kippur (Yizkor), September 23, 2015/10 Tishrei 5776

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I heard a story about a little girl who was attending her very first wedding. She asked her mother, “Mommy, why is the bride wearing all white?” Her mother explained that white is the symbol of purity, of something new, of joy and happiness. “This is the happiest day of her life,” she explained. The little girl thought for a moment and they asked, “Well then why is the groom wearing all black?”

I’m wearing all white today in honor of Pope Francis. He accomplished something really extraordinary, you know. He’s made Washington look like Jerusalem on Yom Kippur. People were told not to come to work, the streets are cleared, people are staying home, some schools are even closed...it’s great. So to express my thanks, I decided to dress like the Pontiff himself...

I made an unexpected trip out of town this past weekend. On Saturday night, my little brother proposed to his wonderful girlfriend in Cleveland. He wanted both his and her immediate families to be there for the marriage proposal and to celebrate together afterwards. God-bless my brother, I don’t think he quite realized that the weekend between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is the craziest time of year for his rabbi-brother. And I had to go in on Friday and stay over Shabbat in order to be there for the proposal on Saturday night. Of course, there the crunch of holiday preparations, there was an auf ruf on Shabbat, Religious School started on Sunday, we had the Kever Avot services at both Har Shalom cemeteries...Thankfully my always sensible and wise wife said, “You’re going to Cleveland!” I am grateful to the Hazzan and to Rabbi Irv Elson for filling in here so that I could there with my brother and future sister-in-law for this very special, and hopefully once-in-a-lifetime experience.

After having Shabbat dinner with my parents on Friday night, my mother said, there’s something I want to show you. She left the room for a moment and came back with this. Nice suit right? Did she go clothes shopping for me? Did she buy me a special suit for yontiff? Actually, she explained, this was her father’s suit, my grandfather’s, who I called Papa. My Papa had picked it

out near the end of his 96 years of life, and he requested to be buried in this outfit, shirt, tie, and all. My mother said to me, “I want you to have it.” I laid the jacket down on the table and I opened it to the inside, “Size 44-regular,” my size. Then I took the jacket off the hanger and put it on. A perfect fit. Then I did something instinctive, sort of reflexive. I brought the whole outfit to my face, and I inhaled deeply. My Papa died 4 years ago, and I was hoping to detect his scent; something of his essence still adhering to the fibers of his clothing. It smelled more like the back of a closet than anything that jogged my memories of him. But just clutching the outfit in my hands, putting my arms through the sleeves where his arms used to be, knowing that this suit was perhaps his favorite—since he selected it to be his burial outfit...all of this together made me feel connected to him, even absent the smell of his aftershave.

Turns out that the chevra kaddisha, the Jewish burial society in Cleveland only allow the deceased to be buried in the traditional white linen shrouds, not street clothing. In fact, Jewish tradition considers burial in clothing to be an act of *bal tashchit*...unnecessary wastefulness. Someone could continue to benefit from this perfectly good suit. Not long ago I visited the Shepherd’s Table, an incredible non-profit organization in downtown Silver Spring that provides meals to the hungry and many other services—an eye clinic, legal aid, haircuts, career services, and a large clothes closet, so that the poor who are trying to put their lives back together and get decent jobs can have access to appropriate outfits for their job interviews...and they always have a need for men’s clothes. What a wonderful place to donate previously owned clothing, but putting them in the grave with the deceased doesn’t really help anyone. I certainly understand, though, not giving away a loved one’s clothes immediately. Some cultures, Native American in particular, have a custom of burning the clothing of the deceased soon after they die...especially the clothing the person wore when they actually passed away. It is though that the illness or negative energy surrounding that person’s death actually inhabits their garments, and in order not to pass on that energy to someone else or allow it to linger, the deceased’s clothes must be destroyed. Thank God that is not Jewish tradition. Not only is it even more superstitious than our own *bubba meises*, I think it would literally strips us, the survivors, of an important part of our mourning process.

My mother told me that in the few years following her father’s death, just opening the closet and looking at that suit hanging there gave her tremendous comfort. She too would bring the

clothing close and breath in her father's scent. For her, and now for me, the clothing was a connection, a bond in this world with someone who had passed into the next. I have met many mourners who are not willing to part with their loved one's personal effects for some time after their passing. The American Pulitzer Prize winning poet William Stanley Merwin wrote:

“Your absence has gone through me

Like thread through a needle.

Everything I do is stitched with its color.”

But then, it's like a someone flips a switch, and mourners are all of a sudden ready to pack up the closets, the drawers of clothes, the shoes and belts and ties. For some it happens sooner, for others later. But there is a stage of grieving when we begin to realize that our loved ones are so much more than their possessions; when the memories of our loved ones begin to reside within us, rather than within their belongings. And most importantly, it represents a stage when we have healed enough that we don't need those physical effects to remember or honor our loved ones each and every day; that by donating those items or giving them away we are not discarding *them*, or giving away a part of the person we loved—which we may well have thought closer to the time of their passing.

You know we do engage in our own form of clothing destruction in response to death. It is our custom to tear our clothing, to tear *kriya*, upon receiving news of the death of an immediate relative. Nowadays, when we wear more expensive, designer clothes modern Jews often prefer to tear a symbolic garment, a black ribbon, instead of their shirt, their jacket or their tie. So you might say, how different is that from burying a person's clothes with them? It's not like you're ever going to wear your torn clothes again after shiva... The book of Ecclesiastes in chapter three, made famous in Jewish funeral services as well as by Pete Seeger and *The Byrds* in 1969 says: A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven... In the long list of all the things that there is a time for under heaven the author writes: *Et likroa, v'et lit-por*, a time for ripping and a time for sewing. And so it is permissible according to Jewish law to sew up that tear once you have completed sitting shiva. What a beautiful message... physical expressions of grief, even tearing, ripping, rending, they are appropriate, acceptable, cathartic ways to mourn. But there is also a time to mend, to repair, to recuperate from the agony of loss.

I decided to accept my mother's gift of this suit. The jacket fits; the pants need a bit of alteration. And I'll also wear it, but more as a badge of honor than a garment of grief. When I wear it I will think of my grandfather, how grateful I am that I had him as an active part of my life for so many years—that he got to meet my wife, my children...that he passed on to me a love of yiddishkeit and family. I bet that if I could have asked him: would you rather wear this suit to your grave or leave it for your grandson [the rabbi] to wear it and enjoy it, I'm guessing he'd pick the latter.

In a moment it will be time to recite Yizkor, a prayer of great meaning and power, especially when recited on this holy day. But even as we remember our loved ones today, we do not tear a garment again, we do not reenact the funeral. Instead we allow ourselves to experience the progress and healing we have accomplished since the last time we said Yizkor or the last time we observed a *yahrzeit* for a loved one. Yizkor is also uniquely an act of remembering for the sake of the future...Just as God remembered Noah, and brought him out of the ark; or how God remembered Abraham, and rescued his nephew Lot from the destruction of S'dom, or how God remembered Rachel and gave her a child. In each of these cases in Genesis, remembering is for the sake of the future; for the sake of life.¹ And the words of the prayer remind us that we honor our loved ones by what we do in our lives, today, this year: by giving *tzedakah*, by living lives that reflect our loved one's highest ideals.

The Zohar, Judaism's key mystical text, has a beautiful teaching about the clothing our loved ones wear when they die. It says, "when they leave this world, their days are sown together into radiant garments..." What a stirring image...What our loved ones wear in the world to come is a garment made up of the days of their lives, their experiences, their passions, their values. That is the garment we should try on, that is the clothing we should wear as we recite *yizkor* today, and every day that we remember the precious souls of our loved ones whose physical presence may have left us, but who are with us all the time in so many other beautiful ways...

¹ The Koren Yom Kippur Mahzor, Rohr Family Edition, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Page 758