

Yiskor Sermon – “Memory and Storytelling”

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G'mar chatimah tovah!

I have always had a great appreciation for world history. Even more so, I have valued learning about my own personal family history. Like many Ashkenazi Jews, one of the most central events in the story of my family is the Shoah - The Destruction of European Jewry.

During the war, most of my family was evacuated to the East to flee the full brunt of the clash between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich.

The majority of my family were able to wait out the horrors of the Holocaust and to return back to the Ukraine upon the war's end.

Two of the eldest in my family, my grandfather's grandparents, looked at the voyage ahead of them and said that it would be far too arduous of a journey for two grandparents in their mid-80s.

That decision would prove to be fatal. Two years later, after my family fled the Ukraine, my grandfather's grandparents, Zysel and Ita Minya were murdered.

Who could have imagined that pensioners would be seen as enemy combatants?

I had always known of this story, but I did not know it well enough to share it with anyone else. I only knew the rough parameters. Then when a family member of mine from Israel uploaded a photo of my murdered relatives to the online database of the Yad VaShem Museum, the old story had come to life.

The boundaries of the blurry story that I had only half-known had become clear and fixed. I had fully and without reservation inherited their story.

Although it is not a light thing to carry, it is now a part of my story, and I cannot let it go, nor can I keep it to myself. The time has come for me to share their story as well.

In that moment of receiving this heavy and complicated inheritance, after seeing their photo and understanding what their loss meant for this world, the full impact of their story had hit me in a completely different way than when I had only half-known their names and their faces not at all.

However, while I was still busy trying to assimilate this new image and their full story into my consciousness, I suddenly realized that while I was in Israel just one year prior, the very same person that had uploaded this newly discovered photo was a mere few dozen kilometres away from my apartment in Jerusalem and I did not even know she existed.

Here I was getting so worked up about relatives from my past, while right under my nose were living relatives that I had missed an opportunity to connect with.

In that moment I understood in a visceral way more than ever before how one can best honour their ancestors: we honour the lives of those we loved in the past, by visiting those that we love in the present, telling our own stories, hearing theirs, and sharing about our mutual hopes for the future.

The next time that I went to Israel I made sure to reach out to another grandchild of Zysel and Ita Minya.

So I organized a trip to visit my grandfather's sister. As we discussed our mutual relatives - both those from the past and also those of this generation - we transformed the image of our family from a flat two-dimensional black and white photo into a living, breathing memory.

Through the act of our storytelling, we were able to breathe new life into the lives that were seemingly absent.

There are many aspects within Judaism that reaffirm the importance of face-to-face connection and the transcendent power of storytelling.

When King Solomon built the Holy Temple in Jerusalem he was able to honour the legacy of his father.

King David had such a desire to build the Temple himself he even purchased the land on which it would come to be built as one of his last acts as King.

And at the core of King Solomon's Temple stood the Holy of Holies. And inside of that stood the two cherubim - a sculpture of two faces positioned opposite one another.

It is said that the essence of God emanated from between those two faces which stand across from each other.

The poet Ahad Ha'am once wrote that: "More than Jews have kept *Shabbat*, *Shabbat* has kept the Jews."

I would like to add that: "more than the Jews keeping the tradition of gathering for the sake of storytelling alive, it has been storytelling that has kept the Jewish people alive."

We may be called the "people of the book" but in actuality we have been without a physical book or scroll for most of our history.

Instead, we come from an oral storytelling culture. A culture where we gather together and trade of legends both familial and transcendent.

Coming together from far and wide it was always the act of storytelling that was the glue of our people.

From the Passover Seder to the *B'Mitzvah D'var Torah* sermon - storytelling is the lifeblood of our people. The Hebrew for "story" is *sipur* which is connected to the word "number". In English, as well, giving an account is about making sure the events of our lives were seen, that they mattered, and that they counted.

On this day as we reflect on and share the stories of those from our past, we not only bring their memories to life but we ourselves are enlivened by their memory.

Today marks the first time throughout the Jewish year that we are gathered as a community for this purpose of memory and story.

With each of the four *Yiskor* services, we add another shade to the colourful lives that our loved ones lived.

Though these inheritances may be heavy, we are there for each other and no one person must carry their story alone. For then it would not be a story at all if we had no one else to join us in its telling.

Whether uplifting or heavy on our hearts, we nevertheless share our family story.

Memory without story is like the wick of a *Yiskor* candle but without any oil. It is from our conversations that the flame emerges.

We use today as an opportunity to honour our loved ones. We do this by recalling those from our past and sharing stories with those in our present.

G'mar chatimah tovah!