How We Remember

Yizkor Sermon 2019/5780
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In elementary school, I remember having visitors to class each spring. Like all of the guests in our small little classroom, these people seemed larger than life. They were physically so much taller than us. Their smiles were extra wide. Their laughter was extra joyful. It was likely so because many of these guests were the grandparents of my classmates.

While I didn’t appreciate it at the time, the stories they told matched their appearance. Their stories were profoundly larger than life in the most horrific of ways. I have memories of seeing tattooed numbers on their arms, but being very careful not to stare for too long. I heard stories of escapes from trains headed to the death camps. I heard stories of our guests hiding out in the woods for months at a time. At the time they seemed almost like superhero stories - super heroic stories of survival.

The accounts I heard and the experiences I had of meeting these people were in some ways, like ticking time bombs inside my heart. Their experiences found their way inside, and stayed there, still and quiet, until they finally exploded with their full impact and meaning years later.

In middle school, those same grandparents shared more of their stories with us. I wrote a poem in an English class in 6th grade about a boy who hid from the Nazis in the woods. I remember having vivid dreams in middle school about being chased by Nazis. In eighth grade, by the time I read the Diary of Anne Frank and Eli Wiesel’s “Night” for the first time, I already had within me a deep and resounding awareness of the Holocaust. The books moved me to tears.
To this day, when I learn about the Holocaust or anything about the Second World War, I don't just understand it. I feel it. I feel it because those stories are a part of me. I shook the hands of survivors. I listened to their stories.

I watched tears well up in the eyes of these heroic people as they watched me and my classmates sing songs in Hebrew. I heard them tell us that from the depths of their despair all those years ago, that watching us sing *Hatikvah – the hope* – was their hope realized.

We are at a unique point in history.

A person who was born at the end of the our Civil War in 1865 turned 74 years old when World War II broke out in 1939.

A person who was born in 1945 – the year that World War II ended, is 74 years old today.

This concerns me. Because I know that for me, personally, the Civil War feels like it happened so very long ago. The Holocaust and World War II, contrastingly, is deeply a part of my reality.

We are already seeing that for this generation, World War II is just another war in their History text books.

In 2017, members of the congregation in Tempe Arizona, where I served as assistant rabbi, had put a large menorah outside their home using PVC piping. One night, a few teens dismantled the menorah and reassembled it into the shape of a swastika.

During that same year, students in Atlanta were suspended, and some were expelled, when photos of a drinking game that they titled “Jews versus Nazis” surfaced online. In the pictures, students posed, smiling, in front of beer cups in the shape of a swastika.

There is no doubt in my mind that these acts are atrocious and they are anti-semitic. AND, I believe that these also are examples of what happens as time marches away from any particular moment.
These teens who did remarkably stupid things knew enough about the Second World War to find their despicable act amusing, but they clearly did not appreciate the depth of the horror that a swastika represents.

When they learned about World War II, it was just another war in their high school history textbook. No different than the Civil War or the War of 1812 or the Revolutionary War. The Nazis were just another group from long ago. And out in Tempe Arizona, it was likely they had met only a handful of Jews in their lifetimes, or perhaps none at all.

We, the Jewish community, are facing an uphill battle. Sooner than later, holocaust education will no longer include bringing in survivors. Because in one more generation, there will be no survivors left to bring in. We’ll rely on video and on books.

But one day, no one will be able to shake the hand of a survivor.

This issue does concern me deeply, but at this time of Yizkor, as we gather here to REMEMBER – to remember our loved ones, and to remember that we are a part of something greater than ourselves, I am full of hope. To quote the Psalmist, and to take his words a bit out of context...

“\textit{I am not afraid, because YOU are with me.}”

You are here with me for YIZKOR. Which means that on our most important and holiest day of the year, we the Jewish People take time to REMEMBER.

During Yizkor, we acknowledge that which the Jewish People, our friends and our families, have known forever.

We acknowledge that remembering is hard. We acknowledge that our story stretches back millennia, and that time marches forward. We affirm that despite the difficulty, it is our responsibility; it is our honor, to remember. We do this together, and we the Jewish People remember in a very specific way.
To REMEMBER is different than to RECALL.

To RECALL is to call to mind.
Any of us can do that on our own.
Anytime, anywhere, we can hear a song, or smell a certain scent, and we can immediately reminisce about a time, about a place, about a person.

But to REMEMBER is different.
To remember is communal.
To remember is to re-build.

To REMEMBER is to RE - - MEMBER
It is to cobble back together. To RE MEMBER is to reconstruct something that was once whole.
We, as individuals, are here to reassemble our broken hearts. We are here to mend wounds. We are here to grieve losses. We are here to hold memories close.

And as we travel down our own paths,
We, collectively, are involved in the grand project that has been ongoing since the birth of the Jewish People. In the generations after we have been torn apart, we rebuild, we recreate, we RE - - MEMBER.

After the Destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, we built a second one even larger than the first.
After the destruction of the second Temple, we built with words and with texts. We made the Talmud. We made Midrash.
After the Crusades we rebuilt communities all throughout Europe.
After generations of isolation in Europe we built strategies to integrate into the greater society while maintaining our Jewish identity – this led to among so much else, the creation of the Reform Movement.

And out of the Dreyfus Affair, out of the Pogroms of Europe, out of the dreams of Theodor Herzl and Achad Ha'am and Rav Kook, undeterred by World War, we built the Jewish State of Israel.

The guests who visited my classroom all those years ago, in some ways they were larger than life. In other ways, they were like any other grandparent. They were stopping by their children’s classroom to drop off blocks to play with. But instead of blocks made of wood or plastic, their blocks were made of memories. We, the Jewish people not only RECALL. we RE MEMBER. We build. We create. Through memory.

How will we, this generation, ensure that those in the future will preserve the memories of those we have lost? How will we, this generation, ensure that our story lives on not only in our minds, but in the minds of those who could easily dismiss the magnitude of our pain, of our loss, and of our achievements?

We have done it before. We will do it again.

At the very beginning of these 10 days of tshuvah I asked us all to do something. At the end of these 10 days of tshuva I will remind you that you are off to a great start. You are doing something right now. We are REMEMBERING. And through this process, we are building.
I wait with great anticipation to see what we the Jewish People will, God willing, build together in our times. May we build in honor of those who we are remembering today. May our REMEMBERING be a testament to the tragedies and joys of the Jewish People, and may that which we build be an everlasting monument to our People of generations past, present, and future.

May we be inscribed and sealed in the book of life. And may we always remember.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah