A few years back, my son, Mark and I were flipping through mine and Rina's wedding album. As I turned each page, tears welled up in my eyes as I saw the smiling faces of family and friends no longer with us. I could hear their voices and I could feel their warm embraces from that very special day in my life. The photographs are such wonderful prompts for invaluable memories.

It’s funny how, sometimes, looking back at the past can propel our minds forward. Mark was around four years old at the time, and Sophie had just recently turned one. As I looked at pictures from not that long ago, I imagined who my children will one day, God willing, grow up to be. I thought about the things that they, God willing, will one day accomplish. I even wondered who they might make a wedding album with one day.

As I was day-dreaming, I encountered a familiar feeling that has come-on-and-receded from time to time like a wave, ever since I began my parenting journey. As I flipped through the pages of my wedding album, I was not only coming face to face with those no longer with us. I was face to face with my own mortality.

When we fast forward time to imagine children all grown up, it’s easy to forget that we grow up, and grow old, too. And I expect that the more life experience we have, the more we realize just how quickly it goes.

As I sat there dreaming into the future, Mark asked me a question in a way that only kids can. He asked me a question so innocently and with such genuine curiosity that it completely shifted my perspective in that moment:

“Dad, where was I at your wedding?”
A big smile came across my face, and in a moment of unpreparedness I gave him an answer that I have been thinking about ever since:

“You were a part of the Mystery.”

The answer has stuck with me because that beautiful word, “mystery” has come in handy a whole lot over these past few years when fielding the questions that our young ones ask us.

When was God born? What’s beyond the Universe? What does God look like?

“It’s a mystery.”

Not only is it “A” mystery. But it’s “THE” Mystery - with a capital M. What is God? What is Adonai? What is “HaMelech HaKadosh? - The Holy King?” These are names our people have used for centuries to describe “The Mystery.” And recently, the reverse has been true for me. “Mystery” is a word I use more and more, to describe God.

The questions that children ask us are often the questions we are uncomfortable answering for the simple fact that we never get to find out the answers ourselves.

Why do people die?

Why are we here on earth for such a short time?

What is the meaning of life?

Many of us search for the answers as young people. Yet many of us become less curious as adults. We become accustomed to the fact that we will never know for sure. And there is a danger in this. We might become more comfortable with not knowing, and perhaps less aware, of the mystery of it all.

The great ancient religions of the world have put a huge emphasis on the afterlife. For thousands of years we have fed the human urge to know what lies beyond our world by reading our ancient stories and performing our ancient rituals. While Judaism places huge
emphasis on this world, we too have the concept of “Olam Habah” the world to come. And much ink has been spilled in rabbinic literature about what happens to us after we die.

This year, at this Yizkor service, inspired by my son’s question, I want to ask you to try something. As we are here remembering our loved ones, try as best as you can in this moment to resist the urge to think about where our loved ones have gone after they left this world. Try not to consider, for a moment, how long it has been since they died. Rather, consider for a moment the amount of years before they arrived on this earth. Where was your loved one, where were all of us? for the billions of years before the date of our birth? We were presumably where my son was on the night of my wedding. It was, and it remains, a mystery.

The Torah begins not with the letter Alef- the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. But rather the letter Bet. The second letter. The Jewish mystics of old tell us that the shape of the letter Bet – which looks like a bracket – reminds us that we cannot know what came before that letter. That what came before the beginning of the world is a mystery. But that did not stop the ancient mystics from wondering. They wrote a story to help explain the beautiful mystery of our existence.

The story goes that before God said “Let there be light,” there was light bottled up in vessels. Vessels that burst open – that shattered apart – and light rushed through and flooded the universe. Our job in the world, according to the medieval Jewish mystics, is to repair the vessels. We do this through mitzvot and acts of kindness.

Like clay vessels smashing on the ground, our lives are shattered when the people we love leave this world. But imagine, if you can, how much more of a tragedy it would have been, if they never came into our world to begin with. The brokenness of loss is profoundly painful, but if we are blessed to be remembering people who were kind to us, who brightened our days, who made us laugh, who made everything just a bit more beautiful simply by walking into the room. Then even though our world feels broken without them, and perhaps precisely BECAUSE our world feels broken without them, it means that they left this world a
little less broken than when they entered into it. There are fewer shards of the ancient vessels lying on the ground, because they were here.

I want to also honor those who are remembering people with whom the relationships were not perfect, or not good at all. The people who knew more brokenness than most. To you, I say that while there are those who leave this world more broken than they found it, by being together today – by remembering together, we pray that you are a little bit more whole, because we are all remembering together.

The Torah and our ancient texts are a collection of beautiful narratives and poetry. Lessons and wisdom. They are the teachings of those whose hearts were open to, and aware of, the mystery of the world. We cherish our sacred texts because they are a response to our bewilderment when we stare into the skies and when look at the wonder around us. We cherish our loved ones for the same reason. Because we, too, are products of the mystery. Like light travelling from a star, millions of light years away, our loved ones also are somehow somewhere between time and space, between existence and whatever is beyond that. Certainly beyond our understanding.

When we consider the ultimate mystery, and then contrast it with the fact that, out of nowhere, suddenly we do exist. We can perhaps appreciate our loved ones in a new way. We can appreciate what a blessing it is - what a miracle it is – that they arrived and lived life here in this world.

Today, we think of them. The amalgamation of just enough matter, put together in just the right way, to be a human being. To be a blessing to us and to our world. We remember their smiles, their sayings, the lessons they taught us. We remember what made them laugh and the way it felt to be around them. And for some of us, we remember the impact they could have made on us, we remember the stories we were told about them, even if we don’t remember them from personal memory. We are heartbroken by loss, but what a blessing it is, that they were here.

When we observe Yom Kippur we remind ourselves of that which is beyond us. We remind ourselves that there is a force in the universe, and throughout nature, that we do not
fully understand, yet we affirm as Jews that this Grand Force of our universe is worthy of praise.

Yizkor, however, is slightly different. We do not gather to be reminded. We come to Yizkor to remember. On Yom Kippur we are reminded of that which we cannot fully know through our prayers, but at Yizkor we remember those we knew so well. Their favorite foods, to their favorite songs. There is no mystery about it. We saw them. We heard their voices. We smelled their perfume. Our loved ones who we remember today on Yom Kippur are no longer here, but taking time to remember gives us the certainty that they remain with us, so long as we have breath within us.

Yizkor is not only the name of a service. It is a statement. Yizkor – He will remember. We remember our loved ones and the life they lived because they are a part of us. The memories they left us with, live within us. God will remember because God is one of the many names we have for the mystery of the world. We were a part of that mystery for billions of years. We got here. And those who have died, have returned. And so, Hu Yizkor – He will remember.

G’mar Hatima Tovah.