

Yom Kippur 5781

What is Essential?

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I've fallen and I can't get up! How many of us feel that way right now- in this broken and isolated world that we live in? When just a little earlier in our service, Cantor Shifman chanted the great Aleinu prayer- each of the clergy got down on our hands and knees- prostrating fully before the open Ark- laying down on the ground re-enacting the ancient Biblical petitions of Moses and Aaron falling face first with fervent pleas before G-d begging for mercy, compassion, safety, health, protection and peace but then what followed this year was different- in the past- there have always been helping hands literally reaching into my armpits- lifting me up off the floor like angels or better yet like offensive linemen picking up their sacked QB or powerlifters with a dumbbell- standing me up again, setting me right-, steadying me on my own 2 feet- already a little weak from a full morning of intense prayer and an empty stomach- you see- every other year- you are here to lift me up- technically it is one of our ushers or officers on the bimah- but who would help me in this most difficult year of the pandemic? I thought I was lost, I thought I was alone, I thought I had to do it all by myself, but then I realized that we are in this together, in fact, this year we can lift each other up more than ever.

The opening word of the Aleinu prayer translates best as- "It's on us"- it is our duty and responsibility, for sometimes obligations can weigh us down or come crashing down on us and sometimes they can lift us high- l'eila u'leila- to even greater heights. The Aleinu prayer one of our

oldest and most ancient was originally just recited on the high holidays- it is written in the plural because we are in this together- we share responsibility- and we are here on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar- on Yom Kippur- the day when we are closest to G-d and closest to each other-

and even if we can't physically stand side by side- or sit in our same seats at shul- thanks to technology we are still together- we even made sure our hearts are beating as one- as we beat our chest in rhythm to the ashamnu- confessing our mis-steps- whether we used the traditional words of our machzor- or modern-day confessions written for this year- asking forgiveness for only wearing pajama bottoms even today, for the sin of not wearing our mask when out in public, for the sin of hoarding toilet paper, and more seriously for not standing up against racial injustice, the for losing hope- we beat our chests resetting and recommitting to G-d, recommitting to ourselves and each other- we made sure we are recalibrated and in sync.

This year- the word essential has taken on new meaning- during these past 6 months- we have designated essential workers, essential businesses, essential groceries and cleaning products- today is the most essential day of the year when we ask ourselves the most essential questions.

In difficult times, Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav would advise his followers- Don't fall into despair and give up. He'd yell out- Gevalt! Don't be afraid. It is essential to have hope. He'd tell them stories of lost princesses found by their family or travelers, he'd advise them that everyone has a purpose, a mission to fulfill in this world and remind them that like the rise and fall our bodies we take during the kedushah prayer- when we go up on our tippy-toes and sink low- everyone

experiences a fall before we rise up to greater heights. Ikar is the Hebrew word for Essential- and it appears in a favorite song and teaching of his- Kol HaOlam Kulo Gesher Tzar Moed- all the world is a narrow bridge- V'ha'ikar lo lefached klal- but the essential thing is not to be afraid.

The essential questions we ask today are: How can we move forward, overcome, make it through this time of isolation, despair and unrest? How do know we are never alone? How can we make it a better year?

We can learn from Natan Sharansky, our hero, Russian Jew, Refusenik, activist, former Member of Knesset and leader of the Jewish Agency. In his new book, Never Alone- co-written with Gil Troy, he tells how he survived years in KGB prison, 9 years in the Soviet gulag and hundreds of interrogations. Separated from his new bride who escaped to Israel, Natan Sharansky shares his essential secret to survival in isolation- the answer is connection- he relied on his community. He writes: "I went back in my mind to the world in which I had lived, which I knew so well. From my jail cell, the community had never looked more united. I thought of every living bridge who connected me. They would not forget me. They would not abandon me. I trusted them now as I had trusted them then." Enduring more than 400 days in a sensory deprivation chamber, he writes: "I saw myself as part of the global Jewish community- part of each one of you- and that restored my self-confidence and optimism."

Yom Kippur was an essential day for Natan Sharansky. He writes: "I started my hunger strike on Yom Kippur in 1982- my timing was deliberate- I knew that (even though I couldn't see them or be with them) I knew that millions of Jews were fasting with me- a feeling of

unity that no one could take away from me. As everything vital ebbed out of my body, I only had enough strength to hold onto one feeling- the confidence that I was never alone. And after my 110 day hunger strike, I won the right to send mail and wrote a letter to my wife including these words, “In addition to Newton’s law of the universal gravitational pull of objects, there is also a universal gravitational pull of souls, of the bond between them and the influence of one soul on the other. With each word we speak and each step we take, we touch other souls and have an impact on them.”

Sharansky teaches us that we have the power to influence each other even when we are apart- even in isolation- through connection and community- the knowledge that we are part of something larger than ourselves- the gravitational pull of souls together- we always have each other right here with us- even if we can’t see them.

Today, we can learn from Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg who taught us the essential way to live in a complex and broken world- with trust- by building relationships with those we don’t seem to agree with at all- who see the world differently than us. You’ve probably seen the picture of the larger than life Conservative Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and the short in stature and soft-spoken Liberal Justice Ginsburg riding atop an elephant in India. Justices Scalia and Ginsburg were a mis-matched pair in so many ways- they couldn’t agree in the courtroom but they actually were the best of friends- they shared opera ticket subscriptions, ate their meals together and had a deep respect for each other. Justice Ginsburg when asked how they were able to maintain a friendship despite profound differences, she answered: “We know that even though we have sharp disagreements on what the Constitution means, we have trust.”

And Justice Scalia's son recently shared the story about how his father would buy roses for Justice Ginsburg on her birthday. Seeing him with the roses, Judge Jeffrey Sutton once asked, "So what good have all these roses done for you? Name one five-four case of any significance where you got Justice Ginsburg's vote." Scalia replied, "Some things are more important than votes." Justice Ginsburg said that before she submitted the majority position in a ruling, she'd first receive the dissenting opinion from Scalia, and it would help her write her own- sharpen her argument- open her eyes to new insights to make her own case better.

They were a modern Hillel and Shammai, the great rabbis of the Mishnah who rarely agreed, always argued but had the deepest level of friendship and respect. Even though they had different ideas of what was kosher, they ate at each other's home and their children married the others. Hillel always taught Shammai's position first- but both respected the other- and were considered equal leaders, the greatest rabbis of their generation. How can we ensure better days are ahead? We must build bridges of understanding- to cross the seemingly impassable divides in our society- to see the other and live together as one. Trust is essential right now.

The third essential resource we have is memory, Yizkor- the ability to remember those we loved the most, learned the most from, continue to be inspired by and live for- carry on and lift us up. But this is not like any other year. Truly, every one of us could say Yizkor this year- for who hasn't experienced loss.

Postponed weddings. Virtual graduations. Empty Holiday tables. No extended family hugs or even visits. Vacations cancelled, Schooling from home. Job loss, financial insecurity- empty cupboards- not sure when help will come.

There are those in our congregational family who have experienced tragedy- buried loved ones all alone with no one to hold them up- no shoulder to cry on- some not even able to be present at the funeral service - sheltering at home or in quarantine. Sitting shiva alone or in a virtual zoom square. Not being able to say goodbye- to be at the bedside of a loved one, holding their hand, stroking their head in their last days.

So many of us are heartbroken. The Kotzker Rebbe taught that the only whole heart is a broken one and that healing only begins when we acknowledge that we are broken.

This year, we have lost so many in our world- including so many that touched our lives and inspired us. Rabbi Aaron Panken wrote that: “the meaning of the Memorial prayers we say today at yizkor are not simply a prayer for the dead but a pledge from us the living, a motto that in our life, we continue where they left off- a promise by us to have the courage to continue on the path they forged that lay before us.”

This year, in addition to those in our community and family- we remember Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg- who fought for equality, justice and upheld the constitution, who brought dissents and bridged divides.

We remember Representative John Lewis- civil rights leader and our moral voice.

We remember our essential frontline workers like Samantha Hickey- a Southern Idaho nurse practitioner known as a Sherlock Holmes diagnostician for children’s illnesses- only 45 years old, Samantha died from Covid- infected by a young patient she was treating.

We remember Rabbi Joseph Neumann murdered in the anti-semitic attack on the Chanukah house party in Monsey, NY, succumbing to stabbing wounds after 3 months in a coma. A man known for

committing his life to Torah study- usually having 7 volumes of Talmud open on his kitchen table never stopping from learning even to eat.

We remember Ahmaud Arbery shot while jogging on the street simply for the color of his skin.

We remember Detective Joseph Seals shot while protecting our Jewish brothers and sisters in the Jersey City Kosher Grocery store attack.

We remember the more than 204,000 Americans lost to COVID-19, 204,000 lives ended before their time.

We remember the victims of Systemic Racism and Police Brutality, of Anti-Semitism and Hate, of terrorist attacks in Israel and natural disasters, hurricanes, wild fires and earthquakes.

Our losses this year have become compounded- one loss heaped upon another.

Usually just after this sermon- the doors would open and those with no obligation to recite Yizkor, feeling grateful for the family still with us- would leave and stand in the Atrium, walk through the Courtyard- kibitzing and reconnecting- while a smaller segment of our congregational family would remain in the sanctuary- huddling closer- standing while the ark is opened to recite the memorial prayers- remembering parents, brothers, sisters, spouses and G-d forbid children no longer with us, extended family and close friends- talking with them, asking for guidance, thanking them-- and saying kaddish for the 6 million murdered in the Holocaust, the victims of terror attacks and soldiers of the IDF.

Nothing is as it should be this year- this year of online services, virtual connections- Traditionally, if one's parents are still living- we leave for yizkor- is this the year to make an exception to recall our losses- to

remember all those gone but not forgotten in our lives and our world- the compounded losses from these past 6 months of sheltering in place- and this year of brokenness?

Yizkor is more than just recalling a memory- we believe when we recall them- it changes our trajectory- points out the way for us to follow- sets us on the right path. When we remember those defining moments, those most precious people that touched our lives, guided us, and still point the way and in that way- they still live on in us.

Neuroscience even teaches that our cells keep track of past encounters but their ability to remember is only a by product of their ability to change- meaning that memory is an active and living process. The more we remember- the more we build new connections with our past and those relationships are kept alive within us. Yizkor is essential- to recover all that has been lost.

Ikar is the Hebrew word for Essential- and it appears in that song and teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav- Kol HaOlam Kulo Gesher Tzar Moed- all the world is a narrow bridge- V'ha'ikar lo lefached klal- but the essential thing is not to be afraid. This Yom Kippur- Aleinu- it is on us to do the most essential tasks- to lift each other up- to remember we are never alone- we have long lasting connections- an amazing community by our side- we aspire to build bridges and regain trust- and to honor those no longer with us but in our hearts forever. If we do these, then we have nothing to fear- we will be together again - hopefully long before next High Holidays- standing together- shoulder to shoulder- hearts beating as one in this sanctuary with our fourth essential resource- hope!



G'mar Chatima Tova- May we all be sealed in the book of life for a year of health, blessing, safety, happiness and peace.