

**Yizkor Sermon**  
Shavuot 5781  
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Last week, I spent some time outside doing some gardening work. As I skimmed off the top layer of earth, I kept uncovering small holes in the ground. And as I peered into these holes, I saw that each one contained a cicada nearly ready to emerge from its 17-years below ground. By now, I imagine that most of you have seen your first cicada of the season. Brood X is expected blanket our area in what *The Washington Post* has described as “cicada-Palooza.” In some places, there could more than a million cicadas in just one acre—that’s about 25-30 per square foot. Once they emerge, they will live amongst us for only two to four weeks. During this time, they will do some of their life’s most important work: they will court, they will mate, they will lay eggs, and those eggs will hatch into nymphs that burrow into the ground and which will emerge once again seventeen years from now.

I will be honest—I detest creepy, crawly things. I *am* the one in our house charged with the responsibility of capturing and removing all such pests, but that is only because someone else in my house enjoys that job even less than me! And, admittedly, I have not yet experienced a true emergence of Brood X as they do not have the same presence in New Jersey, which is where I was when the parents of this current group emerged into our world. But I am fascinated and captivated by the lifecycle of the cicada, and by considering carefully how our perspective on life may be dramatically shifted by looking at theirs.

The lifespan of the cicada is about 17 years, or 884 weeks. As fully grown cicadas, they spend about 4 weeks above ground. That is about one half of one percent of their entire lifespan! The remainder is spent beneath the earth, out of our sight and entirely separate from

our existence. And within that brief span of time that they live amongst us, they experience some of the greatest events of their lives. Without these four weeks, or one half of one percent of their lives above ground, there would be no story to tell. Despite the brevity of their presence as part of our experience, they have an indelible impact on the world, with a past and a future that hinges on this brief moment in time that they spend as part of our world. From our perspective, the meaningful part of their lives is a but a small blip on the timeline of nature, but that small blip is meaningful, impactful, and memorable. If we look at the emergence of Brood X in this way, perhaps we can move past our discomfort with the creatures themselves, and instead be awed by the world, remembering that these too are part of God's creation. If we can do that, then perhaps we can shift our own understanding of time and space, and appreciate more deeply that moments do not belong exclusively to the past, but rather they are ours to bring forward with us into the present.

In Judaism, we have many examples of how a brief moment in time is brought from the past into the present, in order to imbue the past with meaning and to help us shape the present according to that meaning. Today, on Shavuot, we celebrate the festival of first fruits. In the ancient world, Israelites would bring their *bikkurim*, the first fruits of their labors, to the Temple in Jerusalem as an offering. This offering demonstrated the bounty of their early harvest and affirmed their faith in the produce yet to come. But the act of bringing one's first fruits was not done in silence. Rather, there was a liturgical element to this annual appearance at the Temple. With your fruit basket in hand, you were instructed to recite the following verses from the Torah: *"My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt*

*harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to Adonai, the God of our ancestors, and Adonai heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. Adonai freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Adonai, have given me” (Deuteronomy 26:5-10).*

These six verses tell an abridged version of the first two books of the Torah: We went down to Egypt, became enslaved, we were liberated, brought here, and now we say thank you! But do not forget, the generation that entered the Land of Israel was not the generation enslaved in Egypt. And the subsequent generations who brought their *bikkurim* to the Temple had been born as free people in the Land of Israel! The story, therefore, represents a moment in the past (or perhaps a series of moments from the past), but the Torah instructs us to reach back into the past, and bring these moments with us into the present. We may not have been there as individuals, we may not have experienced all of this on our own, but those moments were the building blocks of our nation, our people, and our faith. They may have been brief, but they were impactful. Historically, they may be part of the past, but in terms of our culture, faith, and religion, they are essential to our existence today.

Towards the end of the Torah, Moses speaks to the people on God’s behalf and says, “*I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before Adonai our God and with those who are not with us here this day” (Deuteronomy 29:13-14).* In the Talmud (Shevuot 39a), the rabbis interpret these verses to suggest that everyone stood at Sinai, all Jews who ever were and all who ever would

be, stood before God and Moses on that day and entered into the covenant. In this way, the rabbis of the Talmud take that moment from our past and place it in the present, making us part of that moment in time. You and I did not actually, historically speaking, stand at Sinai. It was a moment in time, a brief one, and we have memorialized that moment and brought it forward with us into the present. The historical moment of Sinai is in the past, but the theologically meaningful moment of Sinai is ever-present, and it is with us even today.

I like to apply this same model to the way in which we memorialize our loved ones who have physically departed from this earth. Looking back, their time spent with us is so brief in the grand scheme of time and history. But the brevity of that experience does not, in any way, diminish the indelible impact that they had on this world—on us as individuals, on our families, on their friends, and even on the arc of history itself. We constantly reach back into the past, and bring into the present our memories of loved ones who have passed, of our relationship with them, of what they taught us, and of how they changed us. We bring our loved ones from the past into the present to sit beside us when we need company, to counsel us when we need advice, and to listen to us when we just need to vent. However brief our time together may have been, they are still with us today. The time that one spends on this earth in the company of others is not a determining factor when it comes to the strength of their legacy. As Jews, we know how to reach into the past and bring moments of import with us into the present.

In a few moments, we will rise to recite the Yizkor memorial prayers. For some, especially those recently suffered the loss of a loved one, this can be a painful moment. My prayer is that this Yizkor prayers can be a moment for us all to remember: to remember our loved ones and the lessons they taught us, to remember how our loved ones shaped who we

are today, and to remember how our loved ones transformed their world, and thereby, our world as well. But in Judaism, remembering is not only about recalling a moment from the past; remembering is about reaching back into the past, and bringing that moment into the present. As we bring the memories of our loved ones into this space, may we all be comforted with them at our sides, and may we honor their legacy by demonstrating to them that they are with us today.