

**Sermon | Yom Kippur Yizkor**  
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“There are three deaths,” David Eagleman writes in his book, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. “The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time.”<sup>1</sup> In this tale, death is not a moment, but a process that takes place over time and in stages. Departing from this world is one step along a journey, and thus life is defined by more than our existence here in this world with a breathing body and a living soul. If the boundaries between death and life are not so black and white, then perhaps we in the land of the living have not entirely lost our loved ones who have died; they have only experienced these first two deaths, and it is our duty to prevent them from reaching the third.

As you may have surmised, there are voices in the Jewish tradition that similarly understand death, leading us to acknowledge that death is not a moment in time, but a process that takes place over time and in stages. We even have terminology and laws about someone who is *near* death; such a person is referred to as a *סוגו*. We are instructed to treat that individual as if they are fully alive and well. We do not make funeral preparations in their presence, and we do not begin the process of mourning. Nevertheless, we know (and sometimes even they know) that death is imminent, and thus we provide them with the greatest comfort and care that we can afford them.<sup>2</sup> After the moment of death, but before the body is interred in its final resting place, the Sages proffered the notion that the soul departs from, but stays close to, the physical body. Rav said to Rav Shmuel bar Sheilat, אַחִים בְּהֶסְפִּידָא ,

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<sup>1</sup> David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*, “Metamorphosis.”

<sup>2</sup> Sulkhan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 339:1.

הַיְזְכוֹר, “Stir the hearts of those who gather to hear my eulogy, because I will be standing there listening!”<sup>3</sup> The souls of the departed do not begin to leave this world until after the burial is complete, which is why we eulogize our loved ones standing beside their caskets. This accounts for some of the practices that we observe during this period of time, and the preference that this time be kept to a minimum. This time between death and burial is frustrating for the soul because it is still tied to the physical body and yet cannot animate it. A *shomer*, or a guard, must always sit beside the body, reciting psalms to comfort the soul.

Even after interment, the soul is not fully relieved of its place in this earthly realm. The Zohar describes how the soul of the deceased flutters back and forth from the grave to the *shiva* home for the seven days of intense mourning after the burial.<sup>4</sup> The mourning customs, the recitation of *kaddish*, the gathering of family and friends to offer comfort, all of these reveal to the soul that they have not been forgotten—that the family carries lasting memories and significant stories of their time on this earth.

This period aligns with Eagleman’s story and his understanding of the period between the second death and the third: the time between the moment when the body is interred, and the last recollection of that person fades from this earth. The rituals and rites of Judaism are aimed at extending this period of time indefinitely; none shall face that third and final death because in Judaism, we remember. Judaism is about memory, capturing the narratives of our loved ones and ensuring that they have the staying power to be propelled into the future. This is why we recite Yizkor. This is what we do when we name our children after our relatives—we

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<sup>3</sup> Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 153a.

<sup>4</sup> Zohar, Vayechi, 218b-219a.

are taking the past into the present, and propelling it into the future. The person should never meet that third death, for they will always be remembered.

You may remember that a few years ago in my Rosh Hashanah sermon, I told you all that you have too much stuff, and that it was time to clean out the clutter from your homes, to create a space that was sacred and special for you and your family. And then we faced a pandemic, which drove us into our homes, and suddenly, looking around, we all needed more stuff—stuff to keep us connected, stuff to enable us to work productively from home, and stuff that would keep us safe when we had to go out. The truth is, some of our stuff is important. That which we held on to after we purged our homes of the things that did not bring us joy, that which remained was most precious. Family heirlooms, objects that bring us back in time to a particular place, those are the things to which we hold on, for those are the things that remind us of the meaning of our lives and the lives of our loved ones.

This past April, the *New York Times* curated a virtual memorial, “What Loss Looks Like,” for those we have lost during the pandemic—both those who died from COVID and those who died of other causes.<sup>5</sup> Being unable to mourn in the ways of our various traditions, the *Times* created this memorial as a place for people “to acknowledge our collective losses.” Each loss is catalogued as a photograph of a memento, along with a description about the meaning that it carries. The ones that caught my attention, of course, were the Jewish objects: a *tallit*, a *kiddush* cup, and a necklace with a *Magen David*, a Star of David. But there were also eyeglasses, articles of clothing, a KitchenAid mixer, and various other objects.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/well/covid-death-grief-loss.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>.

Other than the cost of the raw materials, these objects are not inherently valuable or meaningful. Yes, the Judaica is meaningful to me because Judaism is important to me, and therefore I project a value upon these items. But so many of the other objects do not have value for me, because they are not mine, nor were they the belongings of my loved ones. The Kiddush cups have value for Amy Lustig, because they were gifts from her father, Sylvin Wolf, who she remembers singing Kiddush at their Shabbat table with family and friends. The necklace with a Star of David pendant has value for Stephanie Kanowitz, because she bought the necklace for her mother more than three decades ago. It is not the objects themselves that carry meaning, but the stories they carry of the people we loved. If we can hold on to those objects, then we keep their stories alive, and we keep them from facing that final death.

Six years ago, the *Times* did something similar for objects recovered from the wreckage of the World Trade Centers after the horrific attacks of 9/11—Port Authority police vehicles, PATH railway cars, and other “artifacts” to remember the fateful events of that day.<sup>6</sup> Few, if any of these objects, have meaning in and of themselves. Their meaning is derived from the stories behind them, from the memories that they evoke and the lessons that they teach. No, the objects are not *the* person, but they tell one part of a person’s story, one small reminder of the life that they lived, and that object may be the only physical, inanimate manifestation left of them in this world. And because of this, our memory of them endures and they are still with us.

Our tradition recognizes that tangible objects have this incredible value because of the stories they evoke. The Talmud mentions in a few different places that the shattered pieces of

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/11/nyregion/911-artifacts.html>.

the first set of tablets, the *שִׁבְרֵי לוחות*, were placed in the ark, alongside the second set.<sup>7</sup> The Talmud suggests that this was the case because the pieces of the Tablets, even once they were broken, maintained their sanctity. That is an interesting argument with *halakhic* implications, but I believe there is something else going on here. The broken tablets were kept in the ark alongside the complete tablets because they tell an important story. As you may recall, the Israelites constructed the Molten Calf because they feared that Moses would not return to them. They very quickly lost faith in their newfound leader, and assumed the worst. They grew impatient, and they panicked, and they acted as if God had not just liberated them from Egypt with signs, wonders, and miracles. When Moses learns of this, he rushes down the mountain and, in a fit of rage, he smashes the tablets bearing the words of God. It could not have been easy for Moses to pick up all of those pieces. But God gave both Moses and the people a second chance. The shattered pieces set beside the complete ones were not in and of themselves valuable—they were just pieces of stone that *once upon a time* contained the words of the Living God. But knowing the story, seeing the stark contrast between the broken and the complete, that is what brings meaning and value to those shards of stone. We held on to those pieces not because they had inherent value, but because they told a story, they symbolized an important moment in the history of our people.

You do not have to be a rabbi to have a substantial collection of *kippot* in your house. We can all point to a drawer in our own homes or in our parents' homes where they kept the stash of accumulated *yarmulkes* from the family *b'nai mitzvah* and wedding celebrations. We marvel at them and recall funny stories about each of them, but some might hold a little extra

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<sup>7</sup> Talmud Bavli Bava Batra 14a-b, Berakhot 8b.

meaning. I have a stack, too, of course. There are the ones that I wear frequently, and the ones that are reserved for the Shabbat dinner guest who forgets to bring one along. And there is also a stack of ones that carry special meaning, that I do not wear frequently, but that I do not share with others. In that stack is a *kippah* that my grandmother of blessed memory made for me for my bar mitzvah. Actually, she crocheted nearly a hundred of these *kippot* for our guests, but the one that I still have is near and dear to my heart. If anyone else found it in a stack of *kippot*, they could easily discard it, along with that random one from your second-cousin's wedding. But for me, this *kippah* carries deep sentimental value. There is a story behind it. There are countless hours of dedicated work behind it, and most importantly, there is a person behind it who I loved. And for that reason, this *kippah* is valuable to me.

In a few moments we will recite the Yizkor memorial prayers. With Yizkor, we remember. We remember those who departed from this world years ago, and we remember those who departed more recently. We remember that which they left behind, both the tangible objects and the intangible stories that infuse those very objects with meaning. In standing to remember them, we affirm our commitment to tell their stories, to keep our memories of them alive in our land of the living. May we be strengthened by these memories. May they bring us joy. May we inscribe their names in our Book of Life, and may we always remember them.