Sermon | Yom Kippur Yizkor 5783

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Recreating & Remembering

This summer I read Gabrielle Zevin's most recent book, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*. If you like video games, as you now all know that I do, then you will love this book. It is the fictional story of characters Sam Masur and Sadie Green, young friends who love playing video games, who become estranged during their teenage years, and finally reunite during college. Together, along with Sam's roommate and Sadie's future boyfriend, Marx, they become wildly successful video game creators. The book is also a story about love, about dreaming, and about loss. Reflecting upon a tragic loss in the book, Sadie recalls:

> She had once read in a book about consciousness that over the years, the human brain makes an AI version of your loved ones. The brain collects data, and within your brain, you host a virtual version of that person. Upon the person's death, your brain still believes the virtual person exists, because, in a sense, the person still does. After a while, though, the memory fades, and each year, you are left with an increasingly diminished version of the AI you had made when the person was alive.[1]

Although the quotation is from a work of fiction, a helpful footnote explains that the idea originates in a book by a professor of cognitive science, Douglas Hofstadter. As we experience the world, and as we get to know other people in it, our brains collect data and create versions of these real people who, in a sense, live in our minds. When they physically depart from this world, these mental versions of them do not expire, even if they inevitably diminish over time.

Consider how often you have conjured up an image of a loved one and engaged with them in conversation within the confines of your own mind? You recognize that the person is

[1] Zevin, p. 381.

not *really* there, but your mind knows them well enough to play out an entire conversation. You can predict the things they might say, the way that they might look at you, the way that they might support you in a difficult time. When we are anticipating a complicated conversation with a friend or family member, we play out the various ways the scenario might go in our mind. And this does not stop if and when a person is physically taken from our midst. In a reflection for the annual *Jewels of Elul* emails from the Pico Union Project, psychologist and author Dr. Dale Atkins wrote about how he was raised on vivid stories of his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives. He concludes his reflection by writing, "In death as in life, I feel my parents' presence every day—sensing their spirits and seeking their counsel. They are a part of me." We internalize these stories so deeply that they leave an indelible mark on who we are. They truly become a part of us when we allow ourselves to receive those memories and fully appreciate those experiences.

In this way, our brains have data stored in them which allow us to do this, to call a person to mind and keep them there. But without constant reminders, without reenactments and recreations, those memories do inevitably diminish with the passing of time. Judaism pushes back against that inevitability. Our tradition recognizes that, in the normal course of events, memories do fade. How, then, do we train ourselves to remember?

Many Jewish rituals and practices are based on the idea that we can recreate the past in the present. This recreation is how we maintain those vivid and lifelike virtual versions of people, places, and events in our minds. When the ark is opened each week on Shabbat, we sing וַיְהִי בִּנְסֹעַ הָאָרֹן, "When the ark was to set out," calling to mind the travels of our ancestors in

the wilderness.[2] And we sing words from Isaiah, כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תּוֹרָה, "The Torah shall come forth from Zion."[3] The service for taking out the Torah is not just about chanting the weekly *parsha* before the congregation. Rather, it is meant to be a reenactment of standing at Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah from God. The Torah is literally handed over to someone and then processed about the sanctuary, making it available to each one of us just as our ancestors stood at the foot of Sinai and heard the voice of God proclaim these words. Perhaps you did not know it, but each week we recreate Sinai in order to keep that moment alive in our collective, communal memory. <u>We recreate so that we may better remember.</u>

During the Passover *sedarim*, we sit around the table and recreate the exodus from Egypt, by eating the foods that remind us of that bitter time, by reclining as free people no longer bound to Pharaoh, by retelling an ancient story using language of today. We recreate the narrative of the exodus from Egypt so that we all remember what it was like to be enslaved, and so that we can more fully appreciate what it means to be free. If we did not recreate this moment each year, we may not truly remember. We may even begin to forget.

Many more examples of this in our tradition abound, and perhaps the most impressive aspect of it all is that we were not even the ones who were there! All of this is part of our collective memory, a part of who we are as the Jewish people, with stories, traditions, and customs that are passed down from one generation to the next. We have created virtual versions of our own history, and we have managed to pass those down through the generations. The more we engage with them, those versions feel less virtual and more real.

[2] Numbers 10:35.
[3] Isaiah 2:3.

We do not limit this idea of recreations to holiday celebrations and Shabbat rituals. We also do this daily during our prayers because our tradition demands it of us. When we recite the Shema each day, we say in the second paragraph, וְשַׂמְתֶּם אֶת־דְּבָרַי אֵלֶּה עַל־לְבַבְכֶם וְעַל־נַפְשְׁכֶם; "Therefore impress these My words upon your heart and yourself," literally on your heart and your soul.[4] What does it mean to place words on our hearts and souls? It means that we must recite these words enough such that they seep into our hearts and souls, that they become a part of us, infuse our minds and our very beings as if they were written there to be accessed at any time. We repeat these words each day, we recreate them, we remember them.

Four times a year we gather with the express purpose of remembering our loved ones who have departed from this world. On each of the major pilgrimage festivals, as well as on Yom Kippur, we have opportunities to remember our loved ones with the words of Yizkor. In so doing, we hope to call to mind our loved ones, load the virtual versions of them into our minds, and bring them into this space.

How literally do I intend these words? One of my mentors, Rabbi Martin S. Cohen, often talks about "the ghosts in the room" when he preaches before Yizkor. He does not mean it figuratively or poetically. He encourages the congregation to conjure up the presence of our deceased loved ones and invite them to stand beside us in this space. In his book, *After One-Hundred-And-Twenty*, Hillel Halkin shares a childhood memory from Hebrew writer David Frischmann, which amplifies this very idea:

> Outside the synagogue stood a merry crowd, making a commotion, while the congregation within was enveloped by a pall from front to back. A fear of God, a dark, holy dread, filled the house of worship. Slowly, the words [of the yizkor prayer] grazed the lips of the worshipers; the many candles whispered thinly and shadows danced on

[4] Deuteronomy 11:18.

> the walls. Was it true that the souls of the dead assembled in the synagogue to hear themselves remembered? I stole a look through a crack in the door: perhaps I would recognize one of them.[5]

Peeking through the doors to the synagogue, young Frischmann wonders whether he will see the souls of deceased loved ones gather as their names and lives are recalled during Yizkor. He was not looking for the virtual versions of his loved ones, or other unseeable, intangible entities. Rather, he was looking for the real manifestation of the souls of the deceased standing in that synagogue and giving comfort to those of us who are left behind in this world even after they have departed from it.

Doesn't Judaism prohibit conjuring the dead and engaging in necromancy? The Torah explicitly says, "Let no one be found among you…who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead."[6] That sounds straightforward enough to me! But in the *Shulchan Arukh*, the standard code of Jewish law from the 16th century, Rabbi Yosef Karo writes that a necromancer is one "who starves themselves and sleeps in the cemetery in order to have unholy spirits rest upon them."[7] That is a very narrow definition of the category! In a later comment, the Ashkenazi commentator Rabbi Moshe Isserles goes even further and says that one may commune with the dead as long as they are speaking to their spirit, not to the physical body.[8] We are, therefore, permitted to call upon the ghosts, the souls, the spirits of our deceased loved ones and gather them here in this room to be remembered by us.

I know that there is a strong custom for those with living parents to depart when Yizkor

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[5] Hillel Halkin, *After One-Hundred-And-Twenty*, p. 183-194.
[6] Deuteronomy 18:10-11.
[7] Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 179:13.
[8] Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 179:14, gloss. I learned about these sources from Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz's book, *Does the Soul Survive?*

is recited. I did that as a young person, too. But I remind you all that there is no obligation to leave, neither is there one to stay. But there is an opportunity during Yizkor to recall departed loved ones, whether they be parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, or other relations. Yizkor is the way that we recreate the memories of our loved ones by setting aside a time to intentionally call them to mind, to invite them into this space, and to be present with them.

My advice to you this year is don't be shy. Talk to the ghosts, talk to the souls in the room. Talk to the versions of your loved ones that you have recreated in your head. And don't just talk to them, but also try to hear them, remember what their voices sounded like. Try to look into their eyes and remember their facial expressions. Try to see them sitting beside you, and remember what they *smelled* like.

Memories may inevitably start to fade, but Judaism equips us with the ability to slow the fading of memory through reenactment and recreation. We seek to maintain vivid memories of them. After all, they are not a part of us. We refuse to let them go, for in so doing we not only give them up, but we also give up a part of ourselves. Judaism resists the passing of time and teaches us how to remember. That is what Yizkor literally means. I invite you all to join me in this sacred ritual where we recreate our fondest memories of our loved ones, and experience their comforting presence. They are a part of us, and we pray that our memories of them never fade.