

Every Person Matters – Shavuot Yizkor 5780

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Last Sunday, the front page became the news. As the nation approached the grim milestone of 100,000 Covid-19 deaths, the New York Times decided to honor victims by printing names. 1,000 names, just one percent of those who died, filled the entire page. What better visual could there be for the horrid disruptions of the past three months?

It is difficult to make sense of such enormous loss. For some, it's just a number. There are 350 million people living in this country. People die every day, and even a big number like 100,000 represents only .03% of the population. In the Bible, Ecclesiastes posits that this is just the way of the world: "כל הנחלים הולכים אל הים והים איננו מלא" All the streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full; to the place from which they flow, the streams flow back again." "For the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous and for the wicked, for the good and pure, and for the impure." "There is a time to be born and a time to die." Death is part of life. Or as Joseph Stalin is alleged to have said, "One death is a tragedy; one million deaths is a statistic."

In the larger arc of the world population, there may be some truth to the sentiment. But, thankfully, that is not all. Because every life is precious. The Mishnah reminds us that humanity was created as an individual first, not an entire population, to teach that a single life amounts to an entire world. "כל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו אבד עולם מלא" one who destroys a single life is likened by scripture to one who has destroyed an entire world; and one who saves a single life is likened to one who sustains the entire world."

The digital version of that New York Times cover lamented the incongruity between the enormity of the number and the personal worth of each individual. "The immensity of such a sudden toll takes away our ability to comprehend," they wrote, "to understand that each number adding up to 100,000 represents someone among us just yesterday. Who was the 1,233rd person to die? The 27,587th? The 98,431st?" The tragedy of the death toll is that we don't know the stories. And, what's more, the virus has kept us from mourning in the usual way. People are living ... and dying alone.

The social unrest in Minneapolis and other cities in the wake of the horrific killing of George Floyd only adds to the enormity of our purpose in this moment – to remember loved ones and to appreciate the value and significance of every life.

Legend posits that the 11th-century Jewish poet and philosopher, Solomon Ibn Gabirol was murdered by a jealous rival-poet and buried under a fig tree. Years later, the fruit of that tree was so sweet and so plentiful that the people of the town where it was located decided to dig it up so they might uncover the source of its richness. When the people discovered ibn Gabirol's remains beneath that tree, they understood that this great man had enriched them not only in life, but even in death.

That is the paradox of human existence. "מה אנוש כי תזכרנו" What is humanity that You have been mindful of him" asks the Psalmist? "At daybreak they are like grass that flourishes anew; by dusk it

withers and dries up. And yet, “ותחסרהו מעט מאלהים, You have made him little less than divine. You have made him master of your handiwork.” Hopefully later today, a SpaceX rocket will take off from Cape Canaveral on a mission to deliver two NASA astronauts to the International Space Station. It will be the first time in ten years that an American rocket launched from American soil, and a reminder that these little, finite creatures, specks of dust against the vastness of the universe and the immensity of time, have the ability to conquer space. At times we may be lost in the statistics, but every human being matters. One small individual can be so influential and powerful.

This is the message of the Torah reading during this season. Last week we began the book of Numbers. The census is not everybody’s favorite part of Torah, and the Rabbis asked why it was necessary – not just to count, but to count repeatedly and in such elongated fashion, family by family, tribe by tribe. Their answer is “להודיע כמה היו חביבין לפניו” in order to demonstrate how beloved the people were to the Holy One.” The people are counted because every person matters.

Earlier today we read from Ruth. The story began with loss. When Ruth and Naomi travel back from the Moab to Bethlehem, they have nothing. The men in their lives have all died. According to a Midrash, Boaz had also experienced loss. The Jerusalem Talmud says that Boaz’s wife died on the same day that Ruth arrived in his field, “ונמצא זו יוצאת וזו נכנסת”, which underscores the promise that as soon as one leaves the scene, another comes to take her place.”

But it’s not so simple. People don’t just disappear and get replaced. Before Boaz can marry Ruth, he has to agree to take on all the responsibilities of Elimelekh’s estate. He doesn’t just acquire a wife; he acquires the responsibility “להקים שם המת”, to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate, that the name of the deceased may not disappear from among his kinsman.” Ruth and Boaz move on from the tragedies that darkened their lives, their child becomes the ancestor of David, but not at the expense of what came before. The names of the deceased, the memories of the past live on.

Among the traditional mourning customs is the requirement of *k’riyyah*, rending a garment. As Rabbi David Stern, a past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis points out, the custom is to put a tear *into* the garment, but not to tear a piece off. The torn piece remains attached. Because in ancient times, at the end of *shiva*, the garment was sewn back together so the mourner could return to work. But there were limits. For certain people – a father or mother, a teacher, the head of the *bet din*, the torn garment can never be resealed. And for others? “One may tack them together with loose stitches or gather them or fix them with ladder-like stitches, אבל לא לאחותן, but one may not mend them with precise stitches. Rav Hisda explains: *precise* stitches refers to the Alexandrian method, which was of such exceptional quality as to make the original tear no longer visible. We can repair, but we dare not erase even painful memories.

That’s *Yizkor*. Time heals all wounds, but it does not erase them; it should not erase them. At *Yizkor* we affirm our responsibility to remember the hurt, remember the lessons taught and values imparted, remember the images and smile at the resemblances between our loved ones and the children or grandchildren for whom they are named. I try to pause during my own recitation of *Yizkor*, when I say the words “relatives and friends,” to conjure up images in my mind’s eye – one by one – of relatives who are no longer part of my life. It makes me smile; and reinforces a sacred pledge that these

lovely individuals will never become statistics. *Yizkor* affirms the value of life – one seemingly inconsequential speck in the universe can learn so much and teach so much and do so much of consequence.

And *Yizkor* during a pandemic, *Yizkor* in a time of social unrest extends further. So many people, each and every one of them created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. We have to remember them also. We have to dig deeper – read the death notices, find the divine spark, try to connect to these human beings of infinite worth who tragically died alone. And as we remember, we also ask questions. What could we have done differently? What can we do now to make other people safe? What can we do to support people whose lives have been upended? How can we ensure that so many lives were not lost in vain?

The same Rabbi Stern cites a vignette from Elie Wiesel on his first trip back to his home village. “I met a Jew,” Wiesel reflected, “one of the rare survivors, and we walked through the cemetery of Sighet. ‘To be a Jew,’ I asked, ‘what does it mean to you? Does it mean turning your heart into a cemetery?’ ‘No,’ my companion said. ‘The heart of a man is a sanctuary ... To be a Jew is to fill the sanctuary with light, without betraying the cemetery.’”

To be a Jew is to live. To live is to remember. To remember is to appreciate the infinite divine worth of every individual. To appreciate is to learn and build on the accomplishments of those who came before so that they will live on forever. Shabbat shalom and Hag sameah.