Why do we recite Yizkor on Yom Kippur? What’s the connection between the theme of this day, repentance, and reciting prayers in memory of our beloved relatives who are no longer with us? Perhaps we can come to understand this if we reflect on what happened on the very first Yom Kippur during that very first year that the Israelites traveled in the wilderness.

Just to refresh our recollections, at the beginning of the third month after leaving Egypt, the month of Sivan, the Israelites arrived in the Wilderness of Sinai, and on the sixth of that month, Moses received the 10 commandments, on a day filled with thunder and lightning. And then Moses, according to the Torah, remained up there on the mountain for 40 days, receiving the rest of the laws of the Torah.

That experience challenged the people’s faith and their faithfulness. By the time Moses descended, it was too late. They were off worshipping the Golden Calf and ignoring if not directly disobeying everything they had been told. That wonderful expression of God’s love for the people, those wonderful tablets filled with laws painstakingly written during those preceding forty days, dropped to the ground and broke into thousands of fragments.

A very bad scene followed, with lots of recriminations but also a plea by Moses and the People for forgiveness, for reconciliation. Eventually God relented from his urge to wipe out the people and agreed to a new covenant with them. He had Moses come up a second time, and dictated the Torah to him once again. [Interestingly: the first time, we’re told, God made and inscribed the tablets himself (Exodus 32:16); the second time, God told Moses to carve them himself (Exodus 34:1) and at least one text suggests that he had Moses do the writing the second time as well (Ibid., 34:28).]

Finally, after another 40 days, Moses came down a second time, with the second set of tablets in his arms. According to the Midrash, that occurred on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It was truly a cosmic Day of Reconciliation between God and Israel.
And then something interesting happened.

When Moses put the new set of tablets into the Holy Ark for safekeeping, according to the midrash, he did something else: he went around and picked up all the little pieces, all the broken fragments of that first set of tablets and he put them in the Ark as well.

And so, according to this midrash, in that precious Holy Ark in the center of the camp, the children of Israel had not only the second, complete set of tablets but also the fragments from that earlier set. And they kept them with them throughout their journeys through the Wilderness.

What an interesting, not very obvious thing to do! The people were probably somewhat uncomfortable with that. Whatever those fragments represented to them, it would have been very easy to leave those fragments behind when the people headed off on their journeys. Yet this they did not do.

It isn’t easy to carry along a part of ourselves or a part of our experience that we’d like to put behind us. Our instinct is to put it out of sight. To try to forget about it.

Yet this story tells us that we can’t do that if we hope to reach our goal.

On this day that teaches us that change is possible, we also learn the importance of remembering our past, remembering who we have been and who we are in order to determine who we are going to be.

We don’t use the word "sin" a lot in America today. In fact, it’s been said that the only sinful thing in America today is cheesecake. Yet we do sin. Let’s face it. There are times we do what we know to be the right thing and then there are times we, either thoughtlessly or even intentionally, do what we know to be the wrong thing. There are times we’re ashamed of how we behave. (At least we should be.) Judaism, despite too many jokes to the contrary, rather than suggesting that we wallow in guilt, encourages us to acknowledge what we’ve done, vow not to do it again, participate in rituals designed to help us move beyond our behavior, and then (and this is sometimes neglected) to remember what we have done.

Sometimes we would like not to look back, but our tradition teaches us that we can’t just deny that we ever behaved differently. We can’t say, "I’d pass a morality test if it were to be administered today." We have to admit it if we wouldn’t have been able to pass such a test yesterday. That is not to suggest that we haven’t changed; on the contrary, it is to demonstrate that we have.
Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the late great scholar and teacher who spoke often about teshuvah, this marvelous process of turning from one way to another, emphasizes this point.

Sin is not to be forgotten, blotted out or cast into the depths of the sea. On the contrary, sin has to be remembered. It is the memory of sin that releases the power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before.

Soloveitchik goes on to make what at first seems an audacious claim, but one whose wisdom soon becomes apparent. He suggests that the process of moving beyond sin, this process that we focus on today, parallels another process in our lives. The motivations for and the means by which we seek and achieve kaparah (atonement) are parallel to the motivations for and the means by which we cope with the fundamental struggle that is part of the human condition, from which none of us is immune, and that is, enduring a loss.

In other words, those same steps we take to achieve teshuvah can be a guide to contending with loss.

Let me give you an example.

One example of a loss is when a loving relationship comes to an end, when a marriage ends in divorce. A Jewish divorce is finalized by the writing and delivery of a get, a Jewish divorce document. That get says it all. It puts into very clear language that the parties who had once been married are no longer. It is painful to read a get, but there it is, in black and white. The reality is expressed. The get is painstakingly written, with quill and ink on parchment, according to ancient rules. It takes a long time. During that time, all one hears is the sound of that quill scratching against the parchment. When the scribe completes his task, the get is handed over from the husband to the wife, sometimes through an appointed agent, and there is a sense that something momentous has occurred.

The get is then handed over to the supervising rabbi who does something very strange: he cuts or tears the edge of the document. He irrevocably damages this beautifully written document. And then he files it in a secure place for safekeeping.

That cut, that tear, is a sign of loss, which is as real as the beautifully written parchment. And that very real object, that torn parchment, is just a sign of something else very real, namely a marriage that has come to an end.
You could say that the document is put away for safekeeping in case it should ever be needed as evidence in the future. But you could also say that there’s another reason. And that is that to live fully beyond the loss of a loving relationship, one must live with a memory of that loss, a memory of something precious that was torn. Only in this way will one be able to be fully present in the future.

The transition in life that epitomizes loss is, of course, the death of a loved one. There again we see a parallel to the process of seeking kapparah, of atonement. First, there is acknowledgment. The first thing we do when we hear of a death, the first thing mourners do at a funeral, is to speak or affirm words that acknowledge what has occurred. We recite a brachah, "Blessed art thou, O Lord, Dayan Ha-Emet – Judge of truth," and then we quote the words of Job, "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away...." At such a moment we perceive a truth that is usually not revealed as explicitly to us: that human beings are mortal.

The next thing we do is to engage in a simple yet powerful ritual. We make a tear in our garment or on a ribbon to symbolize the tear within. And of course there are many, many other rituals we engage in. These are designed to help us navigate those murky waters, a point made subtly by our Torah reading this morning.

Have you ever wondered why, if the topic of the reading is ostensibly the various rituals that the High Priest is supposed to perform on the Day of Atonement, the reading begins by telling us something about Aaron, the High Priest, that we didn’t have to know (or, at least, we wouldn’t think we’d have to know)? The reading begins with the phrase Aharei mot, "After the Death." The reading begins by telling us that Aaron had just suffered a grievous loss: the death of not one, but two of his children. That does put a totally different slant on all of these rituals. We now have the image of Aaron as a bereaved father performing them. And perhaps they helped him, the way rituals can be so helpful for us. What do you do aharei mot, after a death? The answer of the text seems to be: you perform rituals.

So in grieving a loss we have acknowledgement and we have ritual. And as we move through and beyond our grief, we also must have memory. We must not forget our losses. Even when we think we’re beyond a loss, even when we might want to be beyond it, our tradition encourages us to remember.

Some of you have our congregational yizkor books in front of you. I don’t know about any of the others among us today who’ve suffered losses in the past year as I have, but I must tell you, I did not want to open up this lovely pamphlet and find my father’s name in it. I really didn’t. When I did, when I saw his name, I thought,
How can that be? A year ago, it wasn’t there. And as I reviewed the book and saw
the names of so many others, members of our congregation and parents and
siblings and children and other relatives of members, who have died in the past
year, I am sure I was not alone in wondering, "How can that be?"

On the other hand, of course, I certainly wouldn’t have been pleased if those names
weren’t there! Because though it may not feel wholly comforting now, it is the
right thing to do and eventually it is a source of comfort to memorialize our losses.
It brings us to a new place. And that is why we are here today. That is why we will
shortly be reciting the yizkor prayers.

There is one final phase of grieving a loss which parallels the cleansing nature of
kaparah and taharah. Somehow, God gives us the capacity to live on, to create new
bonds of trust, love and devotion. We learn to smile again. We learn to love again.

A wonderful rabbi, the late Morris Adler once wrote:

Sorrow is the obverse side of love. …To enter into any relationship of deep
meaning is to run the risk of sorrow. [And] out of love may come sorrow.

But out of sorrow can come light for others who dwell in darkness. And out of the
light we bring to others, will come light for ourselves. The light of solace, of
strength, of transfiguring and consecrating purpose.

All of us here today -- those who will be, and those who will not be reciting Yizkor
-- are balancing Brokenness and Wholeness, Separation and Atonement.

The realistic and yet ultimately hopeful and optimistic message of Yom Kippur is
here every year for all of us. All of us have shattered, sacred fragments in our lives.
Whatever they represent, we should gather them up, and place them in a safe,
secure, sacred spot.

Let us look into our Arks, and let us realize that we are not alone, that all of us are
striving to affirm wholeness in the face of brokenness. And let us gain thereby the
strength to do so.

Amen.