

Yizkor

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As is true of any year, many people died this past year. I don't mean to sound harsh, cold, unfeeling, or unsympathetic, but that is the truth. Some were people we knew and loved, and some were people we only heard of, but it felt like we knew them.

It is interesting to how much the impact the death of the famous has on us. We don't know them. We only know about them, but they are part of our lives, and we are sad when they die.

Paul Newman recently passed away. It took most of us by surprise, and it was hard to believe he was 83 years old. He still seemed so young, vibrant and handsome. It seems as if he was a good man, and was not too impressed with himself. He seemed to know how to enjoy life and have good values, having given away the profits from his salad dressing to charity. It was impressive that he remained married to the same woman for over 53 years, famously saying once that the reason he didn't cheat on his wife was, "why should I dine out on hamburger, when I have steak at home."

Do you remember when Princess Di died in the car accident in Paris? Although we did not personally know her, there was a tremendous outpouring of sorrow. People placed flowers at the embassy, at Buckingham Palace. Her loss was deeply felt, even though we only knew of her.

We don't really know these people, and what they are truly like. All we know is their public persona. They may or may not be good people.

The death for example, this past year of Tim Russert also had a significant impact on many people who did not know him as well. We heard many stories and tales about his humanity and decency, about his devotion to his Buffalo roots and to his son.

It seems when people die while still in the prime of their life, as was the case with Russert and Princess Diana, the loss is even more profound, and more deeply felt. That may be in part, because it causes us to come face to face with our own mortality.

I read the obituaries every day. I don't really read them every day. I glance at them every day, and some days I read them. It is an occupational hazard. I glance at them to see if a member of our community has died or lost a loved one. (It is so much easier and quicker since they started adding Jewish stars next to the Jewish deaths a few years ago.) It reminds of the time, a true story, when I was a student rabbi in Caspar, Wyoming for the High Holidays. Fred Goodstein, the wealthiest man in the state, in his 80's told me, "Rabbi, people ask me how I am feeling. And I tell them, at my age, I get up, open the paper and turn to the obituary page. If my name isn't there, I get dressed and continue to go about the rest of my day."

Sometimes I read the stories if they appear interesting, which they often are. You can learn a lot about life by reading the obituaries. And one of the things I have learned and reflect upon at Yizkor is that we will all wind up there. I don't mean to be morbid. I just mean that it doesn't matter how rich or famous, how important or powerful we are, one day, we all must pass from this earth.

Ecclesiastes, Kohelet says,

"The wise and the foolish share the same fate... For everything there is a season. There is a time for everything under the sun. A time to plant and a time to uproot. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to seek and a time to lose. A time to be born, a time to die."

That is part of why we are here today: to mourn our loved ones and to acknowledge and remember those who are no longer here with us. They may not have been famous, or invented anything important, or made a major contribution in their field. But we come here and we remember them on this sacred day in this sacred place. We recall what they did for us, and the role they played in our lives.

I want to give you two quick quizzes. Since it is Yom Kippur, I am not going to ask you to write down the answers. Just think about how you would respond. I base this on something I came across in a book called "Taking Stock" by Rabbi Benjamin Blech. Each has six questions.

1. Name the five wealthiest people in the world.
2. Name the last five Heisman Trophy winners.
3. Name the last five winners of the Miss America pageant.
4. Name five people who have won a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.
5. Name the last half dozen people who have won an Academy Award for best actor or actress.
6. Name the last five teams to win the World Series.

And if you still know all the answers, here's the tie breaker - Who were the last three winners of the National Hockey League Stanley Cup?

Now - Here is the second quiz:

1. Name a teacher who had an impact on your life.
2. Name two people who have helped you get through a difficult time
3. Think of the names of the people you enjoy spending time with
4. Name a half dozen heroes whose stories have inspired you.
5. Name some individuals who have given you advice that has been helpful or made a difference in your life.
6. Think of a few people who have encouraged you, helped to guide you, believed in you, or made you feel special

You get the picture.

Rabbi Blech writes about his little quiz, "None of us remembers the headlines of yesterday. These are no second rate achievers. They are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. Awards tarnish. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades and certificates are buried with their owners....The people who make a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. They are the ones that care (about you.)"

The point is that ultimately, life and today's service is about recalling the people who truly matter and who mean or who once meant, and will always in some way mean something to us.

Let us pause now as we lovingly remember those who cared about us, and who cared for us, those we took care of while they were alive, and about whom we shall always care and remember. Let us rise for Yizkor, as we remember them.

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