

Memories of Joan Rivers: Yizkor 2014

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Yom Kippur Yizkor Service
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Beginning last night, and continuing throughout today we have been saying our *Al Het's*, confessing our sins. The prayer is repeated throughout the services on the holiday so that we will focus on our sins and what we need to work on. In the spirit of Yom Kippur, I have a confession to make. And since this is Yizkor, when we recall those who have passed away, the confession has to do with my feelings about someone who passed away this past year.

I would like to share some insights and reflections which are appropriate to the theme of this day, but which at first may surprise you a bit. Although what I am about to say may seem to be an unusual choice to discuss at the Yom Kippur Yizkor service, I ask that you indulge and trust that my subject is not meant to be disrespectful.

I want to discuss my feelings about the passing a few months ago of Jewish comedienne, Joan Rivers.

On the one hand I was a fan and admired her ground-breaking work, especially her early stuff. I remember her appearances on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson when she was just getting started and how funny she was. She was sharp, witty, quick and irreverent. I saw her perform in person several times. As she liked to say, "Can we talk?" But in the past few years I felt that some of her humor no longer had an edge. Instead it had too much of an edge and was too sharp. Often it was mean and vicious. Personally I thought her putdowns of actress Elizabeth Taylor, the singer Adele and others were over the line. Her comments on the red carpet about how celebrities dressed were outrageous and meant to be funny and provocative. But I felt they were mean-spirited. Her shtick struck me as being almost vicious, and qualified as *lashon hara*, speaking ill of others. More and more frequently when I heard her it made me cringe and feel uncomfortable. Earlier this summer when she got upset with a CNN interviewer and abruptly and suddenly ended the interview I was surprised that the one who was so good at dishing it out didn't like being on the receiving end.

But then later this summer, I gained a new respect and appreciation for her. When Israel was under attack, she unabashedly rose to defend Israel. At a time when so many other Hollywood stars were silent, at a time when Israel really needed to hear from them, and really needed the support, at a time when some entertainers cancelled their appearances in Israel, when Jon Stewart was making ridiculous jokes about Israel on The Daily Show, she stood up and was willing to courageously rise to Israel's defense. When the chips were down, she put her neck on the line for her people and identified herself as a proud Jew. As a result of her outspokenness she was threatened and had to hire a body guard because of her statements.

Despite my previous misgivings, and negative feelings, how upset could I be with her when she was so outspoken and unequivocal in her support?

So why do I mention Joan Rivers and my ambivalent feelings about her in this service? It has nothing to do with Israel, but rather about conflicted feelings --- and that is why it is so appropriate to raise at Yizkor, when we recall our departed loved ones.

I do so because I suspect that many of us here today can identify with what I am referring to. As we recall the lives of departed relatives there may be those among us who may harbor ambiguous feelings about those we remember. Some of us may be fortunate to have memories of individuals who shared love unequivocally and who we loved wholeheartedly and without any reservation.

Yet I know that there are those among us here who may not be as unequivocal, and who may have had mixed in with positive associations their share of negative experiences with family members who have passed away. Fond recollections and reflections may be mingled with memories of unpleasant and difficult times.

But the important and significant thing is that, regardless, you are here.

Life has a way of getting messy, and not being so simple to compartmentalize or categorize as good or bad. There is a lot of gray, and a lot of times when things can be both, black and white.

At this sacred service, and in this sacred hour, we recall loved ones. Within each of us resides our own individual, private, solitary and unique reflections and recollections. Let us remember our loved ones as they were and try to focus on the positive aspects of our relationships and associations.

Peter O'Toole, who died this past year said in an interview a few years earlier, "Many years ago I sent an old, beloved leather jacket covered in beer and blood and marmalade to the cleaners. It came back with a note pinned to it, 'It distresses us to return work which is not perfect.'" He concluded, "So that will do for me as well. That is what can go on my tombstone."

He was right. None of us are perfect, but let us accept and remember our loved ones for who they were, not for who we wished they were. Let us not lament what we wished they would have done, but did not do. Let us now rise as we mourn, recall, and honor the memories of those who are still very much a part of our lives.

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