

## **Introduction to Yizkor**

### **Rabbi Rachel Safman – Yom Kippur 5782 – Temple Beth-El (Ithaca, NY)**

Contrary to many people's intuition, the Yizkor service is a comparatively recent addition to Jewish liturgical practice. It began in the Rhineland (Ashkenaz) in the early medieval period in response to the almost contemporaneous tragedies of the Crusades and the Black Death, both of which resulted in widespread violence directed against Jewish communities.

Yizkor was – and is, to a large extent – a folk tradition, in the sense of having welled up from within the rank-and-file of the community, rather than being initiated by rabbinical authorities. It expresses the heartfelt desire – the profound need – of those traversing a festive season without the companionship of a loved one to give voice to the powerful emotions that their absence evokes.

Yizkor invites us to bring into our collective spaces the memories of loved ones who are often relegated by propriety to the deepest recesses of our internal archives, unmentioned, at times hardly acknowledged, at least explicitly, and yet ever-present, continually molding our sense of time, of meaning, of self.

Yizkor presents us with an opportunity to release these memories from the narrow confines of our inner spaces into a communal space, in which the void left by a loved one's passing can be collectively acknowledged. It invites us, too, to regard their life's accomplishments with the added perspective imparted by the passage of time.

In some instances the distance will further elevate or complement the legacy of the departed in the minds of those who survive them:

Individuals celebrated at the time of their passing for their prodigious professional accomplishments may, in the space of memory, persist more for their kind words, caring attention, idiosyncratic habits, little-known passions.

Spouses, parents, supportive friends whose presence in life seemed defined by the buttressing they provided to others may, in the years since their passing, come to be remembered for their unique gifts and quirky sense of humor.

Intimates with whom we shared a thousand lifetimes, or only a handful of precious moments, may return as vivid emanations, to partake in the affairs that have transpired in the time spent apart.

In other instances, we hope time will soften some of the sharp edges of relationships left jagged at life's end:

Those from whom we were distanced by pain or fear may be rendered more human, more approachable, when the hurt they can cause us is now placed fully within our control.

We may effect a belated rapprochement with those from whom we became estranged, having failed to re-establish a connection in life.

Those whom we may have lost before having the opportunity to offer full-throated apologies may become more accessible to us as physical distance and social and psychic barriers to admitting our own failings are removed.

Whatever guise our departed assume as we revisit them in this season, whatever emotions wash over us as we abide with those who walk with us no more, we are privileged to be gifted this precious time to revisit the sublime space of memory and to do so in the supportive embrace of community.

We move now into our Yizkor service.