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Congregation Beth Shalom

Wilmington, DE

THE JOY OF REMEMBERING: *KAVOD HA-MAYTIM*

*Gut Yontif!*

Throughout these High Holy Days, we have been exploring the word *kavod*, Hebrew for honor or respect. How does *kavod* apply to Yizkor, when we remember family members and other loved ones who have passed away?

I'd like to share with you the story of Robert Hatanaka. When I was in middle school and high school, my best friend was Robert Hatanaka. He is Japanese-American and I am Jewish-American, and back in the Orange County, California of 1976, – that made us both fairly exotic. [Pause] I remember among the most interesting places in his family home was a small area, a shrine of sorts, dedicated to the worship of his family ancestors. Robert is Buddhist, and part of the religion involves family ancestor worship. In fact, in Japan, there is an annual ancestral ceremony called *Bon*, celebrated around the Japanese New Year, where it is believed that departed family members return to the homes of their beloved family members. This idea cements the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead. That's *Kavod Ha Meyt*.

This belief in an ongoing bridge between the living and dead is also shared with Confucianism. How many of you remember or have heard of the Disney film, *Mulan*. Hands? Set not in Japan, but in China, Mulan, her father, her mother and even her grandmother, dedicate serious time worshipping at the temple of their Fa family ancestors – asking the family members to intercede in the life of Mulan. This, too, is *kavod ha meyt*.

During last winter break, my family was moved to tears during the Disney Pixar Film, *CoCo*. The film was co-created by Mexican-American Adrian Molina, and Jewish-American Lee Unkrich. The movie centers around the Mexican celebration of *Dia de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead. It is a time for Mexicans to remember their loved ones who are no longer with them – once again, *kavod ha meyt* – honoring the dead. Religious Mexicans actually believe that their ancestors return to their families on this day -- a family reunion that spans the divide between the living and the dead. The drama of the film centers around the idea that when the living stop telling stories about the departed, the departed disappear into nothingness.

I was particularly interested in an interview with Coco's Jewish American co-creator Lee Unkrich, conducted by fellow Jewish American Terry Gross, in a January broadcast of the radio show, FreshAir.

Of the relationship between his Jewish heritage and death, Unkrich said:

*I'm very, very much Eastern European Jewish, so no Mexican blood in me. I grew up Jewish in Cleveland - in the suburbs of Cleveland. I had I think a pretty typical American relationship with death, which is that it was something kind of hidden away, a little taboo. Cemeteries were just kind of grim, gray places devoid of color. And, in my own religion, you know, we have this concept of the yahrzeit, which is a yearly remembrance of people who have passed on, on the anniversary of their death, and it's kind of a somber time.*

*As I started thinking about the film that I wanted to make next after "Toy Story 3," I was reminded of this kind of fascination that I'd had with Dia de los Muertos for a long time for many reasons. I was drawn to a lot of the folk art and a lot of the iconography that people are familiar with, but I think I was also interested in the notion of a culture having a different kind of relationship with death than what I had grown up with.*

I was so moved by what Molina and Unkrich had created. But I felt truly sorry for Unkrich that he misunderstood his own Jewish heritage so much that he saw only sadness in his memory of his Jewish dearly departed ancestors. I think I was touched by the movie, *CoCo*, because I saw much Jewish in this Mexican celebration of *Dia de los Muertos*. As in Mexican culture, in Jewish culture we thrive on stories of family members who have passed away.

When you get together with family and friends, do you find yourself telling stories about loved-ones who have passed away? (Pause)

Which of you is THEE family storyteller? (Raise your hand and fess up)

Do you share the stories with your children until their eyes roll from having heard the same stories over and over again? (Pause)

Those children may not appreciate it yet, but Kavod Ha Meyt, honoring the departed, will become a part of their lives through your simple act of telling a story.

You may not know this, but every time you have a *Yahrzeit* of a loved one, you are passionately encouraged to join our Morning Minyan. It is one of the best kept secrets at Congregation Beth Shalom. But I am ready to blow the lid off this secret and make it available to each of you.

At the end of weekday and Shabbat services, right before the Mourner's Kaddish, we invite you to share a story or a cherished value of the loved one whose memory you chose to honor that morning. Giving *tsedaka* in memory of a loved one is important. But there can be no stronger example of giving *kavod* to our departed than sharing a value or a story about them.

And I think those stories are particularly poignant at holy days like Passover, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Our mystical tradition holds that at times like *Yarhtzeits* and especially at this moment, at *Yizkor*, where we remember not just the anniversary of the death of one family member, but ALL our departed family and friends, it just a sheer, lace curtain that divides us from the dead.

You may also know this...At the bottom of traditional Jewish grave makers are five Hebrew letters: *tav, nun, tsaddi, bet* and *hey*. They stand for the words *t'hee nishmahto (or nishmatah) tsrurah b'tsrur ha-chayim* – “May his (or her) soul be bound up in the bond of life.” *Kavod ha mayt* helps keep alive the never-ending connection between the living and the dead, in an eternal bond of love and affection. This bond continues as long as we continue to remember them and tell their stories.

On the weekend of October 26-28, the Rabbi Jacob Kraft Adult Education Committee is teaming up with The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd to bring Storyteller Rabbi Naomi Levy from California, to be our Scholar-in-Residence. She was one of my first mentors and paved my way to rabbinical school back in 1990. She recently authored a book called *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul*.

She writes extensively in her book preserving the memory of her late mother, providing an intimacy between the living and the dead, very much reminiscent of the movie *CoCo* which Jewish-American film-maker Lee Unkrich could not identify in his own Jewish faith and tradition.

Rabbi Levy writes:

*“Our souls can teach us how to bless each day. Every day we’re granted endless opportunities to pull back the curtain and touch another dimension and bless it. We are given the power to connect with those we’ve lost.*

*I’d like to ask you to do something sacred with me now. I’d like to ask you to close your eyes and welcome them. Picture a sweet moment with someone you’ve loved and lost. Try to picture them beside you. Look into their eyes. Let time stop. Just schmooze with them. See what they’re wearing. Can you see their smile?*

*Take their hand and just sit in silence. Breathe in. See if you can remember their smell.*

*Just share a moment in eternity with them. Remember a lesson they taught you.*

*When you’re ready, ask for your blessing.*

*And now offer them your blessing. Tell them what they meant to you, what you’re grateful for. What they taught you. What you will always carry with you.”*

For a religion that seems to have a blessing for EVERYTHING, there is no blessing said when we light our annual *Yahrzeit* candle. Nor is there a blessing said on the *Yizkor* candles we light four times a year, at the end of *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot* and at the beginning of Yom Kippur. Rabbi Levy thought it was wrong that there was no prayer said when lighting this candle, so, of course, she wrote one. I asked her if I could make a copy of this prayer for each of you, so next time you have to light that candle, you would have a prayer at the ready.

My hope is that you will carry her prayer with you just for moments like this one. Because, like the movie *CoCo*, or *Mulan*, or even like my friend, Robert Hatanka's family shrine, *kavod ha mayt*, honoring the dead, is an important part of Judaism and so much a part of all of us

And now, Rabbi Levy's blessing:

*"I haven't forgotten you, even though it's been some time now since I've seen your face, touched your hand, heard your voice. You are with me all the time.*

*I used to think you left me. I know better now. You come to me. Sometimes in fleeting moments I feel your presence close by.*

*But I still miss you. And nothing, no person, no joy, no accomplishments, no distraction, not even God can fill the gaping hole your absence has left in my life.*

*But mixed together with all my sadness, there is a great joy for having known you. I want to thank you for the time we shared, for the love you gave, for the wisdom you spread.*

*Thank you for the magnificent moments and for the ordinary ones, too. There was beauty in our simplicity. Holiness in our unspectacular days. And I will carry the lessons you taught me always.*

*Your life has ended, but your light can never be extinguished. It continues to shine upon me even on the darkest nights and illuminates my way.*

*I light this candle in your honor and in your memory. May God bless you as you have blessed me with love, with grace and with peace. Amen*