

Rabbi Michael Beals

Yom Kippur 5782

*Gut yontev.*

I open our Yizkor service, on the eve of our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of this Congregation, with the words of Rabbi Jacob Kraft. Thanks to the Jewish Historical Society of Delaware, I found this passage from a Rosh Hashana letter Rabbi Kraft wrote in September 1944 to the congregants of Beth Shalom, just before he left for war-torn Europe, 78 years ago. This is what he wrote:

“The impermanence of things in time of war brings people a new appreciation of home. In home they find anchorage, roots and security.”

Anchorage.....Roots....and Security....We certainly had that with Rabbi Kraft who came here in 1930 after his recent graduations from Harvard University and the Jewish Theological Seminary.

He served Congregation Beth Shalom as a beloved rabbi, rabbi emeritus and community leader, until his death on March 10, 1988.

Rabbi Kraft is the right place for this sermon that traditionally occurs just before the Yizkor service. Yizkor is about the power of memory. I could not think of a better way to celebrate our centennial than with a memory from the rabbinic pillar of our shul, who served us selflessly for 58 years – a record I don't think I will live long enough to catch, unless I make it to 98 --- stay tuned.

I also begin with Rabbi Kraft because of his words on the appreciation of home, especially in times of adversity. The unending toll of this COVID19 pandemic, including the new Delta Variant, has impacted all of us emotionally, if not also physically. Rabbi Kraft, who served as a chaplain during World War Two, would understand the spiritual and emotional impact of sustained stress and uncertainty on the *neshama*, on the soul. During this Yom Kippur service, we strive to nourish our souls.

We have built this synagogue, in large part, on the shoulders of people like Rabbi Kraft. In fact, between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, congregant Toni Young, the unparalleled historian of Jewish Delaware, reminded us that Rabbi Jacob and Leah Kraft are among those foundational Jewish leaders who are buried at the Jewish Community Cemetery of Delaware off of Foulk Road. Many of you have relatives and friends buried there. My father, of blessed memory, is there. But Toni Young wants us to also think about the cemetery as an historical link to how we became this community, and what we value as Jews.

Here is how Toni Young described the value of our community cemetery as we consider our Centennial Year:

((((((((((((((((Clip from Toni Young's talk))))))))))

For those who could join us in person this morning, when you leave the sanctuary, do take a moment to look at the *"Im Tirtzu Ain Zo Agadah – If You Will It – It is No Dream"* wall of contributors in our central atrium. Aside from the names at eye level, take an extra moment to cast your eyes downward to the granite foundation of the wall. There you will find the names of congregants from an earlier era, who 50 years ago, used their hard-earned resources to build our original synagogue building on the corner of 18<sup>th</sup> and Baynard.

We owe them all a huge debt. It is on their shoulders that we could rebuild and renovate the beautiful synagogue we enjoy today.

Let us all now look within our own hearts and remember, at Yizkor, all the loved ones upon whose shoulders we have built our own lives. Each of us has a unique backstory, filled with loving parents, and perhaps grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, childhood friends – all of whom made us who we are today.

I have been tempted to rename the Yizkor service, the “Todah” service – the service of saying thank you.

If the Yizkor service, was renamed the Todah service, then as long as we felt gratitude for those who came before us, who both gave us life and sustained our lives, it shouldn't matter if they are alive or dead. What matters is the mitzvah of remembering them, and THANKING them. And so, even if loved ones are still alive, I encourage you to participate in Yizkor to utter those important thank you's.

I invite all of us to take moments starting from now, and continuing throughout this service, to reconnect with people with whom you feel a profound sense of gratitude for making you the amazing person you are today. Start now.

Then continue to hold in your heart, and your memory, those special, unique moments which they shared with you.

Take some time to reflect on how those precious moments with those loved ones shaped you, changed you for the better. Gratitude, *hoda'ah* in Hebrew, is one of the most profound spiritual expressions we have.

We begin with thanks for God, for allowing us to be alive to experience this moment together – But NOW, at Yizkor, we lower our gaze from Heaven to encompass our gratitude *for* fellow human beings.

*Gut yontev.*