

Chaplain's Corner October 1, 2021
"Post-Yizkor Thoughts"
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Is a picture still worth a thousand words? We don't talk of "pictures" much anymore, nor of "flashbulbs." We speak of "images" now.

However, a proverb may be worth a thousand words ... or more.

Yom Kippur Yizkor this year was less than a week after the twentieth anniversary of thousands more added to our communal *Yizkor* on 9/11.

When 9/11 struck, Allen Kay was the CEO of the Manhattan advertising agency, Korey Kay & Partners. When 9/11 struck, Mr. Kay was wrapping up a slogan for the NY MTA, the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The slogan was released a few days later. The slogan remains intact. It is, "If you see something, say something." It is a proverb for our time. It was actually on the drawing board *prior* to 9/11.

There are three proverbs which help orient us to *Yizkor*, *the service of "You will remember," with paragraph after paragraph a variation of, "May G-D remember the soul of my _____ who has gone to her/his eternal home"* These two proverbs come from different heritages. They come from different languages. Yet, they speak to our hearts the same way. Proverbs are succinct signposts of how we might think about living. Proverbs are elegant and beautiful in their simplicity, They pause our hearts and make our minds think.

One is a Native American proverb, from our indigenous peoples. This proverb is attributed to the South Dakota Sioux. Its English translation is only ten words: "We will be known forever by the tracks we leave." My favorite Yiddish proverb translates into only six English words: "Memories are all we truly own." The similar Hebrew proverb, attributed to the 11th Century CE Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda, translates into English into, "Days are scrolls - write on them what you want to be remembered."

On September 25, 2013, Rabbi Marci Bellows used the Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda quote for a column in The New York Jewish Week urging readers to write their ethical wills. These are sometimes called legacy letters. It is where you share your values, your blessings and sad lessons, dreams and anything else, with those closest to you. There are many beautiful publicly available examples of ethical wills.

The Ethical Will connects to the *Yizkor* in a very subtle way. *Yizkor* is a prayer. Prayer is not about changing G-D. Prayer is more about changing ourselves. When we begin to recite *Yizkor* with, "May G-D remember the soul of ..." our hearts and tear ducts open with how we remember the souls of

Although *Yizkor* is recited several times a year, it is the *Yizkor* recently recited, on *Yom Kippur*, that is closest to our *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, our accounting of our souls, and our *Kol Nidre* reflections on what promises did we make to G-D in a year's span that, despite our best efforts, we could not keep.

Since prayer is about changing ourselves, the time around the *Yom Kippur Yizkor* is a poignant time to add a special pledge of *tzedakah*, a pledge to yourself on what you will do in the year just beginning to affect *how* your soul will be remembered by others. When I enter a hospital room of a patient who just died, and meet the family for prayers, I pray there will be enough time and receptivity to start the conversation with the family with the beautiful, open-ended question, "Tell me about" I am not using that moment to develop the *hesped*, or formal eulogy. I am using that moment to listen to the top-of-the-mind reflections of what that person was all about to those gathered there.

David Brooks, author and New York Times columnist has beautiful writings and speeches on the difference between our "resume virtues" and our "eulogy virtues." Two places to find them are through an Internet search or through reading at least the Preface and Introduction to David Brooks' The Road to Character.

You will not hear your *hesped*, but you will shape it. Just as proverbs are short and powerful, your *hesped* will have short and powerful remembrances, in effect, summation retrospectives. In the hospital room, I hear, "She/he was so kind. She/he was so funny. She/he was so thoughtful of others."

One of the joys of modern word processing is that you have the opportunity to modify the words in your Ethical Will, your Legacy Letter.

Each and every time you do a *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*, a reflection on the accounting of your soul, you can reflect on what you did since the last opportunity which, you pray, will affect how your soul will be remembered.

These small actions are not for scoring points for *olam ha-bah*, the world to come. These small actions are for *tikkun olam*, for improving *olam ha-zeh*, the world we are sharing now.

On *Yom Kippur* I spoke about, and subsequently published, thoughts on estrangements, trying to heal the wounds from family members who do not speak to each other, who do not listen to each other. When these family members are also *onenim*, the obligated mourners who should recite the daily *Kaddish Yatom*, the mourners' *kaddish*, on your behalf, estrangements will reduce the probability of that *mitzvah*. Our congregation is one of many that will recite a *Kaddish Yatom* for those for whom no one is saying *kaddish*.

Reciting the Mourners' *Kaddish* is a *l'dor v'dor* moment, a reflection on the values that were transferred from one generation to the next. Try to shape that this year.

May this be your will and *HaShem's* will in the year beginning.

