The Charge of Remembrance
Simchat Torah Yizkor 5780
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In memory of Rabbi Richard N. Levy z"l

My teacher and mentor, Rabbi Richard Levy, was not the type of person who had all the answers. And if he did happen to have answers, he didn't share them until his students had discovered them first. Nor was he the type of person who would let you take the easy way. If he thought you capable of something, he would expect you to push through whatever challenges and do it. He never left you completely on your own—he was always right there to support you through the process—but he wouldn't let you off the hook either.

I had experienced Rabbi Levy's particular style in his classes. To be honest, at first I found it frustrating. It felt like we couldn't get through any topic in a timely manner, because, rather than walking us through the tradition or rabbinic reasoning or what have you, he made us go through it ourselves. Sometimes you just want to know what the ancient rabbis said about a particular ritual without having to puzzle out all the whys of it.

It wasn't until my fourth of five years that I began to appreciate the brilliance of this style—by making us figure out why rituals are what they are or why the rabbis would have chosen this or that text and so on, Rabbi Levy was inviting us into a millennia-old conversation. Our ideas were not simply the thoughts of a random handful of students, they were necessary for the continued renewal and relevance of an ancient tradition in today's world. Although I don't think I would have been able to articulate that at the time, when I finally appreciated Rabbi Levy's style, I started to take all of his classes, made him my academic advisor, and eventually wrote my capstone project with him.

It turns out Rabbi Levy did this with everyone and for most things. At his funeral this past June, I heard stories from colleagues and some of his family and friends that suggested that he actually went easy on us in class. His daughter Sarah shared that she and her sister each had to write their own prayer books for their Bat Mitzvah services, including their own translations. At 12! And then, despite having hundreds of rabbinic and cantorial colleagues and former students who would have been more than honored to officiate, he again asked his daughters—neither of whom is clergy—to lead his funeral.

But Sarah was able to capture this aspect of her father's essence perfectly. Each time he pushed you to discover an answer or do something difficult, he was saying, "I love you, I believe in you, I see you, and I want to hear you. You understand more than you think and it's okay that you don't understand everything. No one does. Let's learn together, you start. I'm listening."

My guess is that most of our loved ones who have died did not leave us this particular combination of love and empowerment, but they did leave us a legacy, a sense of their essence, a set of values. In the months and years and perhaps even decades since their deaths, we continue to hold onto that legacy; aside from our memories, that sense of who they were lives within us to be shared with others.

And sharing our loved ones' legacies with others is how we show that they were—and still are— important to us, that they are still relevant in our lives. This is, I learned in Rabbi Levy's class, the essence of our Yizkor prayer.

Of course, Rabbi Levy didn't just come out and teach this—that would have gone against his "Let's learn together. You start, I'm listening" philosophy. And if we had just looked at the version of Yizkor that's in our siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*, it wouldn't have made sense anyway. In *Mishkan T'filah*, the Yizkor prayer asks God to remember our loved ones and keep them in the bonds of eternal life, and then it invites us to bring honor to their memory through our lives. In our version of the prayer, our presence here at a Yizkor service is enough to say that our loved ones continue to be important to us.

In contrast, the classic version of the prayer feels a little like a quid pro quo: "God, remember my loved one who has gone to their eternal rest, because I will, without making a vow, give money to tzedakah for their sake. In compensation for this, may their soul be bound up in the bonds of eternal life along with our ancestors and all the righteous."

Now I'll never say that you shouldn't give tzedakah in memory of your loved ones, but when I first read this version, it certainly felt like mourners were being asked to pay for their loved one's place in God's presence, and the more you gave, the closer your loved one got. It felt wrong and gross and, frankly, I was glad to be using *Mishkan T'filah*. But Rabbi Levy wouldn't let us off that easily. Judaism, Rabbi Levy reminded us, is about a covenantal relationship between us and God, not an exchange of goods or services. So giving tzedakah is not about buying a better seat closer to God.

Instead, the promise to give tzedakah in our loved ones' memory reminds God and *us* of their continued influence on our lives. We don't just remember them, our love for them continues to affect us, change us, push us to be our best selves. Their physical presence in our lives, no matter how long or short it was, was and is important and meaningful. And even though our loved ones are no longer physically present with us, they are still a part of us, still alive in our memory and our behavior.

Part of why, decades ago, the Reform Movement changed the language of the Yizkor prayer is to say that giving tzedakah isn't the only way we show that our loved ones continue to affect us. We can bring honor to their memories in any number of ways depending on their particular legacies. For some of us it's about sharing their love of a certain sport or art form. Some of us might honor our loved ones' legacies by cooking with their recipes or telling stories about them or using things inherited from them. There are so many ways to let our loved ones' legacies be a part of our lives that I can only begin the list.

As we turn to our silent Yizkor and remember our loved ones who have died, I invite you to consider how you will show the impact that your loved ones continue to have on your life. What can you do to bring their memory and legacy into the world that they no longer inhabit? How will your ongoing love for them manifest in your life?

Even during his lifetime, I used material that I learned in Rabbi Levy's classes quite a bit. I have for years, because good learning, meaningful insights, and fun—if nerdy—tidbits are meant to be shared. But now that he has died and is no longer able to impart his wisdom himself, sharing his teachings, sharing his legacy with others has taken on new meaning. Each time I offer something I learned in studying with him, I show how important he was and is to me. Rabbi Levy may have died, but he will never stop being my teacher, my mentor, my advisor, as long as I let his legacy live on through me. May your loved ones' legacies live on through you as well.