

As the pandemic spread and our world contracted for each of us, the anguish for those dying and grieving was particularly acute. In the early days of the lockdown, one person shared as she fought back her tears, "It's bad enough that my dad had to go into the hospital during the pandemic, but that I cannot be there with him?! I am heartbroken." Many confided their guilt about not being with a loved one who was always there for them. "If I could just be a her beside." "I only want to hold his hand." "Do you know how awful it is to say goodbye to a parent who was always there for you with a nurse holding a phone up to them while you are home?"

To die apart from loved ones was hard enough. Adding insult to injury is that so many have also had to mourn apart from others. At the cemetery, the numbers allowed to attend was – are remains – limited. Yes, we did *shiva* on Zoom and some held backyard *shiva* asking people to sign up for a time slot to visit in order to limit the number of attendees, but it was hard without spontaneous visits or physical hugs. Even this *Yizkor* service had to be limited in person to those who lost a loved one since the last Days of Awe, with many choosing to watch online rather than be here.

We have a model, however, for dying alone with the most important Jewish figure in history – משה רבינו *Moshe Rabbeinu*, "our rabbi" or "our teacher" Moses. As great as Moses was, however, "(God) buried him in Moab ... but to this day no one knows where is his grave."<sup>1</sup> Only God was with him when he died. No one else. To die alone, however, makes him no less great, no less admirable. In fact, the death of Moses is a reminder to all of us – particularly those anguished that they were not with their loved one when they died – they were not "alone".

There is a cliché that "you can't take it with you." Most of us probably think that refers to the things we own. But it's more than that. We take none of our pretensions about how important we are with us to the grave. No matter how much we give to others, no matter how much we have or how little, without

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 34:6

regard to what we have done or failed to do, with no regard to whether we lived a long, full life or are taken too soon, death *will* come. But when it does, though we face it alone, we will not be fully *alone*. As we affirm in the song sung on Shabbat *Adon Olam*, just as life is the gift God gives, God is with us in death, too:

בידו אפקיד רוחי Into God's hands I entrust my spirit,  
 בעת אישן ואעירה when I sleep and when I wake;  
 ועם רוחי גויתי and with my spirit and my body also,  
 ה' לי ולא אירא God is with me, I will not fear.

There is an additional balm to the pain of the “alone-ness” of death, which is why we are here right now. What redeems us from the emptiness of dying alone – even mourning apart from others, is knowing that through shared remembrance something of us lives on. That is why we are drawn to *Yizkor* – this time of communal remembrance. As alone as we feel at this moment, something in us also knows that the only way through the pain, the only hope of incorporating our grief into our living, is to do find a way to do it with others. At *Yizkor*, no matter how apart we are, each of us with our own brokenness and pain – we are bound by a covenant of pain yet also shared resolve to find a renewed sense of living.

One of the great things we discovered this year is that we do not have to be physically close to be emotionally or spiritually bound together. We learned that a קהילה קדושה *kehillah k'doshah*, a sacred community, is best served with a synagogue building, but does not need one. If we did not know it before, we discovered that we do not have to be in the presence of those we love or respect to be inspired by them. We found – even through Zoom (and sometimes even better since we can share videos and because each person has to take their turn talking!), that we can reminisce and cry together when we are far apart. The harshness of this year, then, also offered us important insights that dying alone is redeemed by remembering together. Memory saves us from the “alone-ness” of death, for it reminds us that we are not only physical beings, but spiritual ones.

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik writes:

The Hebrew term for synagogue is *Beit Kneset*, a house of gathering, and it is called so because, in the rabbinic tradition, the phrase *Kneset Yisrael* refers to the mysterious bonds that connect Jews to one another. A synagogue is not merely a physical gathering of individuals, but rather, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik [his great-uncle] explained, it reflects "an invisible *Kneset Yisrael*, which embraces not only contemporaries, but every Jew who has ever lived."<sup>2</sup>

At *Yizkor* we remember the loved ones closest to us. Our partners, parents, siblings and children; grandparents, aunts and uncles; friends, lovers, colleagues and teachers. But we also recall those we never knew – yet whose lives inspire us. We remember the martyrs of our people, mourning their needless deaths, yet dedicated to preserving something of them by recommitting to Jewish continuity. Consider the outpouring of grief and homage this past week for Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Most of us never met her. Yet in her death, which she faced alone, millions have been inspired by her life.

We die alone, though only apart from others. Never without God. Each of us also faces grief alone. But – together or apart, near or far, present in this sanctuary or watching online, here or there – we *remember* together. And that is what saves us from the loneliness of the spirit and offers a way to heal our shattered souls and fractured world.

We pray for healing for all humanity. But at *Yizkor* we look to God and to the memories of our loved ones at our best to begin that healing within ourselves.

הַמָּקוֹם יִנַּחֵם *HaMakom yinachem* - May the Holy One bring comfort to you and only sweet memories of our loved ones.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/meir-soloveichik/sermons-in-solitude-jews-of-faith-are-never-alone](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/meir-soloveichik/sermons-in-solitude-jews-of-faith-are-never-alone)