

Giving Life
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The Community Synagogue, Port Washington, NY
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There is nothing like the power of these High Holy Days. We gather round the holiday table with family and friends, ready to share stories, and reminisce. Family members take their usual seats and fall into their regular familiar roles. The opinionated cousin, the loud uncle, the annoying sibling, and the proud grandparent all play a role. Inevitably someone will spill the wine, an inappropriate joke will be cracked, there will be a heated conversation and hopefully all will be resolved by the end of the evening.

But then there are the empty spaces. The chairs that are no longer filled by the people whom we loved so dearly. Family stories that with the passage of time have become a distant memory. The silence that now exists is deafening. No matter how much we want things to remain the same, life keeps moving. Change is inevitable. We speak a lot about change this time of the year. We are told to change our ways and ask for and grant others forgiveness as we return to God. But change is hard, often permanent, and quite uncertain.

Life and death are what we have on our minds this Yom Kippur afternoon. The *Yizkor* service receives its name from the opening words of central prayer we will shortly recite: *Yizkor elohim nishmat* - May God remember the soul of our departed. We ask God to remember our loved ones so that their souls are bound up in the bond of eternal life. But in truth, *Yizkor* isn't just about God remembering, rather it is about us remembering our loved ones. Four times a year, on our holiest days, we take time to sit with a sense of loss as we dwell in sadness and memory.

The traditional words of the Amidah, offered as an alternative in our siddur and mahzor says: *m'chalkeil chayim b'chesed* - you sustain the living through love, *mchayei meitim b'rachamim rabim* - and with great compassion, You **revive the dead**. This act of God giving life to the dead may be a reference to the messianic times but we don't have to wait for Yom Kippur, our holy festivals, or even the messiah to remember our loved ones. We can bring life to their memories each and every day.¹

Each year I am struck by the certainty of the prayers we say over these High Holy Days and the uncertainty of their outcome. Our tradition teaches that even though our fate is sealed on Yom Kippur, we don't know the verdict. We ask God *zochreinu*

¹ With gratitude to Rabbi Albert Lowenberg for sharing his wisdom.

l'chayim - remember us to life but what if God doesn't remember? What if we stop remembering? What if our loved ones stop remembering us?

The psalmist cries out and we pray what may be the most powerful, vulnerable, and deeply personal section of our Yom Kippur prayers. *Al tashlicheinu l'eit zeekna* – Do not cast us away when we are old, *ki-chlot kocheinu al ta-azveinu* – as our strength diminishes, do not abandon us.” And just like that, all of our hopes and dreams, fears and nightmares are printed in black and white for everyone to see. We say: God listen to me, I don't want to get sick, I don't want to end up helpless. Our *mahzor* names exactly what many of us fear most: The anxiety of change, the uncertainty of the future and the dread of being absolutely and utterly alone when we are old.

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The following is a relatively well-known true story from author Kent Nerburn:²

Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living.

When I arrived at 2:30 a.m., the building was dark except for a single light in the ground floor window. Under these circumstances, many drivers would honk once or twice, wait a minute, then drive away.

But I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on the cab as their only means of transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. The passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I reasoned to myself.

So I walked to the door and knocked. “Just a minute,” answered a frail and elderly voice. I could hear the sound of something being dragged across the floor.

After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80s stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like someone out of a 1940s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase. The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware.

²The Cab Ride I'll Never Forget. (n.d.). Kent Nerburn Wandering, Wondering, Writing.
<https://kentnerburn.com/the-cab-ride-ill-never-forget/>

"Would you carry my bag out to the car?" she said. "I'd like a few moments alone. Then, if you could, come back and help me? I'm not very strong."

I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm, and we walked slowly toward the curb.

She kept thanking me for my kindness. "It's nothing," I told her. "I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated."

"Oh, you're such a good boy," she said.

When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, then asked, "Could you drive through downtown?" "It's not the shortest way," I answered. "Oh, I don't mind," she said. "I'm in no hurry. I'm on my way to a hospice."

I looked in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were glistening. "I don't have any family left," she continued. "The doctor says I don't have very long." I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. "What route would you like me to go?" I asked.

For the next two hours we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl. Sometimes she would have me slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing. As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, "I'm tired. Let's go now."

We drove in silence to the address she had given me. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. Without waiting for me, they opened the door and began assisting the woman. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her.

I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase up to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair. "How much do I owe you?" she asked, reaching into her purse. "Nothing," I said. "You have to make a living," she answered. "There are other passengers," I responded. Almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly. "You gave an old woman a little moment of joy," she said. "Thank you." I squeezed her hand once, then walked out into the dim morning light.

Behind me, I could hear the door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life.

I did not pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. For the remainder of that day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if I had refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away?

How many other moments like that had I missed or failed to grasp? On a quick review, I don't think that I have done anything more important in my life. We are so conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unaware - beautifully wrapped in what others may consider a small one. People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.³

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Yizkor is not a prayer service aimed only at the departed. If it were, it would not be called Yizkor, which means, "remember," an act that only the living, by definition, can do. Yizkor alerts us to the fleeting and vanishing days of our lives and calls on us to act now before it is too late. For many the recitation of Yizkor represents the conclusion of a life. For others, Yizkor is a call to remember those who are still living. Every story that we share, every lesson we've learned, everytime we mention our loved one, it's an act of *tichiyat hameitim* - an act giving life emotionally and spiritually to our loved ones that have passed away.

Shema Koleinu, Adonai Eloheinu - Hear our voice, Adonai our God *chus v'racheim aleinu* - be kind and have compassion on us. On Yom Kippur we pray that God will hear our voice. We want God to really listen, to truly hear us, to know who we really are. *Shema Koleinu* - God hear our voice at our lowest moments. *Shema Koleinu*, God, hear our voice when we struggle to understand the mystery of Your ways. *Shema Koleinu* - God hear our voice even when we have abandoned You.

Hashiveinu Adonai Eilecha v'nashuva – help us to return to You, O'God so that we continue to share stories, open new doors, and create new memories. Today, we pause to remember the past and mourn our loved ones. Tomorrow we take a brave step toward life.

A version of this sermon was delivered at The Community Synagogue, Port Washington, NY, at Yizkor 5784

³ Lang, Rabbi Jory. "The Cab Ride." *Yom Kippur Readings: Inspiration, Information, Contemplation*. Edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, Jewish Lights, 2005, 8-10.