

Yizkor 5780
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The Bonds of Life

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In July, my mom, her brother, and his family came to visit. They were here for just a few days, and most of them had never been to New York before. What would you do with such a quick trip? *We* went to a cemetery.

To be fair, that was a main goal. In recent years, my parents have sifted through the boxes of memorabilia stacked in the basement, and they've discovered bits and pieces of family records. Among them was the notice of headstone placement for my mom's grandfather, my great-grandfather, in the Mount Judah Cemetery—one of those that line the Jackie Robinson Parkway. We knew also that his wife, my great-grandmother, was buried next to him, and through the magic of the internet, we discovered that his parents, my great-*great*-grandparents, were buried at Mount Judah too.

I never knew these people. I'd heard smatterings of information here and there from my mom, I'd seen a few pictures of them—but they might as well have been from a history book.

Then we stood at their graves, and suddenly they came alive. They became more than names; they became my ancestors.

The first headstone we found was my great-great-grandmother's—her name was Sarah. She was buried a hundred and one years ago—a hundred and one years ago! She died of the flu, which, according to family lore, she contracted traveling around the city trying to keep her son, my great-grandfather, out of World War I. She and her husband, Wolf, whose headstone was a few feet away, were the first of their line to immigrate to the States. They came from Bialystok, which was then part of Russia. They came a few years after the pogrom that killed their young daughter, whose name is lost to time. That girl was my great-grandfather's sister—*my* great-grandfather's sister.

We found my great-grandparents Hyman and Florence's graves, too, and the chain was complete: Wolf and Sarah, to Hymie and Florence, to Bernie to Judi to me. My cousin kept saying, as we stood at the graves of our shared ancestors, "If they'd never met, we wouldn't exist."

I'll never really know the people whose remains are buried beneath those headstones, but I am bound to them. Because they lived, I live. Because they lived, I am here.

We are bound to those who came before, and they are bound to us.

On the headstones of many of our ancestors, including mine, there are inscribed five Hebrew letters: 'תִּנְצִיבִיה'. An abbreviation, they stand for “תהי נשמתו/נשמתה צרורה בצרור החיים” *T’bi nishmato/nishmatah tz’rurah bitzror hachayim*. May his or her soul be bound up in the bonds of life.” We pray the same thing in the *El Maleh Rachamim* memorial prayer: “ויצרור בצרור החיים את נשמתו/נשמתה” *Viytzror bitzror hachayim et nishmato/nishmatah*. May the Holy One bind his or her soul in the bonds of life.” It’s a beautiful, evocative phrase: *tzror hachayim*, the bonds of life.

As with all metaphors, it’s impossible to define what the bonds of life are. But our tradition invokes them again and again: when we bury our dead, when we erect a marker at their grave, when we recall them on *yahrzeits* and at *Yizkor* year after year. At each of these moments, we are invited to hold fast to—and be held by—those bonds, the bonds of life.

For we are bound to those who came before, and they are bound to us.

For the rabbis of the Talmud, *tzror hachayim* points to the bonds of life itself, the wraps which tie our souls to the very Source of Life. Talmudic legend says that, beneath the Holy One’s Throne of Glory, there exists something of a treasure chest—itsself called the bonds of life—in which the souls of all the righteous are treasured for eternity.¹ Something of who they were made a difference, and it lasts forever.

We know that this is true, that the impact made by those who came before reverberates long after they have died. Most directly, this is a function of procreation; as my cousin said of our great-great-grandparents, had they never met, we wouldn’t be here. But beyond the matter of biological or adoptive ancestry, *midrash* teaches that the offspring of the righteous are their deeds.² When we tell the stories of our beloved dead, when we live according to the wisdom they taught, something of who they were remains bound to life.

We also know that they were not perfect. All made mistakes, and some caused real harm. Remembering them can be painful, yet at least one talmudic sage teaches that there is room for gratitude here, too. Had our forebears not been prone to sin, we would not have come into the world.³ In other words, were a generation to reach perfection, there would be no need for another to come along, to finish the work of repairing the world. We now get to correct the mistakes of those who came before.

¹ B. Shabbat 152b

² Rashi to Genesis 6:9, quoting Genesis Rabbah 30:6

³ B. Avodah Zarah 5a

For better or for worse, the lives of the dead are bound to us. As we recall them and transform their memories into blessing, we build a better world for the next generation.

We, too, are bound to them. Through memory and a sense of loss, we feel their presence as if it were living, even after they're gone.

This bond of life makes me think of a story,⁴ as told by Rachel Naomi Remen, the author and clinical professor of family medicine. This story is about her friend Jane, a dog lover.

“Jane’s dog was never more than two feet away from her. Gentle, brown, and devoted, it even slept on her bed at night. It’s devotion was returned full measure, and when it died of old age, [Jane] said that she doubted she would ever have another dog. She didn’t have another dog for several years.

“During this time, [Dr. Remen] visited her often in the small town where she lived. Sunday afternoon [they] would walk down to the beach together. In those few blocks, [Jane] would stop and pat dogs on leashes, and strays would come up joyfully to greet her. Each got a moment of tenderness and a dog biscuit from her pocket.

“Once [Dr. Remen] asked her if she missed her dog. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘very much.’ But then she [said] something odd. When she had a dog there were two kinds of dogs: her dog and all the other dogs. Now it seems as if all dogs are her dog.”

When someone dies, we don’t simply bury their body in the ground and pack their lives in the closet. We are bound to them too much; we see signs of them everywhere, little reminders that recall who they were. We miss them, and our lives are forever wrapped up in theirs.

And our lives are wrapped up in those of one another, too. *Tzror bachayim*, the bonds of life—we could say, “the bonds of the living.” The ties we have with each other help us feel held in times of grief, seen times of sorrow, and supported in times of healing.

In the prayerbooks we often use for *shiva* gatherings, there’s an opening reading by Chaim Stern that asks, “Who among us has not passed through trials and bereavements? Some bear fresh wounds in their hearts, and therefore feel more keenly the kinship of sorrow. Others, whose days of mourning are more remote, still recall the comfort that sympathy brought to their sorrowing hearts.”⁵

⁴ Remen, Rachel Naomi. *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*. Pan Macmillan Australia, 2010. Page 184.

⁵ Person, Hara, and Elaine Zecher. *Mishkan T'filah for the House of Mourning*. CCAR Press, 2010. Page 1a.

It's part of the human condition, our capacity for grief. But perhaps it's that very aspect of our lives that binds us to one another more than anything. Everyone in this room, every single one of us, is remembering someone today. None of us is alone. We are here to shed our tears together and pray for healing together, and we are here, together, to comfort one another.

We are *bachayim*, the living, and the bonds among us give us life.

תִּנְצְבֵיהִ—these are the letters I saw carved into the stones at Mount Judah cemetery, the stones marking the bodily remains of my ancestors. “תְּהִי נִשְׁמַתָּם צְרוּרָה בְּצִרוּר הַחַיִּים” *T’hi nishmatam tz’rurah bitzror bachayim*. May their souls be bound up in the bonds of life.” As I stood there, I felt bound to the people whose names the stones bore, bound to the living family standing there with me, bound to a now-Polish town I’ve never seen where a small girl was murdered, bound to the immigrant Jewish story, bound to lives beyond time and space.

One day, we too will become the ancestors to future generations. Let us live lives worthy of the bonds that will link us to them.

We are bound to those who come before and after, and they are bound to us. And we are bound to one another here, today.

El Maleh Rachamim, O Merciful, Comforting Presence, may the souls of those we remember be bound up in the bond of life eternal. May we feel the impact of their righteousness in our own lives, transforming their memories into blessing. May we see reminders of them as we go about our days, that we carry them with us even in their absence. May we cherish the ties that bind us, the living, to one another now, as we share our strength with those at our side.

Zichronam livrachab. May their memories be a blessing to us. And let us say: Amen.