

Never Is A Long Time ó Yom Kippur Yizkor
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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I sometimes leave a place and marvel at the fact that I will never again return. Never is a long time. Sometimes a hiking trail, sometimes a city on vacation or a restaurant, sometimes just a particular seat on an airplane, these places, big and small, make me wonder about the length of never and forever and never again. Places get me to think but when those moments happen with people, I don't **think** about forever, I **feel** it.

I went to see my Uncle Robby soon before he died. We sat in the den and talked of my kids and this and that. I looked at his antique maps of the Holy Land all over the den walls and sipped a cool drink and gave him a hug when he needed to go back and lie down. He was tired. I sat with my aunt for a time. We talked a bit of prognosis but more of my kids and my work, of my cousins and the weather. I knew when I hugged him that that would be the last time and I put that knowledge in a box in my head until I got to my car. And then I cried. Never is a long time.

Each of us in this fellowship of memory and loss can remember the last time with the ones we love. The last meal or the last laugh. The last time we heard the philharmonic or the last time we drank some wine. The last seder at which the family's heirloom candelabra lit the faces of everyone; using those boring old hagaddahs but laughing through it nonetheless. Recalling these lasts brings a tightness to our throats while tears well up and burn our eyes. Grief coming from God knows where ó or grief coming as it always does. Either way, grief.

And while the pain of grief can overwhelm it illuminates a love from beyond the grave, a love that no death can take, a love that no loss can break. The poet teaches that, òto grieve is also òto celebrate the depth of the union. Tears are then the jewels of remembrance, sad but glistening with beauty of the past. So grief in its bitterness marks the endí but it also is praise to the one who is gone.ø

The pain we feel is not only the love that we shared with someone now gone. That pain is also our capacity to love. And so we must redeem the grief which can so easily fill our cups with bitter wine. We can only redeem that grief by giving away the love that sustains the grief itself. When we take the last hug from a loved one and give it to a small child, that hug redeems a bit of grief. When we take the necklace that mom loved and place it on a new bat mitzvah's neck, mom's love echoes as the cold metal warms and grief warms to love even as our tears spill over. And when we make new the holiday traditions from our dining room tables and kitchen stoves and living room couches, when we make those traditions our own we breathe in lungs full of love from the grief that sometimes seems to drown us. The love wrapped up in our grief, a love so powerful that it can hurt, can also heal the ones we love and bring more goodness and light to this world's shadows.

My Uncle Robby's maps now hang on my office wall among paintings by my sister, diplomas, pictures of my wife and children, a needlepoint by my grandmother, a portrait of my great-great grandfather and gifts of art whose colors reflect the love of the gift givers. As maps they show me the Land of Israel ó a place I love ó as understood at one time or another. As something from my beloved Uncle Robby, they help me place myself in the web of family and love and values that gives my life ultimate meaning. In their small way, those maps help me redeem my grief for my uncle who loved me because they remind me of the love that I must now give to others. When we learn to give that love away, we find our grief redeemed, our love fulfilled, and never does not feel quite as unbearably long.

Our Yizkor service, page 541.