

Reciting Yizkor on Simchat Torah

Rabbi Melanie Aron

October 10, 2020

Reciting Yizkor on Simchat Torah is different from reciting it on Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is already a somber holiday, so the remembrance of those who are gone seems very appropriate. Yizkor evokes appropriate feelings in our heart. It may bring up regrets and remind us not to postpone reconciling with those from whom we are estranged. Those we remember may be examples for us of the traits we wish to strengthen in ourselves and of the good we hope to do.

But Simchat Torah has a totally different feel. It comes at the end of Sukkot, a holiday on which we are commanded to be, *ach sameach*, only joyous. It is a time of celebration, as wild as Purim eve in many communities, including wild dancing and shots at the end of each *hakafah*. It is a time when, in some Orthodox congregations, our guard comes down, including the literal fence, the *mechitzah* between the men and the women.

Reciting Yizkor in the midst of the joyous Simchat Torah service reminds me of breaking the glass at a wedding.

Why do we break the glass? There are as many explanations as there are rabbis willing to offer them. The original story in the Talmud has a valuable glass broken by the bride's father, to make sure the partying didn't get too out of hand. Is Yizkor meant to tone things down after the *hakafot*? That would fit in too with the reading of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, a somber text.

Another explanation is that the breaking of the glass comes so that we remember the destruction of Jerusalem, fulfilling the psalmist vow, “if I forget thee O Jerusalem.” Even in a time of great personal joy, we are to be conscious of the broader experience of our community. For centuries that was remembering that the Jewish people were in exile; today, that might be keeping in mind those who are not getting through this pandemic as securely as are many of us.

The explanation I like best is that we break the glass as a reminder that the good things in life are fragile and ephemeral. The relationship of a loving couple is fragile; it might be destroyed in years to come. The possessions we amass are ephemeral. As Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, reminds us: Our wealth, our successes, even our wisdom—these are all no more substantial than vapor. But the conclusion our tradition reaches from this is not despair, but appreciation: Enjoy life while it is ours to live, be thankful for the people in our lives, and take joy in what we do have, fulfilling the rabbinic injunction to be among those who are *sameach bechelko*, finding joy with our portion. Treat all of life as precious, and don’t take the good we experience for granted.

As we head into Yizkor this morning, may the awareness that death is part of life helps us sort out that which is truly important. Thinking of our loved ones who are gone, may we be more sensitive in our relationships with those who are still with us. Sadness and longing coexist in our hearts with gratitude for the time we had with those we have lost, and appreciation for the healing we have experienced.