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Yizkor 5780

Where the Lost Ones Go

I'd like to tell you a ghost story. It is called, *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, by Charles Dickens. Mr. Redlaw, the protagonist, is haunted by painful, difficult memories – all of the wrongs he has suffered, the iniquities he has endured, the burden of the losses he has shouldered – they plague him and fill his days with grief and unhappiness. A specter appears and says, “Your wisdom has discovered that the memory of sorrow, wrong, and trouble is the [bane] of all mankind, and that mankind would be the happier...without it. Go! Be freed from such remembrance, from this hour, carry...the blessing of such freedom with you. Go!” Uttering these words thus erases all of Redlaw's memories. But, as the poor man soon discovers, this does not provide the relief for which he had hoped. Without his memories, Redlaw loses his capacity for empathy and understanding. He becomes an even more embittered and miserable man, spreading unhappiness to all of those around him. He soon realizes that life without his memories, both good and bad, is no life at all.

What would it be like for us if, when someone close to us dies, all remnant of them is erased from our minds, as if they never existed at all? Would it be worth it, to be freed from the burden of our loss, to live on as if they never were?

We are here today because we have loved and we have lost. And because we remember. We who mourn – the beautiful, the broken, the complicated, the simple – know that life and living depend on memory. Yet, in some moments, like the protagonist in the Dicken's story,

we may feel so overwhelmed with the grief of memory that we wish it away. But, in truth, the pain is part of what preserves the connection between us and our loved ones, now gone. In the heartbreak we feel their heart beat. And so, we choose to be here on this Yizkor, all of these emotions swirling about us, so we can feel their presence and remind ourselves that they are not lost.

Since our son, Jonah, was about three years old, one of his favorite books has been a beautifully illustrated edition of the well-loved folk song, Puff the Magic Dragon. The story is, in its purest reading, a story of a boy and his beloved dragon. The dragon, Puff, is ageless, but the boy, Jackie, grows up, becomes occupied with the realities of adulthood, and leaves his fantastical friend, Puff, all alone.

The first time I sang this songbook to Jonah, as he sat in my lap, I felt his shoulders start to shake, and soon big tears were rolling down his cheeks. By the end of the book, we were both crying. I turned him around to face me and asked him why he felt so sad. Jonah looked up at me and told me he felt bad for Puff because Jackie had forgotten him. I was shocked by Jonah's emotional reaction to the story and I put the book away on the shelf, thinking it might be too painful for him to want to read it again.

A few weeks later, however, I was surprised when Jonah asked if we could read Puff the Magic Dragon again. As we sang it and looked at the beautiful pictures, sure enough, he, and then I, began to cry again. This time, neither of us shied away from our emotions. We held each other and smiled, though our cheeks were stained with tears.

Jonah, who has just turned 7, still asks me to take Puff off the shelf and read it with him. This cathartic ritual has become Jonah's way of creating space for those feelings of sadness and

loss, as well as honoring and remembering all those things we've lost and nearly forgotten. These days, we don't always cry, though sometimes we do, but each time brings us together in a beautiful moment of memory.

Historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi reminds us that the Hebrew word for remember – *zachor* – is repeated nearly 200 times in the Torah. Daily, we are commanded to remember the grand sweeps of creation, redemption and freedom. Each prayer service recalls the moments of devastating defeat and the inexplicable miracles of hope and perseverance. Our Jewish rituals and observances are all tools to help us remember. And yet, we as Jews are emphatically *not* historians. As Yerushalmi notes, memory in Judaism is not passive recall – it is the act of **how** *what was* comes to shape *what will be*. And as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “There is a profound difference between history and memory. History is *his* story – an event that happened *sometime* else to *someone* else. Memory is *my* story – something that happened to me and is part of who I am.” By remembering those we have lost, we make them a part of our story. A part of us.

We are here on this Yizkor, to do just this; to come together in a beautiful moment of remembering, looking back on those who were and transforming those memories into what we will become. Together we recall the stories of our loved ones who have passed from this earth, and together create a sacred space for the myriad emotions these stories evoke. We do so as a community, as a family, because sometimes it is too painful to abide our memories on our own.

For some here today, the recent loss of a loved one still stings our eyes and re-opens the gaping wound in our hearts. Thinking of them and the empty space they've left behind is

almost so painful, we'd rather try to forget. It's hard to imagine our life moving forward without them. For others, the pain is more distant. The passage of time has smoothed the sharp edges of loss, the memories of your loved ones shrouded in a haze of years. You have learned how to move on and continue embracing life. Some of us are here today thinking about those who died tragically, whether by illness, accident, or by their own hand. Others were taken too soon; a child, a spouse, a friend with whom we didn't have nearly as much time as we, or they, deserved. Perhaps anger mingles with your grief as you wish they could be here, sitting among us now. Some of our loved ones died at a ripe old age, beloved and content with their lot in life. Remembering them brings a smile to our lips and a warmth to our hearts. But some of you are thinking of those who have passed with whom your relationships were toxic, abusive, challenging and messy. Remembering them inspires a complicated kind of sadness. It might seem that, with all of these emotions, it might just be easier to forget. To close the book and put it away on the shelf. Never telling their stories again. Silencing the ghosts of memory that haunt us. Moving on and starting over, living on as if these souls had never existed.

The magical wizarding world of the Harry Potter book series is populated with ghosts and spirits of all kinds. In the final scene of the seventh book, *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry ventures into the forest to face the world's most evil wizard, Lord Voldemort. Harry knows that, in order to save the lives of all his friends and teachers, he must sacrifice himself at the hand of You-Know-Who. With him, Harry carries the Resurrection Stone, a magical object that he believes will bring his loved ones back to life and help him in his fight against the Dark Lord. As he holds the stone in the palm of his hand, the ghostly spirits of his loved ones appear in a circle around him – his godfather Sirius Black, his beloved Professor

Lupin and, of course, his mother and father, Lily and James Potter, who were murdered by Voldemort when Harry was an infant.

As these souls surround him in the forest, Harry speaks with them. “You’ll stay with me?” He asks them. “Until the very end.” His father replies. “Voldemort won’t be able to see you? Asks Harry. “We are a part of you, invisible to everyone else.” says his mother. “Stay close to me.” Harry implores them. He puts the stone away, and the images of his loved ones disappear. In that moment, Harry realizes that, while the Resurrection Stone won’t actually bring his loved ones back to life, it can remind him that those souls he thought were lost are with him and within him always. With this knowledge, feeling their presence surrounding him, and wanting to make them proud, Harry musters the courage to fight his final battle.

As it was for Harry and his beloved dead, so it is with ours.

Close your eyes for a minute. Go back in time and recall a moment with the person you are thinking of today. Where were you? What were you doing together? Remember the color of their eyes and how they looked at you. What were they wearing? How had they styled their hair? What smells filled the air? What were you feeling? Conjure up the sound of their voice. Recall the story of their life. Be in that moment. Remember who you were. Who they were. You may not be able to pinpoint the year or the date or what time it was, but I’m sure you can reconstruct the *sense* of this moment and relive it in your mind’s eye. Even if the memory is faded, it still endures. Even if they have left this world, they yet remain.

In this way, our loved ones are never gone. Nor are they static, frozen in time. In remembering them today, even if it’s painful, we weave their harmonies into our own melody. The music is always there, we need just close our eyes and listen. And, when we hear that melody, we hear

it in our hearts and in our minds and the essence of them comes rushing in. When we are still, eyes closed, hearts open, we honor the requiem of their lives in all its complexity. When we remember, our loved ones resonate within us still, filling us with strength, with courage, with insight and perspective.

For many of us, the scariest thing we can imagine is that when we die, we will simply fade away into oblivion. Nothing of us will be remembered and this life will have been for naught. This ritual of Yizkor, of remembering, is the antidote to this fear. Our tradition implores us to conjure up memories of our loved ones – the laughter, the tears, the pain, and the stories – at this service and every time we rise to say kaddish. And, each time we do so, we are invited to ponder what legacy we will leave behind. We ask ourselves, “How have we touched the lives of those around us? Have we created meaningful connections? Have we fully and courageously lived out our story in this world?” Yizkor then, becomes a reminder to us as well, to live our lives fully so that, when our end comes, we can take solace in knowing we are worthy of remembrance.

We remember, though it may make our hearts ache with sadness, because to do otherwise would be to rob the deceased of their life and legacy. Our task then becomes to search for the meaning that emerged from their time on earth and make it our own. We can learn from the mistakes of our loved ones by choosing a different path. We can carry out their legacy by living in a way that would make them proud. By reflecting on, and reclaiming the memories of our dead, we embrace their imperfections as well as the beauty within. In light of our loss, we can choose to live more fully – with more joy, with more intention, with more purpose.

Author Diane Cole reflects, "One morning shortly after my mother died, a hesitant tap on the shoulder stopped me as I left the synagogue where I had just finished saying the Mourner's Kaddish. I turn to face a fellow...service regular. 'I don't mean to be presumptuous,' he said in a soft voice. 'I know you're very sad right now. But I wanted to tell you that I went through that too, when my father died several years ago. And here's the thing: Believe it or not, I am as close to my father now as when he was alive! Maybe even closer, because I have come to understand him better. He is inside me, I hear his voice. We are still that close.' Then [the man] smiled and waved goodbye, leaving me to ponder [those words]."

What he meant, I think, was that our dead inhabit us like ghosts. The trick, as he then and I have learned since, is to befriend them rather than have them haunt us. They will greet us on sad anniversaries as well as in joy. We will imagine a deceased parent's response to her grandchild's arrival; or we will call back from memory the words or actions of the one person to whom we would have turned were he or she still here. And eventually, when we hear that voice again, it will bring not just pain but comfort and resolution."

Complicated though it may be, we Jews are commanded to *zachor*, to remember, as a sacred obligation to those who came before us. With each passing year, may we come to cherish our memories, lest we be haunted by them. And, in turn, may the memories of our loved ones give definition to our lives and ensure that we, ourselves, live in a way that is worthy of being remembered. As we sing these songs and recite these age-old words together, may the ache of loss be lessened, and may we leave this sanctuary with greater compassion and a deeper understanding of others among us struggling with loss. On this Yizkor, we honor the lives and legacies of those who no longer walk beside us in this world but who remain within us still. By remembering their song anew, we evolve our everchanging melody of love and life.

