

Sh'mini Atzeret- Simchat Torah. Yizkor sermon.

By Cantor Sheila Nesis
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During her Rosh Hashanah sermon Rabbi Mari Chernow, from Temple Chai in Phoenix, stated a surprising fact: in the year 2016, the single most read piece in the New York Times was not about the presidential election, Isis, Brexit, the Zika virus, or the Denver Broncos. The single most read story was an opinion piece by Alain de Botton entitled, *“Why You Will Marry The Wrong Person.”* Now, from the title, you would conclude that de Botton is pessimistic about marriage and long term relationships. On the contrary, he’s optimistic but thinks that we, society, may have been set up for failure by what he calls the “romantic novel”. The romantic novel is the narrative about love and relationships that has shaped much of our western history on marriage. The story goes something like this: two people meet and fall in love, and from that moment on, there is nothing-to-work-on-between-them. He says,

“Characters might have jobs, but on the whole, they have little impact in their lives. Work goes on somewhere else. Children are incidental sweet symbols of mutual love. They take up little time, and are generally wise. In the romantic novel we have only a hazy idea of who does the housework. It is not seen as relevant to the relationship.”

In reality, he contrasts,

“There are toys in the living room, pieces of chicken under the tables, and no time to talk. Everyone-is-always-tired. This too is love. There are opportunities for genuine heroism, usually having to do with laundry. And there is, sometimes, even in our most intimate relationships, a deep existential loneliness. The work is in meeting each other not in our areas of greatness, but at our weakest and most vulnerable. The work is in adopting a more

forgiving, humorous and kinder perspective, that is, more empathy, more compassion.”

Reading this account makes me think of another relationship that many of us have held onto for years: and that is our relationship to loss, mourning, and our commitment to give those loved ones who no longer are physically with us, eternal life.

Some years ago I delivered a Yizkor sermon during Pesach. It was only a few months after my mother had died and after I had become a mother myself. At the beginning of that sermon I listed all that had happened that morning in order for me to be able to be at the service with all of you. Except for pumping and breastfeeding, much in that list has not changed. It involves being woken up at 6:00 AM or earlier by my son, who wants to jump in my bed only to demand his “leche” (milk). It follows with making breakfast and packing lunch and getting my son ready and somehow leaving the house on time. It does not include, most of the time, making the bed or cleaning the crumbs under the table after breakfast. It does include a fight over TV time, and giving up so that I can have the twenty minutes I need to get ready for the day. And yes, this does include my husband’s help.

Between that Yizkor and this one, there have been promises, some direct, some indirect, I made to myself about what I wanted and needed to do to honor my mother’s memory, to keep her values alive and give her eternal life through my actions. Some of them were:

1. Make a photo album so I can show her face to my son.
2. Talk about her. Share who she was and her story.
3. Make a date with one of her closest friends just to talk about her and learn more about who she was.
4. Visit her grave when I travel to Argentina.
5. Take my son to visit Argentina so he will know where I come from and where she came from.

6. Remember her passion and her devotion to her family. Honor her, but try to learn from her mistakes.
7. Be the happy and gentle person she knew me to be. Don't get embittered by death and life's disappointments.
8. Whenever she comes unbidden into my mind, stay with that thought, stay with her for a little while. Don't rush into what's next in the day or wherever you might be needed immediately.

And the list goes on. Your list may look a little different. Perhaps it includes a trip you always talked about together that you want to experience. Perhaps it's taking over her/his business or continuing a social action cause, etc. I won't tell you how many of the promises that I've made to myself I've been able to fulfill, and I won't ask about your numbers. Why? Because, as de Botton suggests, we have jobs that have an impact on our lives. We have children who are very wise, but who do take a lot of time. There are toys and crumbs everywhere. There are friends who need to confide in us, and others who need a hospital visit or a meal delivered. There are elderly parents who need our assistance. When given forty-five minutes at night, I personally have to decide between putting together the album with the photos, or doing laundry and folding clothes for the next day. What do we do with this? What do we do with our pledge to give a parent, a sibling, a child, a friend, eternal life? What does it mean and look like to honor someone's memory? Have we too, just like in Alain de Botton's piece about marriage, been set up for failure because expectations are too high when it comes to loss?

Jorge Drexler, a famous Uruguayan singer and songwriter, tells the story of how he composed the music to one of the first songs he wrote when he emigrated from Uruguay to Spain. He chose to compose it in the Uruguayan style of **milonga**. The **milonga** has a rhythmic pattern that we musicians call 3-3-2. And it has a characteristic emphasis. But this characteristic pattern comes from Africa. He says:

“...in the 19th century it could be found in the brothels in Persia, in the 13th century in Spain, from where, five centuries later, it would cross over to America with African slaves. Meanwhile in the Balkans, it encounters the gypsy scale, which, in part, gives origin to klezmer music, which Ukrainian Jewish immigrants brought to Brooklyn, New York. They sing it in their banquet halls, and their neighbor, an Argentine young child of Italian origin named Astor Piazzolla, hears it, assimilates it, and transforms the tango of the second half of the 20th century, that travels all the way to Buenos Aires and Uruguay, also, influencing the Uruguayan milonga with his... 123, 123, 12, 123... “

What if memory making is more like a 123, 123, 12, 123...? What if blessed memory is like a melody with a characteristic emphasis? What if giving our loved ones eternal life is less about crossing things off a list, and more about both tapping into that characteristic emphasis they represent in our lives, as well as allowing it to come to the surface, to surprise us when we least expect it? A vivid anecdote about their lives sometimes overwhelms us with joy and laughter, sometimes with sorrow and tears.

The sudden memory of the sound of their voice is a rare and precious gift. Seeing their facial expressions captured on the face of a brother, our child, a friend brings a smile to our faces. De Botton would say, *“this too is love”*, and I say, *“this too, is memory making.”*

We remember them not only in what we can do to make them present, but in allowing their Presence to emerge in unexpected ways at unexpected times. Perhaps, we give them eternal life much as we do with a melody that changes, yet retains a same characteristic emphasis, traveling through time and space. Perhaps, we give them eternal life as we move through the

seasons of our lives and all the changes that those bring, but they remain as our constant, a thread that is underneath it all.

This morning, we gather to take this time to think of our loved ones and to reflect on the ways in which we can surrender to their ongoing and all encompassing Presence. Let's allow them to overwhelm us, to take our breath away; let's open ourselves to meet them, as de Botton would say, "*at our weakest and most vulnerable moments*". Adonai, let us open our hearts and teach us to surrender, to encounter their presence in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. Let us not be enslaved to our "memory making bucket lists". We love them and we miss them. They are now the constant in the song of our lives.