

This Is The Blessing
Shmini Atzeret-Simchat Torah - Yizkor 5778

Four times a year, we gather as a community to recite public prayers of remembrance. We come together on the last day of Pesach, on Shavuot, on Yom Kippur, and today, this Festival of Atzeret-Simchat Torah. Today we are supposed to rejoice as we conclude of the annual cycle of public Torah readings and begin the cycle anew, but it can be hard to celebrate when foremost in our minds are cherished memories of our loved ones who have died.

Once a year, I take out and read the old obituary. By now the words are familiar, so familiar that I know them by heart. Still, I'm saddened when I read the account of a life journey that came to its end. Let me share with you the words of the obituary:

Moses went up from the steppes of Moav to Mount Nevo, to the summit of Pisgah, opposite Jericho, and the Eternal showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan; all Naphtali; the land of Ephraim and Manasseh; the whole land of Judah as far as the Western Sea; the Negev; and the Plain -- the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees -- as far as Tzoar.... So Moses the servant of Adonai died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of the Eternal. God buried him in the valley in the land of Moav, near Beit-Peor; and no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated....Never again did there arise a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom Adonai knew face to face, in all the

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signs and wonders that the Eternal sent him to display in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and all his land, and for all the mighty acts and awesome sights that Moses displayed in the sight of all Israel. (Deut. 34:1-7; 10-12)

These words are from *V'Zot HaBrakhah*, the last *parashah* in the Torah. They are read only today on Simchat Torah, never as part of the weekly cycle of Shabbat Torah readings. Why do these words make me sad? Because the narrative of a unique life journey has come to an end? Sort of. Because God didn't let Moses, of all people, enter the Promised Land? Yes, although I understand the concept that there are consequences for our actions, even if you're Moses. But Moses was one of a kind. He worked so hard and had to deal with so much *tzuris*. Surely, if anyone was deserving of a little *rachmanis*, a little compassion, it was he! We, who didn't schlep through the wilderness for 40 years with a horde of kvetching Israelites, can board an airplane in Denver and land in Israel in a matter of hours. From the eastern outskirts of Jerusalem we clearly can see Har Nevo, from which Moses viewed the panorama of *Eretz Yisrael*, but the poor guy wasn't allowed even one toe in the Promised Land. While I am saddened for Moses as a person, while I can sympathize with the Israelites who wept in mourning for 30 days because their beloved leader was gone, I am not heartbroken because, as we know, the story goes on. The death

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of Moses was not the end of the people. Look around. *B'nai Yisrael*, the Children of Israel, lives on through us. Is that not the testament of a good life: that it lives on with strength through those who remember?

And so we are here, to remember not only Moses, a prophet unique in the history of our people, but also to remember those in our own families who lives impacted our own so very personally. Today I think especially about my mother, Beatrice Rubin Miller, whose was born on the real Columbus Day, October 12, and who died not knowing how our family's narrative would unfold: that Rick and I would get married, that she would be the grandmother of three incredible boys, and that her husband, my dad, would survive her by almost 22 and manage competently on his own. At this time of *yizkor*, each of us holds close the memories of our own loved ones. We recall when they lived, where they lived, how they lived. We think of the cherished moments we spent with them. We recall what made them giddy with pleasure and what made them tear up with emotion. We remember how it felt to hold their hand or to be wrapped in their loving embrace. We think about how their lives interwove with ours. We think about how best to honor them, how to hold on to those special remembrances, and how to perpetuate their memory.

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Keeping alive the names, the stories, and the love we shared is why we observe *yizkor*. We are here because we understand *v'zot habrakhah*, that remembrance itself is a blessing. So we ask God to bless us with the gift of remembering, to bless us with reminiscences that are tender and true and undiminished by time, and to bless us with the strength to share those memories as an everlasting memorial to those whose lives touched ours.

Zikhronam l'vrakhah, may the memories of our loved ones always be a blessing.