



High Holidays 2021/5782

Rabbi Ain's Sermon – Yom Kippur Yizkor: How to Bring People Back to Life

What is a life worth?

This was the question that was explored in the docudrama *Worth*, released two weeks ago on Netflix in anticipation of the 20th anniversary of the horrific attacks of September 11th based on the memoir, *What is a Life Worth*, written by Kenneth Feinberg. The film chronicles Ken Feinberg's role as the special master of the 9/11 victim fund. For those of you who remember, Kenny, as I know him, spoke here several years ago as a guest speaker. To me, Kenny, and his wife Dede, have been close friends of my mother since I was in nursery school.

The question of how to judge a life hits home in the movie (and the book upon which it was based) as the movie deals with various stories of those whose lives were lost on that awful day and how, in trying to determine their worth, it became clear that we cannot look at people solely as numbers or statistics, but we need to know their stories. We need to realize that being worth something, is not a question of financial value, even if we know it often means that.

I realized that just as on Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the mitzvah of Jewish peoplehood as a global concept, where we needed to tell our stories in broad strokes, to understand that we are part of something larger than ourselves, we also need to understand that each person is created, *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God, and we have an obligation to understand what that means and how to remember people, especially today, Yom Kippur, now, at Yizkor, where we are asking God to judge us and remember us.

As our member, and my teacher, Rabbi Jack Moline recently wrote, "the rituals of remembering that exist in so many traditions – not the large memorials for the many, the famous and the wealthy, rather the candles and flowers and headstones that exist for the sole purpose of reminding us not to abandon the dead entirely.

In my own tradition, he writes, includes the annual recitation of memorial prayers on the anniversary of a death and the dedication of a space in most every synagogue for a small plaque that recalls a loved one's name. But most especially, on the most solemn day of the year, Yom Kippur, when Jews rehearse their own deaths, a time is set aside for all of us collectively to remember our dead individually. For a moment, we return to that exact point when neither of us has abandoned the other in a visit to the small cemetery of the heart."

What Jack is reminding us of, is that there are moments for grand memorials and there are moments for stories, to remember the people, to appreciate how they lived, how they died, and I will suggest, how we bring them back to life.

To me it starts with learning people's names. It can't just be about numbers.

In the book *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller, she decides, after years of being known as Emily Doe, the anonymous woman assaulted on the Stanford campus by Brock Turner, to use not only her voice but her name as this as an opportunity to help others find their worth. Though she wasn't killed, thank God, on that night she was assaulted, she was able to live a new life, one where she spoke out, and gave voice to so many.



Learning how to give people voice is crucial during the yizkor service, where we are taught to remember them.

One of my most favorite Israeli poems is by Zelda

Having grown up in a traditional Jewish home, her poem was inspired by a famous midrash in Kohelet Rabbah which says that “A person is known by three names. One that he is called by his father and mother. One that people know him by, and one that he acquires for himself.”

She wrote:

Everyone has a name given to him by God and given to him by his father and his mother.

Everyone has a name given to him by his stature and the way he smiles. and given to him by the fabric he wears.

Everyone has a name given to him by the mountains and given to him by his walls.

Everyone has a name given to him by the constellations of stars and given to him by his neighbors.

Everyone has a name given to him by his sins and given to him by his longings.

Everyone has a name given to him by his enemies and given to him by his love.

Everyone has a name given to him by his celebrations and given to him by his work.

Everyone has a name given to him by the seasons of the year and given to him by his blindness.

Everyone has a name given to him by the sea and given to him by his death.

Learning the names of our loved ones and the loved ones of others isn't always easy. We often get desensitized to tragedy, given how overwhelming our world often seems.

But we are reminded today that we can't do that. We need to stop and remember, and so the question is how.

Rabbi David Steinhardt, a conservative rabbi in Florida teaches:

The Diary of Anne Frank is impactful because she was one young woman. You can't remember an event in numbers, you need to remember it in names, but looking at the individual doesn't take away from the magnitude of moments-

There are other places where focus on the power of names as well.

Vietnam Memorial

Yad Vashem Children's Memorial

And of course, the 9/11 reading of the names

But Chayim Nachman Bialik, one of the most famous of Israel's poets, wrote a poem called "After my death" that causes us to think about how we remember people



AFTER MY DEATH

Chaim Nachman Bialik

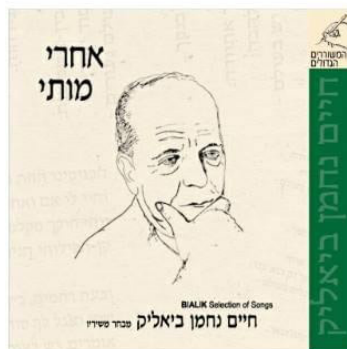
Say this when you mourn for me:

There was a man – and look, he is no more.
He died before his time.
The music of his life suddenly stopped.
A pity! There was another song in him.
Now it is lost forever.

A great pity! He had a violin, a living, speaking soul to which he uttered the secrets of his heart, making all its strings vibrate, save one he kept inviolate. Back and forth his supple fingers danced, one string alone remained entranced still unheard.

A pity!
All its life that string quivered silently shook, yearned for its song, its mate, as a heart saddens before its fate. Despite delay it waited daily mutely beseeching its saviour lover who lingered, loitered, tarried ever, and did not come.

Great is the pain!
There was a man – and look, he is no more.
The music of his life suddenly stopped.
There was another song in him.
Now it is lost forever.



אחרי מותי חיים נחמן ביאליק

אחרי מותי ספדו ככה לי:
"היה איש – וראו: איננו עוד;
קדם זמנו מת האיש הזה,
ושירת תייו באמצע נפסקה;
וצרו עוד מזמור אחד היה-לו –
והנה אבד המזמור לעד,
אבד לעד!

וצר מאד! הן כנור היה-לו –
נפש תיה וממללה,
והמשורר מדי דברו בו
את-כל-רזי לבו הגיד לו,
וכל-הנימין ידו דובכה,
אך רז אחד בקרבו הכחיד,
סחור סחור לו אצבעותיו פזזו,
נימה אחת אלמה נשארה,
אלמה נשארה עד-היום!

וצר מאד, מאד!
כל-ימיה זעה נימה זו,
דומם זעה, דומם רעה,
אל-מזמורה, דודה גואלה,
במהה, צמאה, עגמה, נכספה,
כאשר יעגם לב למזמן לו;
ואם-התמהמה – בכל-יום חכטה-לו
ובנהימה טמירה שועה-לו –
והוא התמהמה אף לא-בא,
אף לא-בא!

וגדול מאד, מאד הכאב!
היה איש – וראו: איננו עוד,
ושירת תייו באמצע נפסקה;
עוד שיר מזמור אחד היה-לו,
והנה אבד המזמור לעד,
אבד לעד!"

ת"רס"ד.



BUT I WANT TO REJECT THIS- i reject that something is lost forever. Yes, that person has died but i refuse to believe that though a person is physically gone that they are lost forever. How do we recover the music, the sound, the beauty?

First we need to grieve-

This summer, in response to the tragedy in surfside in Florida this June, Rabbi Michael Bernstein-wrote,

There is a concept in Jewish law called yeush, despair. Yeush signifies the moment when one realizes or deems that something is impossible. When they relinquish their hold on something, no longer having hope of being able to find and reunite with what they have lost.

Yeush has been reached in the efforts to find the survivors of the catastrophic collapse at Surfside.

With yeush comes the permission to grieve. To allow stunned paralysis to become brokenness and mourning. To begin the path to wherever it leads. Hope is the lifeblood of human experience and it waits behind every moment of our life. Yet, those moments of yeush, of moving from prayers for a miracle to permission to let go, are sacred in their own way.

And then, we need to learn to take the first step, following grief.

As Rabbi Jon berkun, a rabbi in Aventura shared after surfside,

"This morning, a single family that suffered multiple losses in Surfside got up from shiva. While the Hebrew word "shiva" means "seven," it's been 20 excruciatingly long days of waiting, praying, mourning and crying since the Champlain Towers South collapsed. עַד-מָתַי "How long?" the daily Psalm (94) for Wednesday asks. יְדָאוּ וַיַּחֲלִתֶךָ יְעוּבוּ עִמָּךְ ה' יִדְכְּאוּ וַיַּחֲלִתֶךָ יְעוּבוּ "They crush Your people, O Lord, they afflict Your very own."

During these difficult days, I learned that when a building falls, it crushes more than the victims. Grieving husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren are also crushed. But when shiva ends, especially a shiva that lasts 3 times longer than usual, it is time to get up.

It was bashert that during this final morning minyan, there were toddlers running around in their pajamas. There was also a baby, perhaps around 5 months old, being held upright on his mother's lap as she bounced him up and down. It was cute to watch him try to stand on his own. He cried as we prayed, nonetheless.

Perhaps we are now not so different from babies and toddlers. When we are born, we need to learn how to walk and talk for the very first time. After an elongated shiva for such tragic, multiple losses, the bereaved need to learn how to walk and talk all over again.

I imagine there were days when it felt impossible to get up or rise from bed. Standing, walking, or going anywhere needs to be relearned. The mourners have lost their footing, and they will need practice. They will need to be held. They will need to be helped. Maybe, one day, they will walk again on their own. Maybe they will run. Perhaps even dance..

In the days following the collapse, this family and so many others prayed for miracles that never materialized. But there is another miracle which I believe, with all my heart, will come to bear. That miracle is the one of the human spirit being able to do miraculous things, like healing after being so deeply broken, getting up after being so devastatingly crushed, and learning to walk and talk all over again when it once seemed impossible.



Last weekend we recalled the atrocities of 9/11 on the 20th anniversary of the occurrence and we heard about stories of horror and stories of rebirth. In fact, our member, Jonathan Judd, spoke about 9/11 as his second birth date, an important metaphor.

But what about those who did lose their lives? How do we remember them?

For that, I think we need to go back to our faith, to our tradition, to our prayers. Every day we say, Baruch Atah Adonai, M'chaye HaMetim—we bless God for giving life to the dead.

My colleague, Annie Tucker taught last week to her community that *if you haven't seen someone in a year, you say this blessing. As she shared: The great sage Rav suggests that the reason for this strange benediction is that after an entire year of not seeing a person, we presume he actually must be dead, an interpretation bolstered by the 19th century Aruch HaShulchan which explains that if you haven't seen a friend in a year but happen to know that he's alive (having received letters from him, for example, in the intervening months) you say only Shehecheyanu and not M'chayei Hametim. Put another way, Shehecheyanu expresses the pure joy of friendship and being close to those whom we treasure while M'chayei Hametim expresses something different, deeper, a melange of sadness and relief that feels especially appropriate to me at this particular moment. M'chayei Hametim acknowledges that there has been a very real possibility of death for all of us these past eighteen months, that we have been made aware of our mortality in an entirely different way than ever before. M'chayei Hametim affirms that there are things that have indeed died since the last time we were together – innocence, hope, a sense of stability and security, perhaps even a feeling of connection to people with whom we once were close or places that used to feel like home. M'chayei Hametim proclaims that we are all now tentatively, cautiously coming back from a disruption so significant that it's as if we've been raised from the dead. This is both an enormous challenge and a tremendous opportunity.*

How does one come alive again? By creating impact when we are alive and trusting that people will see our value when we are dead.

But what about the people who really died? How do we bring them back to life?

I am brought back to thinking about the power of the individual story of Anne Frank, not just about the power of her testimony and her name but the power of her optimism, her hope for the future, her belief in the goodness of people. She wrote "I want to go on living even after my death." How did she do that—through her writings and by us sharing her words.

And of course through naming people, through telling their stories, through seeing their names on our walls, through recalling them at moments of simchas.

What we have learned from this year of Covid and in fact from the past 20 years since 9/11, is that the impact of a person, one person, is as impactful as a world. In fact, we know that there is an interconnectedness of our world, the Networks we weave, the impact we have and that is why we need to stop and think about the people we love. We need to bring them to life.

When we think about 9/11 or surfside we are often talking about fallen buildings but it is about fallen lives. And so just as we rebuild that which is physical, how do we rebuild the memories of those lost? Those lost to terror, those lost to covid, those lost?

We will understand that in a world after loss, The music might be different but it can reflect a melody once heard.

The colors on the painting might be complementary, not the exact shade.



We grow and we evolve and we give life, when we remember.
In memory of all those we lost, 20 years ago. They will not be forgotten.

A year after the 9/11 attacks, the then US Poet Laureate Billy Collins wrote a poem called "The Names"

Yesterday, I lay awake in the palm of the night.
A soft rain stole in, unhelped by any breeze,
And when I saw the silver glaze on the windows,
I started with A, with Ackerman, as it happened,
Then Baxter and Calabro,
Davis and Eberling, names falling into place
As droplets fell through the dark.
Names printed on the ceiling of the night.
Names slipping around a watery bend.
Twenty-six willows on the banks of a stream.
In the morning, I walked out barefoot
Among thousands of flowers
Heavy with dew like the eyes of tears,
And each had a name --
Fiori inscribed on a yellow petal
Then Gonzalez and Han, Ishikawa and Jenkins.
Names written in the air
And stitched into the cloth of the day.
A name under a photograph taped to a mailbox.
Monogram on a torn shirt,
I see you spelled out on storefront windows
And on the bright unfurled awnings of this city.
I say the syllables as I turn a corner --
Kelly and Lee,
Medina, Nardella, and O'Connor.
When I peer into the woods,
I see a thick tangle where letters are hidden
As in a puzzle concocted for children.
Parker and Quigley in the twigs of an ash,
Rizzo, Schubert, Torres, and Upton,
Secrets in the boughs of an ancient maple.
Names written in the pale sky.
Names rising in the updraft amid buildings.
Names silent in stone
Or cried out behind a door.
Names blown over the earth and out to sea.
In the evening -- weakening light, the last swallows.
A boy on a lake lifts his oars.
A woman by a window puts a match to a candle,
And the names are outlined on the rose clouds -
Vanacore and Wallace,
(let X stand, if it can, for the ones unfound)
Then Young and Ziminsky, the final jolt of Z.
Names etched on the head of a pin.
One name spanning a bridge, another undergoing a tunnel.



A blue name needled into the skin.
Names of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers,
The bright-eyed daughter, the quick son.
Alphabet of names in a green field.
Names in the small tracks of birds.
Names lifted from a hat
Or balanced on the tip of the tongue.
Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory.
So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart.

I know that our hearts can only hold so much. We can't hold 6 million. We can't hold over 3000. We can't hold 600,000. But we can hold the ones we love and we can hold the ones we learn about. We can bring them to life after they are gone. We owe them that

SO first we grieve, then we begin to walk, and then, we begin to rebuild. And sometimes, when we rebuild, we do so with changed expectations but with the power of memory and the use of our voice. And we use our voice to remember others.

We need to hear the stories of those who have been silenced

We need to learn the stories of those lost in tragedy

We need to understand the lessons from these moments

We need to honor those that we had to say goodbye to.

We need to remember their names.

At the end of Chanel Miller's book she wrote "For all the names I do not know, i hope you understand you are worth fighting for. You are not a statistic or a stereotype. To the ones who are faceless, the ones who remain anonymous, we each have a name. You have taught me to be proud of mine.

It is Yom Kippur. The ultimate day of Atonement where we hold up those who need to be held and we recall what we should do.

As we prepare for yizkor, let us remember everyone and let us help them live again.