

Yizkor: The Command to Remember During COVID

(YK Morning - Yizkor)

On January 23rd of this year, my grandfather, Harvey Chaim Sandberg, passed away at the age of 94. In the three weeks immediately following my grandfather's death, I officiated at three funerals in the TBS community - for Hy Sokolov, Eleanor Yoffee, and Sylvia Zack, may their memories be for blessings. Then on February 21st, my father's eldest sister, Claire, passed away at the age of 85 after a decades long battle with Multiple Sclerosis. It was quite the start to the secular new year. Just as I thought things were quieting down and returning to "normal," we closed the doors of our physical building on Friday March 13th, in response to the threat of COVID19. I'm not sure there are words to describe how difficult these past six months have been for each of us personally and for us all together as a community. I am similarly short of words to describe how resilient this community has been in the face of these challenges.

The response from the Temple Beth Sholom Community has been tremendous from the beginning. I will never forget what Lee Bauer said to me when I called to ask her if the Caring Volunteers could check on some of our more vulnerable members. I started listing people who might benefit

from a call and she very politely interrupted to say, “Rabbi, why don’t we just call everyone?” Since then, the Caring Volunteers and ritual committee have in fact called everyone in the congregation at least four times, have organized two holiday food orders, and continue to manage information about how everyone in our community is coping, who has tsuris and who has simchas. They have truly kept this community close even as we remain distant!

The members of our ritual committee have also been my partners in the important work of adapting our services to a new two-dimensional platform. Although we would certainly prefer to pray together in person, this has also been an opportunity to flex our creativity and try new things and I am so grateful for everyone’s eagerness in these endeavors. Of course, this very moment is an exercise in creativity and adaptability. Way back in April, we held our Passover Yizkor service the evening after chag ended, so that we would not be interacting with our electronics during the holiday. Today, after many conversations, research about the recommendations from the Conservative movement, and reflection about the needs of our community, we have gathered virtually on both shabbat and holidays. I am so proud of how resilient this community has been. And at the same time I

know that no amount of creativity, compassion, and hope can ease the pain inflicted by this virus.

Since March, more than 200k Americans have died of this insidious virus. We have lost four beloved members of our own community, including Lenny Lovitz, Sylvia Gartenberg, Hy Siegal, and Esther Rubinovitz. We have lost other loved ones to other illnesses, accidents, and other natural causes that befall us in the course of our normal human lives. But nothing, **nothing**, about these losses has been normal. No matter how our loved ones departed, the losses we have suffered in the last year have **not** been normal because we have not been able to mourn in the way generations of Jews have mourned.

When a Jew loses a beloved friend or relative, we are commanded to surround them with love, prayer, and food. Accompanying mourners to a funeral is one of the most sacred mitzvot, the rabbis teach that it overrides almost every other mitzvah you might be doing. We follow the mourners home and provide them with meals and companionship for an entire week. We see them in person for thirty days, sometimes even a year, to recite kaddish on behalf of their loved ones and to accompany them on their journey through grief.

Since March, these ritual comforts have not been accessible to any of us. Members of our community have said goodbye to their loved ones over the phone or screen because they could not visit them in the hospital. Funerals have been limited to ten mourners at the most, and in some cases even close family and friends have been unable to travel to bid their loved ones farewell. Shivas have been held virtually. While we can call and send cards, we are unable to visit or bring food, one of the most significant signs of love in our community. Although we are fortunate to enjoy the wonders of technology, reciting kaddish with only your computer for company is just not the same as being surrounded by family and friends.

So this morning, the command to Yizkor, to remember, takes on an especially poignant meaning. This is the moment when we mourn the loss of our loved ones. It is also the moment when we mourn the loss of mourning in the ways we would have wanted. This is the time to cry, to be angry, to be numb or to feel nothing. We honor those memories and that pain, and we now take on the task of carrying them with us into the next year. As we embark on this daunting endeavor, I will leave you with the words of the powerful words of the poem “The Cure” by Albert Huffsticker.

We think we get over things.
We don't get over things.

Or say, we get over the measles
but not a broken heart.
We need to make that distinction.
The things that become part of our experience
never become less a part of our experience.
How can I say it?
The way to “get over” a life is to die.
Short of that, you move with it,
let the pain be pain,
not in the hope that it will vanish
but in the faith that it will fit in,
find its place in the shape of things
and be then not any less pain but true to form.
Because anything natural has an inherent shape
and will flow towards it.
And a life is as natural as a leaf.
That’s what we’re looking for:
not the end of a thing but the shape of it.
Wisdom is seeing the shape of your life
without obliterating (getting over) a single
instant of it.