

Yizkor

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My sermons this holiday season have all revolved around the very Jewish phrase, “Chadeish Yameinu k’Kedem, renew us as in days of old.” On Erev Rosh Hashanah I shared how moved I was by Joni Mitchell’s recent performance of Circle Game at Newport Folk Fest, and what a role model she can be for us as we go into the future holding onto the precious parts of our past. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah I spoke about how we can live out this instruction in our community here at TBS, experimenting with new ways of accessing our tradition and sharing it with others. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah I spoke about how books and stories empower us to share our experiences and grow from them each day. Finally, last night, I spoke about how apologies can create a renewing experience for everyone involved.

Now we are almost at the end of the High Holiday season. This morning, we will recite the Yizkor liturgy, which implores God to remember those we have loved and lost. If you look closely at the liturgy, you will notice that it also includes the promise that we will give tzedakah in their names so their memory might be elevated. This pledge demonstrates that in our tradition, remembering is more than just an emotional or intellectual proposition. Remembering moves us to action. When we say “may their memory be a blessing,” we then put our words into actions by doing things they taught us or that they would want us to do.

The holidays can be an especially poignant reminder of the love we felt and the joy we shared and we preserve many of our traditions so that we can feel the love and celebrate alongside those who are no longer with

us. Of course my lived example of this involves food, I'm sorry to bring this up on a fast day. After I got married my Aunt Susan gave me her *tsimmis* recipe, which she got from her great aunt Sherry, which Sherry brought over from the old country. This is an Old World recipe. It has no measurements, just words like "a little" "a pinch" and "enough." It has no times or temperatures, just instructions like "until done." Making the *tsimmis* involves 4 steps, each of which takes hours. It's quite an endeavor. The first time I made it on my own, I called my aunt at every step to help me decode it, and to this day I still call her at least once during the process. After my first try, I also added my own personal touch by adding apricots to the mix of sweet fruit and vegetables. It comes out a little differently every time, but it always comes out great!

This is one small way in which I live out the sentiment, "Chadeish Yameinu K'Kedem, Renew us as in Days of Old." This recipe is literally older than I am. It was created to be cooked in a kitchen that did not have most of the modern appliances I use, although the people cooking in that house were far more skilled than I am. This *tsimmis* is a tradition, a smell and a taste memory, that fills my house with joy. It fills my house with a sense memory of joyful childhood gathering in my aunt's or my mother's house, it makes my adult house smell like home. I preserve these important moments of my childhood, and make the tradition new again like it was in the Old Days. I think Aunt Sherry would approve.

Our community does this as well. We are using a new Machzor donated last year in honor of Nancy Bushinsky, who has since passed away. We think of her friendship and her leadership in this community, and we honor her memory when we come together to pray. This afternoon we will read from Haftarah Yonah, which was a favorite portion of our dearly

departed friend Elliot Pozmanter. Elliot was a talented davener and beloved teacher, and every year we honor him by asking his students to read a portion of this haftarah. Every time we share the knowledge he taught us, we keep his memory alive and ensure that it continues to be a blessing.

Another way we memorialize our loved ones is by naming descendants after them. In the Sephardic and Mizrachi traditions, we name children after living relatives and in the Ashkenazi tradition we name children after deceased relatives. Either way, we are ensuring that the name lives on and in doing so, we also hope the person's best qualities carry forward. I personally feel a deep connection with the ancestors for whom I am named.

My Hebrew name (which is really Yiddish) comes from my maternal great-grandmother, Gussie. She was the matriarch who brought our family to this country. In 1917 the town where she and my great grandfather lived transferred from Polish to Russian territory, and he was in danger of being drafted into the Tsar's army, which was not a good place for a Jew to be. So he departed for America, leaving his wife and their 4 year old daughter. Family folklore tells us that Gussie would go out every evening dressed in her husband's coat and boots to leave footprints in the snow and give the illusion there was still a man on the property protecting the family. Five years later my great grandfather had earned enough to bring the rest of his family to America. Many years after that, I was the first great-grandchild born after Gussie died, so I was named for her. I repeat the stories I have been told, and I admire her determination and bravery and the hardships she endured to ensure our family would continue to thrive. I strive to live up to her example in the way I parent my children and take care of the

people I love. As the first great-grandchild named for her, I also inherited her Shabbat candlesticks, which I am proud to use every Friday night.

Memories bring us joy. They also bring us comfort, especially when we are sad or sick. When Maya's daycare went mask-optional at the beginning of September, our whole family got a year's worth of colds, strep throat, RSV, and all the other germs we had been avoiding. Everyone was fine but everyone was also pretty miserable for a couple weeks. I broke out every cold remedy in the book, medicinal or superstitious or otherwise. One evening as I was getting everyone ready for bed, Matthew exclaimed, "You all have head colds, why are you putting Vicks on your feet?!"

Friends, I don't know why I was putting Vicks on my feet. But my grandmother of blessed memory put Vicks on the kids' feet when they were sick, so I'm going to do it, too. And I'll tell you, I felt better after. Maybe there is something real or scientific about why putting Vicks on your feet helps with a cold. Maybe it's just to get Vicks somewhere on your body without the danger of rubbing it into your eyes. Or maybe it's just the placebo effect. Maybe it's just that the smell reminded me of all the comfort and care I got when I was sick as a kid. But I felt great, and I'm going to do it again the next time I have a cold. These smells and touches of comfort remind us of the people who took care of us, nurtured us, loved us.

As part of this whole month of colds and strep and sickness, I had to take my son Evan to the ER unexpectedly. He's fine, he was running a very high fever and it was a Sunday night so our pediatrician was closed, and so we ended up at the ER at Children's. When we first arrived I was pretty upset; I was anxious and tired, Evan was crying, we had to wait a long time to be seen, you know how it is. When the nurse finally brought us back to a

room, I noticed she was wearing a necklace with her name on it. Her name was Yvonne. Evan's first name is in memory of my grandmother, Yvonne. Being cared for by this nurse, I felt like my grandmother was sending me a sign, giving my hand a little pat and telling me everything was going to be okay.

I don't pretend to know how things like this work. Our tradition is frustratingly short-winded about what happens in the afterlife, although the texts that do allude to life after death are fascinating. The book of Daniel declares, "Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence."¹ This is one of the many sources that obliquely alludes to some sort of eternal life of the spirit but leaves the details to our imagination. The rabbis of the Talmud build on this line of thinking, suggesting that everyone's soul goes through some sort of judgment and cleansing. How harsh the judgment and how intense the cleansing depends on the person's actions in this life. One Jewish tradition states that a soul needs a maximum of 12 months for purification and is aided on this journey by the prayers of those who remain in the mortal world. This is why, when a parent dies, their children recite kaddish for 11 months - we want to offer our departed loved ones the maximum amount of spiritual support, but we also don't want to imply that they were so wicked that they require a full year of kaddish. So we compromise at 11 months.

The rabbinic image of the place of judgment was based on Gehenna, a real place in ancient Israel where devotees of other Canaanite religions offered human sacrifices to their gods. Their picture of heaven was some version of Gan Eden. Some traditions imagine that in the time of the

¹ Daniel 12:2

Messiah, the whole world will be transformed into Gan Eden and everyone who has ever lived will be brought back to life to enjoy this peaceful world to come.

Some of our mystical traditions even suggest some sort of perpetual reincarnation. The Zohar teaches, “As long as a person is unsuccessful in his purpose in this world, the Holy One uproots him and replants him over and over again.”² The text leaves the details to our imagination. Maybe souls really do appear repeatedly until they complete their spiritual purpose. Maybe it’s more metaphorical - we continue the spiritual tasks of our ancestors by living out the values they imparted.

I don’t know which, if any, of these things, is true. It is frustrating to have so many “maybes” surrounding such big questions. When we lose someone we love, we want to take comfort in certainty that they are at peace, certainty that their life mattered, certainty that we will be okay without them. Unfortunately, uncertainty is part of the human condition. And that’s why we have our tradition and our community, in order to give ourselves structure as we mourn, and the love of friends and family to support us.

I still struggle against this uncertainty at times. But I take comfort in those moments when I feel the presence of those I have loved and lost. Maybe in those moments there is something supernatural going on. Maybe in those moments I am prompted by my surroundings to remember what they taught me and how they loved me, and I am prompted to act accordingly. It doesn’t matter to me which it is because both are equally powerful.

² Zohar 1: 186b

This morning we ask God to remember those we have loved and lost, and we promise that we will also remember them. We will act in ways that ensure their memories continue to bring blessings into this world. We continue with the Yizkor service in our purple books or on page 290 of Machzor Lev Shalem.