

## Yom Kippur Sermon

There is story about a niggun, a Jewish melody, told by Eli Wiesel, z''l about an older Hasid, from Warsaw, who composed a now familiar melody to Maimonides' "Ani- Ma'amin," while on a train of Jews who were being transported from the Warsaw Ghetto to Auschwitz. The cattle car was, of course, full of scared and anguished people, and the Hasid tried to comfort everyone around him by singing and teaching the melody. At some point along the journey there were two young men who decided to try to escape by jumping off the train. The Hasid, suspecting that he and the rest of the people in the car were not going to survive much longer, encouraged these young men, saying, "If you manage to escape, you should go as far as you can, and if you make it to America, please share this tune with my rabbi." When the two men jumped, one was spotted immediately and shot, but the other miraculously got away. Eventually, once the war finally ended, this man made his way to America, and remembering the request of the Hasid on the train, he sought out the man's rabbi, and passed along the melody. Before long, this tune had spread across the Jewish community and around the world and is one with which many of you may be familiar (sing).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ani ma'amin* (melody from Vishnietz, transmitted by Elie Wiesel, notated and arr. by Matthew Lazar)

The other day my friend Rabbi Eric Yanoff shared a story with me that felt very similar. He told about how this past November:

*...IDF Colonel Golan Vach was stationed in Gaza with his friend, Sgt. Major Yossi Hershkovitz. Golan tells the story that he came upon Yossi in the middle of the night, humming a melody in the darkness. When he asked Yossi what the tune was,*

*Yossi told him, "I just composed it, to go with the words from the 23rd Psalm: gam ki eilech b'gei tzalmavet – Yea, though I walk in the Valley of the Shadow of Death." There, in Gaza, in that shadow of death, Yossi had composed music.*

*Golan asked him to teach it to him. They sang it, over and over again. Two days later, Yossi was killed in battle.*

*Golan shares that he was doubly bereft – because of the loss of his friend, and because he could not remember the melody. But somehow, at the funeral, the melody returned to him.*

*And so, just like the survivor who made it to America to pass along the Hasid's melody, Golan sang this melody and passed it along during the funeral and shiva for Sgt. Major Yossi Hershkovitz (sing).*

I have spoken before about the importance of passing on our stories to others; about the importance of ensuring that our memory, and our values, live on

through those who will remain when we are no longer physically dwelling on this earth. As we gather on this Yom Kippur, on this yizkor, it's hard not to feel a collective loss for all of those who were killed in Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>, and for all who have been killed since. There is also, of course, the personal loss that I feel every year- for my grandparents, for an aunt, for an uncle, and for my mother, who would have just turned eighty six, but whose life was cut short at age fifty. It is sometimes hard to believe that they are all gone, and as the years continue, it is hard to believe that they have been gone for so long.

Time is a funny thing. Our most valuable and limited commodity- it goes by so fast. The stark message of Yom Kippur is that there is not a minute to waste because we never know what is coming around the corner.

But during this moment of yizkor, we are reminded of much more. Yom Kippur comes along to push us to take up our obligation, our sacred responsibility, to remember those who have come before us.

There are a number of specifically Jewish ways that our tradition helps us remember our loved ones over the course of our lives after their death. The first, is what we are about to do right now, yizkor. Yizkor is a service that has been around since the time of the Crusades, when this ritual got started as a communal response to the tragedy all around. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, yizkor was

regularly added to the liturgy of our major pilgrimage festivals, in part because of the connection between the festival Torah readings (which remind the Israelites to come to the Temple bringing gifts), and the theme of yizkor (our obligation to give tzedakah in memory of our loved ones). For centuries, gathering on the holidays to recite the yizkor service in memory of all of our community's dead was a central Jewish practice.

Some of you may recall a time when it was much more common for members of the Jewish community to prioritize taking time off from work and the other business of life to attend the yizkor services, to say Kaddish and remember their loved ones. I can recall that growing up, even if my father worked on some of the holidays like Sukkot and Shavuot, when it was yizkor, he would book time out of the office to come to shul. He would simply see less patients that day.

My dad was not alone in this practice. I have seen many times, over the course of the hundreds of holidays I have spent in shul, people who would come to the synagogue to say kaddish, even if afterwards they returned to work or other non-holiday related activities.

But I will be honest and say that in recent years, this practice has seemed to abate somewhat. We could say it's because people lead very "busy" lives, but

it's also important for us to acknowledge that, for whatever reason, this ritual has become less of a priority for many in our community and congregation.

Aside from the holiday observance of Yizkor, I have seen the same decline in observance when it comes to annual yahrzeits. Yahrzeit, the once-a-year anniversary of the death of a loved one. This is another time when our tradition compels us to gather with the community in a minyan to say Kaddish.

Growing up I remember my parents and grandparents would hang the list of family yahrzeit dates on the fridge. These lists, usually put out by funeral homes or synagogues, calculated the exact date of a person's death on the Hebrew calendar, and where on the secular calendar it would fall over the next twenty years. Printing out lists like this and hanging them on the fridge may seem antiquated, but it worked, and people knew when to come to shul.

(Now, by the way, you can all do this on your own, by going to [hebcad.com](http://hebcad.com) and in seconds pull up a list of the yahrzeit dates of a loved one for the next fifty years. Or, if you prefer to take it one year at a time, you can wait for the letter that we send you from Torat El each year, and mark your calendar so that you remember when to come to shul.)

For those who cannot make it to say kaddish on the actual Yartzeit date, there is a practice of coming to synagogue on the Friday night before the yahrtzeit. That is the time when I read the full list of people who will be recalled in the week ahead. And while coming to shul on the Shabbat before a yahrtzeit is a modern adaptation of the traditional ritual, it serves the purpose of enabling people to mark the anniversary on Shabbat when once upon a time it was safer to assume they might be coming to the synagogue anyhow.

Why share all of this with you? Because I have to say it's been very sad for me to notice that fewer people than ever have been coming to shul for the three major holidays each year (besides Yom Kippur) when we say yizkor. And even the once core Jewish experience of coming to shul to say kaddish for a once-a-year yahrtzeit has declined notably.

Here I want to backtrack somewhat and say that I am grateful to Ben Laskowitz, our wonderful director of ritual engagement, for taking the initiative to email people who have a Kaddish coming and encouraging them to come to minyan to say kaddish. A good number of you have taken him up on this suggestion recently, and I hope you have found it to be a meaningful experience.

But my concern is what happens when people stop coming? What happens when we stop remembering those who came before us in this intentional and

traditional Jewish way? What happens to our community when most people give up on these more traditional gatherings, in order to remember in their own individual ways- on their own?

Hopefully you know by now that I will always say something is better than nothing. But when it comes to coming to synagogue to say Kaddish, because it is such a uniquely Jewish experience, and one that has in many ways kept communities together for centuries, I feel like we're missing a precious opportunity. I often think about how our community would be changed if everyone incorporated this ritual into their lives. And it's worth considering how you personally think you might be changed.

There's also the ritual of lighting *yahrtzeit* candles. I am not sure how many in our community are doing this on a regular basis, either on the four holidays a year when we say *yizkor*, or on the anniversary of a family member's death. I would like to think many do. I remember as a kid my family members were so diligent about this ritual that they collected the glass holders after the candles had burned and used them to build quite a large collection of juice glasses! Does anyone have *yahrtzeit* juice glasses anymore?

Interestingly, there is not a traditional Jewish prayer that is said when the *yahrtzeit* candle is lit. The custom is connected to a verse in proverbs, reminding

us that “the human soul is the lamp of God” (20:27) that each person is holy to God, that each person’s soul is that which literally “lights up” God’s world. That said, it’s often meaningful to have some guidance and written reflections to incorporate into personal rituals like these, and Rabbi Naomi Levy wrote a beautiful meditation that can be read when a *yahrtzeit* candle is lit. Her words can be found in the back of our *yizkor* book, and end with the words:

*Your life has ended, but your light can never be extinguished. It continues to shine upon me even on the darkest nights and illumines my way. I light this candle in your honor and in your memory. May God bless you as you have blessed me with love, with grace and with peace. Amen<sup>2</sup>*

So what happens if we don’t remember to light the *yahrtzeit* candle on the actual Hebrew date of death? And what if we just are too busy to get to shul for the *yizkor* services and for your loved one’s unique *Yartzeit*? What happens is that they become less meaningful, and run the risk of disappearing. The answer, like anything else, is that we get from these rituals and traditions what we put into them.

I hope some if not all of these practices **are** meaningful to you. I hope they **are** among the rituals and traditions that connect you to generations of your family. And I hope they give you a few moments of peace, quiet and tranquility each year to remember your loved one, whether they died this year, or fifty years ago.

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<sup>2</sup> Talking to God, Rabbi Naomi Levy, A Memorial Prayer



If you are not regularly practicing these traditions, I encourage you to do your best to start (or restart) incorporating some or all into the year ahead. Don't worry about doing everything if it feels like too much, but don't pass on the opportunity to do **something**.

Light the candle. Take some time to reflect and remember. Come to synagogue to be with your community, to say kaddish, to share memories of your loved ones. It is good for your soul, and it is good for the soul of our community. In many senses, at our core, at our best, creating this kind of caring community that marks happy times and sad times together, and helps us all remember together, is what we are all about.

Moving beyond yahrtzeits and yizkor observances, I want to offer up one final invitation, concerning one of the most significant and impactful mourning rituals that we have. I'm talking about Shiva.

Shiva, meaning "seven," is the time beginning with the day of the funeral of a loved one that we set aside to mourn in one's home surrounded by community. From the moment we return home from the funeral we are invited to carve out the time and begin the process of mourning in an attempt to re-orient ourselves to the new reality of a life without our loved one.

Making time to sit shiva can seem complex and overwhelming. We are all very busy. How could we miss that much work at such short notice? How can we just stop everything for a week? Who will make sure the house is in order, and what if we run out of food? These are all real questions.

I want to invite all of you to consider setting aside these worries, and to focus on making shiva a priority when you experience a loss. There's something uniquely precious about taking the time to sit, to grieve, and to allow others to come to help you, for more than one day, and maybe even more than three.

In truth, while our community is wonderfully supportive, offering members the chance to gather for an evening shiva minyan and sharing memories, there is more that we could do. (There is always more that we could do.) While every one of us will inevitably be the one who is the mourner, there are many more times when we are in the position to comfort and care for mourners in our community. We all need to remember those who don't have close friends or family in the area, and we all can do a better job of being there for those in our community who may be outside of our close personal circles.

What would it look like if we had a large group of members who were always ready and waiting to help set up shiva houses, to help with the shopping and cooking, to take some of the worries and burdens off of the family in mourning,

even when it's a member of the synagogue they didn't personally know? What would it look like if a group of dedicated volunteers came into the synagogue kitchen once a month to cook a bunch of meals that could be frozen and ready to go when someone experiences a loss.

And what about helping to lead a shiva service? We are so blessed to have some wonderful volunteers who regularly go to the homes of mourners to lead a service. But this group of volunteers is too small, and we need more people to add into the rotation. If you are someone who knows the evening service (even if you never come to shul) and who would be willing to contribute to our community in this important way from time to time, please let me know. If you want to learn how to lead the service, Ben and I would both be more than happy to work with you. *(This by the way is true for all services, though I am specifically speaking about shiva now)*

Please don't mishear me. This is not the rabbi trying to **guilt you** into doing these things. But it is **an invitation**. An invitation to return to the powerful, meaningful, and impactful ways our tradition helps us manage the days, months, and years after a loved member of your family has died. An invitation to thoughtfully remember your loved ones in an intentional and uniquely Jewish way. Of course there is more than one way to remember someone, but the decline in

observance of these ancient practices means even more loss – a lost opportunity to be surrounded by community at some of the hardest moments in life. The loss of the tradition's wisdom that generations have clung to and preserved.

As we gather on this Yom Kippur, the one day of the year more than any other in the Jewish calendar, where death, loss, memory, and our own mortality is front and center – it's appropriate for us to think bigger, about how we want to remember others, and how we want to be remembered. Who do we value enough to carve out time – even when it's inconvenient, even when it upends your routine – to sit shiva, to say kaddish, and to light the memorial candle. And who do we hope will do this one day for us?

About a month ago, one of our long-time regular minyanairs came to services to say kaddish. When we reached the moment of the service when I invited members to share memories of the person they are honoring, he told us that he was saying kaddish for a cousin. While observing traditional mourning practices like saying kaddish is generally reserved for members of our immediate family, he felt it important to gather with the community and remember this cousin in the traditional and time-honored Jewish way because he knew that there was no one else left to say kaddish for him, to pass on his story, to pass on his life's melody.

This, then, is my challenge to our community, which is also in truth a sacred opportunity and privilege: the reclaiming of the traditional ritual and spiritual practices of Jewish mourning. When the time comes, as it inevitably will for each of us to grieve, may we be wise enough to embrace these specific rituals and practices, taking on, and passing on the melodies and memories that have sustained the Jewish people for thousands of years.

*Gmar Hatimah Tovah*- may we all be sealed for a good, healthy and meaningful year ahead.