

A WORD from SENIOR RABBI, CRAIG MARANTZ



Just yesterday, I sat with a bereaved family. A moment designed to place the mourning process front in center in the mourners' lives. We talked about the usual. Keri'ah ribbons and Psalms. Hespeditim and El Male Rachamim. Shiva. There were questions, too. What recollections bring smiles? What legacies remain for us to sustain? And, what must we do to make our memories a blessing? This last question seemed to hit home with the widow, as she said tearfully to me: "Having to make my husband's memory a blessing means that he's really gone" I gave her a hug and said to her and her children: "I wish we could just celebrate the Cubs' great victory. But here we are."

Indeed, it's hard to ignore the great joy in the air. An historic victory at Wrigley Field. This festival of Sukkot. Our *z'man simchateinu*, our time of happiness. And yet, even as this simcha abounds, life and loss still present us with moments of great sadness. Even amidst our celebration of life, we confront death. Life begins. Life ends. And, yet, as we seek to make life and loss matter, Sukkot offers us the wisdom of Qohelet, which on first blush, tells us that all is vanity. That life is futile. That our work under the sun is meaningless. And, for good measure, that our lives just come and go. Insight hardly joyous or comforting. Until we take a closer look, that is. Consider what Rashi has to say. Commenting on the phrase *tachat ha-shemesh*, the medieval French sage draws a parallel between the sun, the *shemesh*, and Torah. Like the sun, Torah is a light. And, just as the sun nourishes us, so, too, does the light of Torah bring us a life of reward.

Case in point. Today's kariat ha-Torah experience. As you witnessed, we completed Deuteronomy and commenced Genesis. They say that the Torah ends with a rewarding act of *g'milut chasadim*, of grace and lovingkindness. And, it begins with another act of *g'milut chasadim*. And apropos to this particular moment of Yizkor, in both portions, Torah focuses on funerals and the abiding *mentschlikeit* that accompanies the act of burial. Torah's final portion, *V'zot Ha-Brakha*, tells us that God buries Moses, our great teacher, in the valley of Moav. And then, in the Torah's initial *parashah*, *Bereshit*, when Adam and Eve die, God clothes them in coats of skin--the origin of which we are uncertain.

Common to both funerals is the mitzvah of *kavod ha-met*, showing respect for the dead. In both moments, God models *mentschlikeit* and the ensuing reward is not the dead's gratitude. They obviously cannot thank God. The reward comes from acting with singular kindness, and loving grace, from preserving others' dignity when they cannot do so any longer for themselves. And such reward brings great meaning and purpose to our own lives, knowing simply we have done the right thing. This is the legacy of Torah we celebrate today--this legacy of purpose and meaning. This legacy of light.

But there's a second, more enduring *mitzvah* that we also embrace today--that of Yizkor, that of memory. Not only is Yizkor a beautiful practice of *kavod ha-met*. It's also an essential expression of another *mitzvah*--*nichum avelim*, comforting the mourners. Comforting ourselves. When we remember, we ease our burden. When we remember, we summon our resilience. When we remember, we may even bring a smile or two to mingle with our tears.

And once again the light of Torah sheds its wisdom for us, as it reminds us that just as the life span is limited, the cycle of life remains affirming and creative...and lasting. Just as Moses dies at the end of Torah, life begins at the beginning of Torah. The cycle of Torah teaches us that with endings there are new beginnings. And we capture this creative essence in today's mourning ritual.

As we dwell in the Sukkah of memory, Yizkor gives us pause to reflect on death and loss, to dwell in our sadness. But Yizkor also recognizes that as, we contemplate life and loss, we do so in the context of this season of plenty and this *z'man simchateinu*, this time of joy. Memory is like a cornucopia--a harvest of great and beautiful abundance that buoys us on difficult days, on days when life does not seem as vital and full. It is *yizkor*--it is memory-- that helps us reaffirm not only precious legacies, but the elegance and richness of life itself. What could be more meaningful? More purposeful?

Just as we contemplate death and sadness, we also contemplate life and happiness. And, we embrace all as a sign that we ourselves are alive and full of potential. Those we remember would want us to live our lives in such a way. With such intentionality. Our choice to do so brings dignity to their legacies and blessings to our lives.

It seems so fitting amidst the complexities of our lives that, as we conclude Sukkot, we celebrate Simchat Torah and practice Yizkor at the very same time. We celebrate the gathering in of this *ohr ha-Torah*, this light of Torah, and we focus it on our lives. Embracing its impact. Calling it to choreograph the dances of our days. We remember our loved ones. We honor our dead. And, we affirm life by embracing its endings and beginnings.

Zikhronam livrakhah...May those we remember be for a blessing. L'chaim to all of us...Chag sameach and Shabbat shalom