

" FRIENDS "

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5778— Thursday, September 30, 2017

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

For many years now, I have used this hour of memorial to share words written by others. I have always been struck by the ability grief has to elicit profound and beautiful sentiments...sentiments that can help us cope with the loss of a loving presence. This year, the thoughts I share are inspired by Rabbi Leigh Lerner, a wonderful and sensitive rabbinic colleague.

As with many of you, I have lost my share of friends this past year. And while Judaism is masterful in the way it guides us on the path of mourning and renewal after the loss of a relative, our tradition is silent regarding friends.

Traditionally, we do not say Kaddish for friends. There are no mourning rituals. Indeed, when we gather together for Yizkor – today, on Yom Kippur, and then again at the end of the three Pilgrim Festivals of Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot, the prayers we recite are only for relatives.

Therefore, "this afternoon, I would like to open Yizkor a little wider, because some of us – perhaps most of us – have the experience of losing a dear friend, and that loss...affects us as profoundly as the loss of a brother or a sister, [a mother or a father, a spouse].

[For] what does it mean to lose a friend?

It's like losing your place in time. [Our tradition is replete with stories about] Choni Ha-Ma-agal, a mystical, mythical figure who was also the Rip Van Winkle of the Talmud. He fell asleep and did not awake until a generation had passed. Upon his awakening, when he went to the House of Study, [when he went to the Synagogue, when he went into the market place,] no

one recognized him. All his friends were gone, all his generation had passed on. He was out of sync, out of the natural order of things, and he complained that life without friends was not worth living.

Our friends are our bookmarks. They hold our place on the pages of the Book of Life. They are the relationships out of which much of our [personal life] story is told – the joys, the pains, the sins, the deeds of love and kindness. [The kid we rode our bike with to school every day. The girlfriend we shared our first kiss, our first love, our first heartbreak with. The one who was there whenever we needed a shoulder to cry on or a hand that needed lending. Some of our friendships were decades long. Some more recent. All were powerful in how they supported us.] As they pass on, it is as if the bookmarks in our life story are pulled out. We cannot find our place. The pages seem to go blank. The story is not remembered or shared, and it seems to lose its [vibrancy and] power. We miss our friends. We mourn them. For without them, our place in the world is less secure.

When we lose a friend, it is as if life's recipe has lost a key ingredient. Life's "tam," life's flavor, is not the same.

Friends are like warm clothes in winter. They feel good, they feel safe, they don't always fit neatly, they sometimes wear thin, but you'd never do without them. When we lose a friend, we often feel as though we must somehow begin again – find someone who patches or reweaves the warm garment of friendship. That's not easy to do. As our friends pass on, one by one, the cold winds of life chill a little deeper."¹

We know how vital friendship is, for we know how difficult it is when they die. When we lose a friend, a piece of us departs. Whether it is the image of a bookmark, an ingredient, or a garment we use to describe "it," we know what "it" is: we are lost and – as Choni Ha-Ma'agal felt – out of sync, out of the natural order of things.

How often have we, ourselves, experienced such a sense of being out of sync? We lose a friend – one with whom we have shared memories – perhaps a cup of coffee each Sunday morning, or going to the ball game together, or Friday night at services, going of vacation together, sharing in one another's family births, graduations, weddings, perhaps just serving as one another's confidant. Those moments of memory we created so unconsciously with our friends come back now to stun us. We are immobilized, for we know not how to respond, now that the bookmark has been pulled from our books...now that the garment of our friendship has been torn ragged by death.

Rabbi Ray Zwerin illustrates this truth beautifully in a story he told "about a bird that was caught by an old cat. The cat gnawed at the bird, but didn't really hurt it. It tossed the bird about a bit and held it down with its paw for a while. And then, simply lost interest and walked away. The bird, stunned, rose to her feet. It tested its wings, no feathers damaged, the wings moved as before. And yet, it hesitated to fly.

A farmer witnessing the event remarked simply, 'The bird is caught in its brokenness.' What a wonderful way of saying it. A bird who will not try to do what it knows it can do best, a bird that will not try to fly even though it can, is caught in its own emotional brokenness.

And so it is with us, too. When we lose a close friend – when we lose anyone we love - the process of grieving involves encountering and facing the pain of being caught [all] of a sudden without the one who shared so much of life with us. Grief is

very much like being mauled and tossed about." We walk around dazed for a while, unsure whether we can ever again spread our wings and fly.

Each of us who is here today knows that feeling. We have been mauled and tossed about as the result of our loss – whether it is a relative or a friend whose death we mourn. We have been caught in our own brokenness.

With our parents, spouse, sibling, or child, we had our rituals to give voice to our shock and grief. With our friends, our tradition did not provide that cushion, that outlet.

A number of years ago, an older friend and congregant knew that he was going to die. He asked if I would visit him regularly. Over the course of several months, we would meet twice a week. Near the end, he told me the following: "For the last few years, I've been going to a lot of funerals. All my friends have been dying. I never knew what to do to mark the occasion. Finally, I hit upon it...the perfect act of mourning. On the way home from the funeral, no matter what the time, I would stop and eat an ice cream sundae in memory of my friend. Each of my friends brought sweetness to my life. The least I could do would be to taste the sweetness once more."

And then he asked if I would promise to have an ice cream sundae on the way home after his funeral? "Of course," I replied, "it would be my joy and my honor."

And I did.

And that has become my mourning ritual whenever a friend dies. And I have adopted it for family, as well. For those we loved made our lives sweet and delicious.

Today, let us dedicate this Yizkor not only to our relatives, but also to our friends. "As each of them left us, our place in time was a bit less secure. Life's flavor [lost] some of its edge. The warmth and comfort of daily

living [became] harder to find.”³ Although we are mauled and tossed about in our loss, we nonetheless rise and spread our wings. We thank God for the lives that were. We thank God they walked life’s path with us while they could. And we even thank God for the lives we still have. As we rise from our mourning, we taste the goodness life offers. Perhaps tonight...or tomorrow...or the next...we will scoop out a dish of ice cream, pour some hot fudge over it, and savor the sweetness that was ours with our loved ones....whether friends or family...as a way of remembering, of holding on to that sweetness. As we rise from our mourning, we praise God’s name and ask the Holy One for comfort and inspiration, as we turn in our prayerbooks to page 492, for Kaddish. Please rise.

¹ Lerner, Rabbi Leigh; *The American Rabbi*, Winter, 1995; Vol. 28, No. 2

² Zwerin, Rabbi Raymond; “A Period of Brokenness,” *The American Rabbi*, Winter, 1995; Vol. 28, No. 2; p.73

³ Lerner, Rabbi Leigh; *op. cit.*; p. 20