

Stay Just A Little Bit Longer: Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk
Yizkor Memorial Worship at Congregation Mishkan Or
October 2, 2025

Poet Billy Collins once wrote about walking into the subway. First, there is light — the sky above, the air on your skin. Then you descend: down the stairwell, past the turnstiles, into tunnels carved in stone.

On the surface, it is just an ordinary pedestrian image. But in the poem, this former U.S. poet laureate reveals something essential for us at *Yizkor*. He writes:

“As you fly swiftly underground with a song in your ears or lost in the maze of a book, remember the ones who descended here into the mire of bedrock to bore a hole through this granite, to clear a passage for you where there was only darkness and stone. Remember as you rise up into the light.”

Listen again: “They cleared a passage for you where there were only darkness and stone.” Each time we descend into a subway, we rise because others carved the way before us. *Yizkor* reminds us the same is true in life. The ones we remember today bore through granite for us. Their lives — and yes, their deaths — carved passages that we still walk.

On this holiest of days, and at this most fragile moment, we choose to descend into memory, into grief, into the raw ache of loss. We are not to wallow in it. But we must grieve honestly and note that very often *Yizkor* awakens in us one wish that is beyond what we can have: more time with our loved ones as they were at their best.

How many of us here wish we could say to a dear person: Stay, just a little bit longer. Stay, see who we have become. Stay long enough to see us through crises, through COVID, through family struggles, through Oct. 7 — still healing, loving, reconciling, surviving.

If I could communicate it in song, I’d choose the Jackson Browne song, Stay. The one that plays on our hope that the concert does not have to end. If the venue doesn’t mind, if the union don’t mind, the roadies don’t mind... could we stay just a little bit longer?

But *Yizkor* insists otherwise. It says: there is nothing to negotiate, no timetable to bend, no way of altering what has been set in motion. When someone dies, their absence is final. There is no “one last time.” That yearning for them to stay is a prayer — it is a prayer made with sincerity. But it is turned down flat by the unchangeable truth of no.

Torah shows us how hard that unchangeable truth is to hear. When Jacob’s great love, Rachel, dies in childbirth, their story, a precious romance, is cut short. He had worked fourteen years for her, and she never saw their sons grow. Jacob has to bury her by the roadside near Bethlehem and walk home in grief. His sorrow at this death echoes our own: Why couldn’t they stay?

And yet, our tradition affirms that spiritually Rachel did stay. Jeremiah tells us that Rachel weeps for her children. Her voice resounds in every generation. To this day, when we stand for T’filah, we call on Elohei Rachel — the God of Rachel. Her presence endures, her love still shelters, her memory still guides, and both Jacob in his time and generations later, her deeds are still spoken of in present tense.

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This year, I feel the responsibility at Yizkor to provide that healing note more than ever. Because here at Mishkan Or, and before that at Anshe Chesed have stood beside you for the biggest portion of my career. You've trusted me to be present with you in times you have descended into mourning. You shared me with your grief, your rage, your questions for God. I know what it feels like when the only answer is no. But I have also seen how love and generosity from those who died became the granite strength you have leaned on.

For me, that granite was my rabbi, Rabbi Dannel Schwartz.

When I met Rabbi Schwartz, I was hurting, anxious, scared, and unsure I would make it. There were many kids for him to see, but Rabbi Schwartz saw me. To be "seen" by him was an extraordinary gift to the trajectory of my life. I was no longer just a struggling kid in school, I was T.K., "the kid," the one he knew he could help make sense of the chaos. I was his T.K., and he was an adult to whom I could say anything.

To quote a Broadway musical, "the man was non-stop." At Jewish summer camp, I met rabbis who would volunteer to teach or lead services. He might have led a Havdalah or two. But what I especially remember is him borrowing the camp's van to haul a dozen youth leaders out to the finest restaurant in town. We ordered the best items on the fancy menu. And before getting back to camp, he would hand us ten bucks each to buy whatever we wanted at the supermarket. Then... before pulling back in, he stopped the van, turned around, and locked eyes with each of us. He had a vision for each of us and called them out as if for his team. But the words were not what mattered. What I recall was the message in his eyes. They said; You have a rabbi who believes in you and expects you to change the world.

He surely changed my world. Rabbi Schwartz gave me my first real job — as T.K., "the kid" in the temple office. It wasn't easy. There were many hours and much discretion and care needed. But it was also a chance to see and learn from the best "anti-establishment" rabbi ever to serve the establishment. Rabbi Schwartz was not traditional. He was an innovator, a modern mystic, a visionary. He was Willy Wonka, and I was Charlie Bucket. He let me know directly that one day, I would smash through the roof of the chocolate factory!

Fast-forward three and a half decades later: in spring 2019, I was diagnosed with a fast-growing stage IV metastatic cancer. Cutting edge care backed by research at Cleveland Clinic saved my life. But Rabbi Schwartz saved me too. This time from a predator disease that clouded my thinking. At first, I thought cancer was something you could still fight in just one square inch of your life.

What I needed — and what I got — was the same rabbi who had known me when I was 14, faking it and hiding my pain, as a witness and a champion for me, what I could see and my blindspots. I was in trouble, but I did not see it.

When Rabbi Schwartz caught up with me by phone, he told me about the view outside his home in Maine. I told him what I saw from the windows of the Taussig Cancer Center. He asked me what I was reading, whether I was praying, whether I was meditating. He asked about my kids,

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remembering activities he knew they loved. He asked about Joanie and reminded me how awesome she is — and that I'd better not blow it.

“Are you working?” he asked. “Just a little bit,” I explained that I was mostly setting up backup coverage for b’nai mitzvah and weddings and for the High Holy Days. Then I explained my three scenarios: Plan A: “I’m fine and can do everything I’d normally do.” Plan B: “I’m impaired and can only do some.” And Plan C: “I’m unable to lead at all.”

Rabbi Schwartz interrupted. He said: “Rob, there is no f—ing Plan A.” He continued: “Listen to me. There is no Plan A. The Jewish people will get to a new year whether or not you are on the bimah. We need you alive and intact. You have cancer. I cannot tell you why. But listen, T.K., I have known you as long as either of us can remember, and you cannot hide from this and do everything for everybody and only work yourself to death.”

We should all be so blessed to have someone with a lifelong pass to speak truth to us and get in our face the way Rabbi Schwartz did for me. He knew what I could not see. There is no Plan A when you are facing a monstrous predator disease. And in case I did not absorb it, he added that if he heard I was doing Plan A, he was flying to Cleveland to kick me off the bimah himself.

I am glad it did not come to that. And I am sorry if my plainspoken language at a Yom Kippur service is hard to hear. But that was my rabbi: fierce, honest, and at my back. Rabbi Schwartz reminded me when I needed it most not to fake a thing. I was to live, to love, to fight, and be authentically present for Joanie, for my kids, for him, and for me. I am so grateful to have learned that from the same man who first taught me about b’tzelem Elohim — the Jewish value that speaks of every person’s infinite worth. To him, b’tzelem Elohim was no theological abstraction. Rather, it was a claim: that when we truly see others, when people feel seen, we catch a glimpse of the Divine. He saw the divine in me. I desperately miss his belief in me since his death two years ago this fall.

When I think of Rabbi Schwartz, I remember not only his fierce honesty but the lessons he bore into the bedrock of my life: that every person is b’tzelem Elohim — infinitely worthy. His death was tragic, stolen from us by a drunk driver who took both him and his father-in-law from us. The swiftness and harshness cut deeply.

Yet he is still right here with me. He never denied me a thing in his life, and even in his death I can almost hear him saying: See? I told you. There is no Plan A. We do not get to control this; we don’t get to choose. His teachings and presence — his strengths and even his imperfections — continue to carve my path, to clear a passage for me... just as I believe that, for each of us, if we are so blessed, there is someone who would descend into the earth to clear a passage.

I do not hide from his imperfections, nor did he hide from mine. That is because for Rabbi Schwartz, teshuvah wasn’t a neat and tidy principle. No — teshuvah was the way Judaism shows that life’s fabric can be mended, even when it first appears to be irrevocably torn. Teshuvah returns us to love, to hope, and to whatever ultimacy you would seek from God. Those were not just values in his sermons and books. These are granite truths he bore into the path before me,

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clearing passage for me to get from where I was to where I am... in recovery and finally in a once unlikely remission.

Our sages taught: “The righteous fall seven times and rise again.” (Proverbs 24:16) At *Yizkor*, the descent is steep. But the love of those we remember was never meant to leave us stranded underground. Their faith in us was always meant to help us rise.

So we rise —

- Rise above doubts, believing we can endure.
- Rise, steadied by love and integrity.
- Rise, lifted by the courage of our ancestors.
- Rise, because their prayers echo still.
- And rise, because in a way, they did stay. They stayed long enough to shape us, to guide us, to give us courage.

Ken y’hi ratzon. May it be God’s will — and may it be ours — to thank them not only with our words, but with our lives. They cleared the passage for us; now it is ours to walk, with strength, with integrity, and with love that never leaves us. It stays, just a little bit longer.