

Yizkor Sermon 5781: Rabbi David J. Small

The story is told in the book of Samuel about King Saul before a great battle with the Philistines.

The Philistine army gathers in the plain. The Israelites are outnumbered. And Saul is worried.

He goes secretly to consult a dead-raiser, the witch who lives in the town of En dor.

Cloaked as a stranger, he hires her to raise the spirit of the Prophet Samuel, his mentor who has died. Removing his cloak, Saul is recognized by the necromancer, who trembles in fear, as this practice is illegal in Israel. Saul reassures her that he is not operating a criminal sting operation but he needs to speak with his mentor, Samuel. Can she please rouse him?

Soon the spirit of Samuel is in the room. “What is the meaning of this? I am slumbering in Sheol.”

“Who needs to speak with me?”

“It is I Saul, who have summoned you, O prophet Samuel.”

“What is your purpose?”

“The Philistines have gathered a great army against me. I fear for tomorrow. What will be the future? Will you tell me my fate?”

“Well, I will put it this way, Saul:

Tomorrow, you will be with me.”

And Samuel Returns to Sheol to resume his slumber.

On the morrow, Saul is slain in battle with the Philistines, along with his son Jonathan.

David, son of Jesse, becomes the king.

Perhaps this story can give us some insight into the meaning of Yizkor.

What strikes me about Saul's audacity is not just that he seeks to awaken the spirit of his mentor, who anointed him, who advised him, and ultimately who informed him that God would be replacing him. The only use Saul made of this opportunity was to ask Samuel for another favor-- "Tell me the future."

But what if he had approached Samuel differently? What if he had said, "Thank you for all you have done for me?"

"Thank you for all you did for our people. I am sorry I disappointed you as a leader, I should have listened more to your advice. I hope you are resting in peace."

That would have been more worthy of a conversation with Samuel the Prophet.

This is a way to understand the purpose of Yizkor--to call upon the presence of our dead loved ones, to have heartfelt encounter with them: to tell them: "Thank you for all you have done for me. I am trying to follow the ways you taught me. I hope I am living in a way that honors you.

I remember you, you are cared for, you are appreciated. We are still learning from you."

That is a relational way of approaching our dead. When we remember them, when we say their names and turn to them in love, they live in us and through us.

My daughter Sharone referred me to a book by David Kessler, who worked with Elizabeth Kubler Ross on the five stages of Grief. This book, *The Sixth Stage*, proposes that making meaning out of the life of our loved one who dies is the ultimate stage of response to their death. Kessler writes how he, a famous scholar of grief and mourning, was upended by the sudden death of his beloved 21 year old son. Struggling with his own grief, pain and loss, Kessler the father found peace by affirming the meaning of his son's short life. Rather than focusing only on the death, he strove to remember and honor his son as he had lived.

When we tell the stories of their lives, we find meaning in our own. This is how I understand what our sages said "may their memory be a blessing;" by weaving meaning into our own lives from the narrative of our dead loved ones, their lives become a gift that keeps giving. And in doing so we keep giving to them:

“Love and grief,” Dr. Kessler writes, “are inextricably intertwined. Death ends a life but not our relationship, our love, our hope.”

“Everything can be taken from a person but the freedom to choose one’s attitude, to choose one’s own way. We define our stance in these circumstances.”

At Yizkor time we say, “I am present for you. Here I stand: hinneni. I still love you. I am present for you.”

Rabbi Kalman Kalonymous Shapiro, a.k.a. the Ishbitzer Rebbe, led and taught Jews in the depths of the Shoah. He preached from the Warsaw Ghetto where he maintained a secret synagogue for two years. The Ishbitzer taught of the different emanations of Divine Presence. One, “Malkhut,” or Sovereignty,” is hidden from us at times. When evil prevails in the world we cannot see it. But another quality of Divine--”Shekhina, presence,” or “in-dwelling,” is always present with us and never departs from the people. Through Shekhina, God is present in the most horrible circumstances. And we do not need ever to feel alone.

My brother Michael reminds me that the Talmud teaches: when people express love and tenderness for each other, “Shekhina beniehem,” --the Shekhina is between them, is with them.

When we show love, appreciation, compassion for each other, shekhina is there; we bring the Divine Presence into life.

Earlier this year, a long-time member was dying in a care facility. His room had a window facing out on the ground floor. Only one family member, dressed like an astronaut in heavy PPE was at his side.

Others were outside the window. A ladder was set up. One by one, his loved ones climbed the rungs of the ladder and called to him through the window-- "We are here, you are not alone, we love you, we care for you, we appreciate you, we will always remember you!"

His face was suffused with peace as he took in their voices and saw them, grainily, through the window.

He felt the love and appreciation of his family. In that moment, shekhinah beineihem, the Divine Presence was among them. Another family I know could not go out of their home and connected via cell phone to share their love and support to a dying loved one.

As Jews we do not seek closure in the death of our loved ones. We seek meaning. And honor and loyalty and we express our love. As we stand in this hour on our most holy day, Shekhina beinenu, may the Divine Presence be among us and our loved ones.

Let us find meaning and be present to and for our dead as we recite the Yizkor prayers.

May their memories live as a blessing, and let us say, "Amen."