

## Yom Kippur Yizkor – September 20<sup>th</sup> 2018

On this sacred day of Yom Kippur, I begin with a personal confessional – I am not on Facebook. Living with three teenagers in my house, who are much more proficient on social media than their old man, who are constantly showing me how they stay connected with their friends on Facebook and Instagram and a few other sites, I remain steadfast in my traditional ways. However, when I read the following story about the power of Facebook, I realized that I may have to change my ways. I just hope I never have the same reason to connect with people on Facebook as Mayank Sharma.

Mayank Sharma, of New Delhi, India, and a few years ago he contracted tubercular meningitis. The life-threatening illness attacks his body's central nervous system, causing inflammation of tissues surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Because of this, Sharma lost all of his memories. He could not remember where he was or when it happened, but one morning, he awoke with absolutely no memory of the first 26 years of his life. He could not recognize his father, his mother or his brother. In a recorded video account of his ordeal, he said, "I couldn't even recognize my own reflection. Absolutely nothing made sense, I had no idea what relationships meant."

A little further into the video Mayank tells us that one day, he sat down at his old computer, and checked the browser's internet history, and saw a site called Facebook. The computer signed him in, and there were the unrecognizable faces and names that were his online friends. There was the "people you may know" feature, which may be a way for most people to find old high school buddies, but for Mayank, it was a phrase with an entirely different meaning. He wrote to these people. He described his condition, his loss of memory. He asked if he knew them. He asked if they knew him.

And so, one by one, Mayank was told who he was: his friends wrote back, and told him the story of his life, the experiences they had shared, the places, the emotions, the good times and bad, the reasons they loved him and the kind of person they thought he was. And, in a virtual world as well as in his family's home, Mayank began to learn the memories he lost, the life he lost, and he began to rebuild it.

The power of this story is not just the technical help he got from Facebook - but the degree to which we are the product of our memories. Mayank Sharma found that without his memories, he was still identified *as* himself, but he was not identifiable *to* himself. Memories helped him realize who he was. And when his own memory failed him, it was the links with family and friends that re-filled his emptiness. He found himself because of the relationships he had with others.

Mayank's story of forgetting and being told what to remember is uncommon, but common to all of us is the fact that the way we remember literally makes us who we are. However, we must also accept how famously unreliable memory is. Even without tragic conditions that compromise memory, not too mention our everyday lapses, memory plays tricks on us.

Of course, Jews have our own relationship with memory and we sense that as both individuals and as a community. Memory pervades Jewish thought and Jewish rituals. For our people, memory is not a passive act, it is an active one. We recite Kiddush on Friday night with its ongoing reminder of both the creation of the world and our Exodus from Egypt. We remember Amalek and Haman and all of our enemies who sought to destroy us, and it is has become the mantra of our people living after the Shoah to make sure the world, Remembers and Never Forgets.

Did you ever notice that when a person chooses to become Jewish later in life, when they choose their own Hebrew name, they are assigned a certain lineage? Jews by birth have their own Hebrew name that includes

the Hebrew name of their parents – mine is Avraham Tzvi ben Aryeh v' Chanah. But a Jew by Choice does not have Jewish parents and therefore their Hebrew name does not include their biological parents. Instead, they become the descendants of the first Jewish couple, Abraham and Sara, and by doing so, they inherit all of Jewish history and are given the immediate task of seeing themselves with the same memories and stories, the foundation of our people.

Some might say that we Jews are obsessed with memories much more so than history. I remember learning that it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century that Jews began to think about history in a collective manner – prior to that it was all about memories, personal memories, remembering the stories from long ago that taught us a lesson, remembering personal experiences that served as a foundation for our belief and our passions and remembering rituals that have been part of our people for centuries.

If history is a collective experience, then memory is personal. I may share my history with you because we studied the same history books, we watched the same movies and we learned the same stories, but all memories are unique, because they are emotional, at least the strongest memories are. And it is those memories, those personal experiences, those moments we shared with loved ones, those emotional experiences that unite us today, as we prepare for the powerful ritual all about memory, the recitation of Yizkor.

The essence of memory is not often full of pain, but rather full of love. The closeness we share with others is a defining feature of our lives, and we are right to seek solace in the memory of time spent with loved ones, with wisdom received from those who are no longer here. As my teacher, Rabbi David Wolpe writes in his book *Making Loss Matter*, “The inescapable paradox of love is this: it is made precious by time, which threatens to destroy it. Only through loss can we love, but it is loss that wracks our hearts.”.

We Jews know about emotional tears in our hearts and we have rituals based on these feelings; the torn ribbon worn by the mourner, the covering of the mirrors in a Shiva house because that is not a time for vanity, and the fact that we never allow mourners to grieve alone. They need us, the minyan of ten to stand with them at the graveside, to be with them in the Shiva house and in the synagogue, to respond to their recitation of Kaddish and to express our condolences as best we can.

Amongst the most powerful rituals we have for mourners are the prayers of Yizkor. There clearly is no moment like this one, the moment we prepare to say Yizkor on Yom Kippur. It is by design that these prayers are recited today and not last week. After all, Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaDin*, the day of judgement - Yom Kippur is a day of forgiveness a day of compassion and a day of kindness. Yizkor is a tradition that began less than a thousand years ago, in the Twelfth Century during the time of mourning the Crusades. It began when synagogue leaders stood up once a year and read the names of those in the congregation who perished in the past year. It is also noteworthy that the concept of a Mourner's Kaddish, the prayer that loved ones say that never mentions loss or death or sorrow, it is noteworthy that the recitation of this prayer by mourners also began around that same time and its name in Hebrew, *Kaddish Yatom*, literally means the Orphan's Kaddish, originally meant to be said by children when their parents passed away and later altered to include spouses, siblings, and parents who mourn the passing of their child.

And so, on a day that we seek to feel God's compassion and forgiveness for ourselves, only on this sacred day of Yom Kippur, when we extend compassion and forgiveness to each other, when we become more acutely aware of the veil of separation between the living and the dead, we remember – we stand together for a few private moments to recall the memories of our own loved ones, we recite the names of the members of our extended congregational family who passed away since we gathered here last Yom Kippur, and we chant the Memorial Prayers to honor the Six Million who perished in the Shoah along with all others we remember today.

Have you ever thought about why Yizkor is recited now in the service, right after we chant the Torah and before we recite Musaf? Why do we not begin the day with this ritual or add it on at the end of the service? Why do we pause so soon after the Torah Reading and the Haftorah Reading to chant Yizkor? The traditional answer is that Yizkor on Yom Kippur is designed to help us connect to the words of the prophet Isaiah that we just chanted a moment ago. As I said earlier, we Jews believe that memory is not a passive act, and Isaiah hammers away the point: ritual without justice is a charade, justice without Torah is forgetting. God says, "Seek the well-being of others, which is how I know you will remember me". And that is the lead-in for our ceremony of *Yizkor*.

It's as if our ancestors, who themselves will always live in our memory, continue to bequeath to us yet another message of love from beyond: do you know how to remember me? Do you know how to invoke my spirit? Not just in tears, not just in laughter, not just in recalling the time we spent together, but by helping others live fuller lives, by bringing kindness to people who need it, by honoring everyone in the greater community, by creating opportunities for *Hesed* when it is so desperately needed. This is active memory. We must never fool ourselves with hoarding possessions when we can share kindnesses. We must never become so egotistical to only think of our own needs. Isaiah and the other prophets, our ancient Rabbis and our own loved ones, want us to turn our attention to others, to inspire others, to be kind to others and to help lift up others. And as we recall our loved ones today, we must be cautious not to weep too much. As the Rabbis of old say, *Zachor B'peh, Al Tishkach B'lev*: Remember with your mouth - Don't forget with your heart.

Remember, not just the good memories, but remember fully, in the best way the tradition asks: active, lasting, thoughtful memories. As we honor those who touched our lives we must strive to not live in the past, but rather bring them into our present and future, looking forward while always mindful of what and whom came before us. Yizkor on Yom Kippur must never be a commemoration of the past, but rather a celebration of our past meeting our present and preparing us for our future.

On this day we admit our shortcomings, urge each other to live more inspired lives, and remember the people who brought us here. How could today be anything other than a celebration of the possible? If we're old or young, weary or anxious, if we're cynical or optimistic: we must use this day to make tomorrow better. We must also use yesterday to make tomorrow better. As the poet Joseph Brodsky said, "If there is a substitute for love, it is memory."

The loss of memory almost erased Mayank Sharma's life story, and his connections to others gave him his life back. It's a story about a popular website, but it's also a more universal story about us and the power of memory: our stories are intimately wound in with a web of family, friends, communities, and, for us, a people whose undying commitment to serving God links us to generations who would otherwise be forgotten. Our loved ones live in us, their blood courses through our veins, their prayers live in our actions, their lessons and values are intertwined with ours. We don't just remember. We remember and we act. Our actions give life to the ideals of our ancestors and loved ones, and their memories give strength to us. May we prove worthy of those we remember today. May their ideals live in us. And may we be worthy to inspire our descendants to ever-greater heights as we prepare now for Yizkor.