

Yom Kippur Yizkor 2011

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This is the day we go eyeball to eyeball with death. Not just at Yizkor time, but throughout the whole day of Yom Kippur we force ourselves to confront what for most of us is our greatest fear, the fear of death. “Who will live, and who will die, who by stoning, who by water”—our liturgy is filled with images and reminders of our death. Yet, through the choreography of this day we somehow manage to lessen the fear, reach a deep place of joy inside, and emerge with a healthy commitment to life. How do we do this?

The formula is very simple. Without even talking about it, without calling any attention to it, Yom Kippur manages to goad us into recommitting ourselves to something bigger than our lives. On this great day we find our way back to the one thing in life that is larger than death. We re-commit ourselves to the covenant of love and kindness. We sit and stand together for a whole day, the entire Jewish people, and we remember who we are and what we’re here to do. The Zohar puts our mission statement out poetically—Who are the children of Israel? The children of Israel exist liftoach drachim, velehair shvilim, velehadlik neirot, velekarev hakol mee-mata le-malah—to open new ways, to light up new paths, and to kindle lamps, and to draw everything from below to above, so that all will be one.

We forget the simple things, the simple truths, the simple commitments that give our lives meaning, and that connect us to something beyond ourselves. After the Holocaust, in 1948, Abraham Joshua Heschel tried to put into words how we had forgotten who we are. Here’s what he says: “When we were blinded by the light of European civilization, we could not appreciate the value of the small fire of our eternal light. In the spiritual confusion of the last hundred years, many of us overlooked the incomparable beauty of our old, poor home...Now, trampled and bloodied in the light of the blinding lamps of civilization and evil—we sense the importance of our small candles which our mothers so piously blessed.”

Yom Kippur tries to bring us back to modest candle light and the covenant of love and kindness. One way Yom Kippur does this is to give us this Yizkor time. For this is the moment when we are to remember the people who gave us life, and who introduced us to love and kindness. When our loved ones actually lived the covenant of love and kindness, when they in their lives managed to connect to this treasure bigger than life, when they got it and lived it, then this Yizkor moment gives us pain that is so great. The loss is so profound. But at the same time we can’t help but get the message they sent us—that we too, like them, can connect to the covenant of love and kindness. And this connection gives our lives a strength and beauty that shines in the darkest hours.

I remember when I was in college and I came home from the University of California at Berkeley. I was to the left of Mao Tse Tung. I mean, I was politically off the charts. My home town synagogue hosted an evening with college students telling parents about what was happening on the campuses in those crazy days of the late 60’s and early 70’s. After I spoke my wild stuff, some one stood up and said, “I’d like to know where Bill Berk gets his money—from the Communist Party? From Russia? From China?” My mom stood up and she pointed a finger at that guy and told him and off and said, “He doesn’t get money from anybody. He’s flat broke.” She protected her baby even though she thought my politics were lunacy. You see my mom did what a parent is supposed to do—over-ride the tendency to be judgemental and lean toward love. As the Talmud in Berachot puts it—what does God pray? May my mercy overcome my sense of strict justice, so that I come to my children more from the place of mercy than from the place of strict justice. It may be God’s prayer, but it’s a great parent’s prayer.

This afternoon we remember our loved ones—some of whom managed in their lives a love that was stronger than death. The Talmud Baba Batra 10a gives us a little poem about this kind of love:

There are 10 strong things in the world: Rock is strong, but iron breaks it. Iron is strong, but fire melts it. Fire is strong, but water extinguishes it. Water is strong, but the clouds carry it. The clouds are strong, but the wind drives them. The wind is strong, but the human being withstands it. The human being is strong, but fear weakens him. Fear is strong, but wine removes it. Wine is strong, but sleep overcomes it. Sleep is strong, but death stands over it. What is stronger than death? Tzedakah, for it is written, tzedakah is stronger than death. But I say the text could have ended with love. Love is stronger than death. Love outlasts death. Love gives you the strength to endure, to go on, to start over, to rebuild, to rekindle your soul. Love gives you meaning in the face of death. We know that love is stronger than death.

Let us remember the love that graced our lives. It is this love that connects us to eternity. It is this love that gives us a big enough picture to understand that death is not the ultimate force in the universe. Our tradition tries to give expression to this in many ways. One of my favorite ways is to remind us that when we got out of Egypt and made our way to Mt. Sinai, we experienced God. That experience was ultimately an experience of love. The Zohar tells us that every Jew at Sinai was kissed on the lips by every single commandment that God spoke.

When love is combined with sacred obligation, with a task to perform, our lives take on a dignity that not even death can shatter. The great Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai expresses this in his poem about how his father taught him the 10 commandments—not with fear, but with love:

MY Father

My father was god, but he didn't know it.

He gave me the 10 Commandments, not with thunder or fury, fire or clouds,

But softly, with love, caresses, kind words.

He added "please, please" and sang the words "keep and remember the Sabbath day" and cried quietly: "don't bear false witness, don't lie." He'd cry and hug me. "Don't steal, don't lust, don't kill."

His voice was as white as the hair on his head.

Then he turned his face to me, like that last day, when he died in my arms, and said: I want to add two more commandments to the ten. The eleventh: never change. The twelfth: change, change."

So spoke my father and walked away into his strange distances.

As we remember our loved ones, let us remember the great gift they gave us—the covenant of love and kindness. May our children and grandchildren be blessed with this gift from us. May the covenant of love and kindness sustain us during tough times. During the good times, may we not forget where we came from and the commitments that put godliness into our thoughts and deeds. The next time we go eyeball to eyeball with death, may we be firmly in the covenant place, so that deep down we won't flinch.