

YOM KIPPUR YIZKOR 5770

CROSSING THE BRIDGES OF MEMORY

We are now well into our 22nd hour of observing Yom Kippur. We have fasted. We have prayed. We have confessed. Our defenses are lowered. Our hearts are open. It is at this moment of heightened vulnerability that we turn to remembering the ones we loved whom death has claimed.

This Yizkor service, this service of memory, is observed four times during the year. At the end of the festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot and on Yom Kippur. On each of the festivals we read a special Biblical book: Song of Songs for Passover; Ruth for Shavuot; and Ecclesiastes for Sukkot. On Yom Kippur there is no additional book that we read. Instead we write one. We inscribe upon the pages of a new year gifted to us what we have learned from another year past, the corrections in our behavior we have committed ourselves to, and the sacred aspirations we now embrace. And these inscriptions are sanctified through the language of memory we now invoke. For in Judaism, memory is in the service of the future. The prayer of memory, as vocalized through the Yizkor, is a pledge to act on behalf of our ancestors, our beloveds.

The Hebrew verb at the root of Yizkor, *zachar*, signifies resistance to the seductive pull of immobilizing longing and melancholy. It appears toward the end of the book of Job. Suffering Job. He has lost his wealth, his health, and all of his children. The alluring numbness of oblivion is great. And at such a moment, he is urged: “Do not long for the night! Z’chor (Remember) to magnify God’s works!”

When faced with death and loss, how easy it is to become entrapped in a dimension of hopelessness and despair. To believe that the shadow cast by such sorrow will forever define the hue of one’s day. Delmore Schwartz captures this in his poem “The Deceptive Present.” He begins awake to the rebirth that is spring and marvels at those who, during winter, cannot remember the promise of revival that lies just ahead:

As I looked, the poplar rose in the shining air
Like a slender throat,
And there was an exaltation of flowers,
The surf of apple tree delicately foaming.
All winter, the trees had been
Silent soldiers, a vigil of woods,
Their hidden feelings
Scrawled and became
Scores of black vines,
Barbed wire sharp against the ice-white sky.
Who could believe then
In the green, glittering vividness of full-leafed summer?
Who will be able to believe, when winter again begins

After the autumn burns down again, and the day is ashen,
And all returns to winter and winter's ashes,
Wet, white, ice, wooden, dulled and dead, brittle or frozen,
Who will believe or feel in mind and heart
The reality of the spring and of birth,
In the green warm opulence of summer, and the inexhaustible vitality
And immortality of the earth?

The verb *zachar* also identifies a recommitment to action. When the Hebrew slaves are moaning in agony under the lash of their Egyptian overseers, the Torah tells us that “*Elohim vayizkor* (And God remembered) His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.” Thus begins the climb out of the death grip of slavery into the vast expanse of freedom and toward the realm of sovereignty.

The Yizkor prayer itself speaks of a mutual call to action, by God and by the one praying. It reads: “May God remember the soul of my dear one who has gone to another world, and on whose behalf I give tzedakah for the repair of this world. In return may my dear one's soul be bound in the bonds of life with the souls of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah and with the other righteous ones in the Garden of Eden.”

The one reciting the prayer testifies that he will act in holy relationship to the living, by giving tzedakah, and calls upon God to act (“to remember”) with regard to the deceased. Thus, Yizkor is a call to action, on the part of both the petitioner and God.

The first step on this road to action on behalf of the living is to bring the one we are honoring into our presence through active remembering. So let us take a moment to close our eyes and breathe deeply and slowly. Picture the face of someone you are remembering at this moment. Their face; their smile; the way they stood; perhaps the feel of a warm embrace; the whisper of affection.

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Open your eyes. Feel the immanence of your dear one's presence. We have crossed the bridges of memory and brought our loved ones back with us in our hearts. They are revived as a living source of inspiration to live our lives well and fully. And this is the message in the poem by the Sephardic poet Brenda Serotte:

I'm crossing the Bridges of Memory now
To the land of my ancestral home;
There's the house of the fortune teller, her name I remember.

Estrella Ben Roya, a storyteller.
She told the villagers' futures,
Then passed on her powers to me.

What would you like to know?
I'll tell you.
It lives in my heart's memory.

I'm crossing the Bridges of Memory now
To the land of my ancestral home;
There's the house of the fortune teller, her name I remember.