

YOM KIPPUR
5779

Maxie Segal is going to Israel for the first time. His good friend Harry tells him he must go to Machane Yehudah in Jerusalem and find this old man who sells onions by the entrance to the market. Harry says that this guy has the most extraordinary memory in the world; he never forgets anything. Maxie arrives in Jerusalem and goes to the market and finds the old man selling onions exactly where Harry said he would be. He introduces himself and tells the man what his friend said about him. Maxie then abruptly asks him what he ate for breakfast on the same day of the month six months ago. The old man immediately responds, "eggs." Maxie is unimpressed, and scoffing says, "big deal, everyone eats eggs for breakfast." Ten years later Maxie returns to Jerusalem. He goes back to Machane Yehudah and sees the old man in the same spot still selling onions. It's ten years later. Maxie approaches the old man and again abruptly asks, "what kind?" The old man responds, "scrambled." As for me, I am not worried about remembering what I ate for breakfast six months ago. I'm trying to remember what I had for breakfast today.

"We flicker on a screen. We fold and unfold upon the mind's eye. Brittle as wings, eternal as a heartbeat. And even when the heart falls silent, we do not cease to be. Because, in the end, we all become memories." This beautiful reflection from "Call the Midwives" is a fitting reminder before *Yizkor*. Whom do we remember and how do we remember them; who will remember us and how will we be remembered?

Jews are commanded to remember: remember the Sabbath, remember the Exodus from Egypt, remember Amalek the biblical paradigm of evil and for us, remember the Holocaust. As we live in this fractured world, we need to remember to have hope. Hope keeps us from despair and gives us the strength to endure. The unknown future and the uncertainty of our lives humbles us. The Psalmist reminds us to learn to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:12). How often do we talk about killing time when we should talk only about living time?

Young children are fascinated by the world; we, adults, strain to make the world fascinated with us. The Baal Shem Tov taught that we should be like young children who are always excited with life, never walking, always running wherever they go. Childhood is a state of constantly recurring astonishment. Rabbi Heschel reminds us to be radically amazed every day? Why are there so many octogenarians and those older who are still youthful and many in their thirties and forties who are so old? Independent of age, some of us see the world through old tired eyes and others with eyes wide open and clear. Younger people should be filled with an appreciation for ageing and older people should be filled with the spirit of youthfulness. We cannot avoid ageing but we can avoid getting old.

Professor Gail Twersky Reimer points out that the Israelites did not march through the wilderness, they wandered. Marchers keep their eyes straight ahead and simply march toward their destination. Wanderers are alert, open to experience, looking around and are aware; Jews are to be wanderers. Too many of us are simply marching through time. Very concerningly, so

are too many of our children as we over program them. Let us remember to wander through time so that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Is it possible to have no regrets? In the best of relationships, is it possible? The Swedish novelist, Fredrik Backman, observes that at funerals so often we wish we could have known the person better, asked the person more questions, spent more quality time together. How much the more so, if this is a parent, a brother, a sister, or a spouse? How many unresolved relationships are there, unfinished conversations, undelivered apologies and unstated love? Yom Kippur reminds us not to forget that the moment is now.

Backman writes that “as parents we are doomed to wish that we’d fallen asleep beside our children more often, while their head could still fit on our chest. That we’d spent more time sitting on the floor while they were playing; hugged them while they still let us.” For those of us for whom these opportunities have not passed, remember not to let them pass. For those of us for whom they have passed, let us remember there are different ways to have our now older children rest their heads on us, sit on the floor with us, hug them and love them. Margaret Meade taught that homo sapiens are the only species that never weans their children and the hardest thing about being a family is that we are never finished. Is this a blessing or a burden? Let us remember to make our families a blessing, especially when it is most challenging and difficult to do so.

Reb Nachman of Bratslav taught that just as it is a mitzvah to remember, it is at other times a mitzvah to forget. The 19th century writer Daniel Sanders wrote that a person’s memory is long on injustice endured by us but short on injustice done by us. Even on Yom Kippur when we are commanded to forgive others, we do not. Reb Nachman reminds us that to fulfill the commandments of not bearing a grudge, not hating our neighbor in our hearts, and not wishing evil upon another, we must forget. For those of us who have wronged others, we must never forget that we have. Otherwise how we will ever think of asking for forgiveness yet alone do it? Our rabbis tell us that all the commandments and good deeds we do that we forget, G-d remembers and all those we do that we remember, G-d forgets. The difference between a person who regales us with all the good deeds he or she has done and one who does not is the difference between one who is humble and secure and one who is not. Our ancient teacher Ben Sira tells us to never forget our good fortune, always remember another’s poverty; forget all the good we have done and remember all the good we still must do.

When Rabbi Akiva was being tortured to death the angels cried out to G-d asking: “Is this Torah and is this its reward?” G-d promises Akiva an afterlife as recompense; to the angels G-d never responded because there is no answer in our world as to why the righteous and innocent suffer. Rabbi Barry Holz comments that even for the great Rabbi Akiva the mystery of death and suffering is beyond human comprehension, locked in the mind of G-d and inaccessible to us. No one can claim to know the answer to this mystery or to what happens after we die. The most we can do is have faith and faith is like the moon, always waxing and waning.

In Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "The Boarder," Melnik whom Reb Berish took in to his apartment is a mocker and unbeliever. One morning Melnik berates Reb Berish when he is davening: "To whom are you praying, to the G-d who made Hitler and gave him the strength to kill six million Jews? Or, perhaps to the G-d who made Stalin and let him liquidate another ten million victims? Really, Reb Berish, you're not going to bribe G-d of the Universe with a pair of tefillin." The biblical scholar Aviva Zornberg tells us that questions about G-d are so difficult that we cannot talk about G-d today in any absolute or dogmatic way. One rebbe says that we must talk about G-d only in a whisper; that we cannot say that G-d is good out loud. There is simply too much suffering and pain in this world. We must remember that we are of a tradition where it is acceptable to argue with G-d and as long as our arguments continue, G-d is part of our lives. The author Hank Lazer writes: "G-d is the G-d of secrets; otherwise it would be easy to know G-d directly and with certainty. G-d is the keeper of secrets, and the best kept secret is the very nature of G-d." Always has been, always will be.

Thresholds are implicitly places of uncertainty. Liminal space, consequently, can be associated with anxiety, danger and also, with opportunity. What happens when we cross the thresholds of our homes into the outside world and what happens when we return home? When we cross thresholds, we always cross into the unknown. What if we could remember the liminal crossing from our mothers' wombs into this world when we were born? What will it be like when we cross the threshold from this world when we die? Professor Hillel Halkin asks: "If life is like a dream, what does that make death?" He ponders after his wife died how a love like he and his wife had for the many years they were together disappear? He asks: "Doesn't it have to go on existing somewhere?" Such love has given Professor Halkin an intimation of eternity. Fredrik Backman wrote that some of us become so preoccupied with death that we go into the waiting room long before it has announced its arrival. We fear that it may take someone other than ourselves, someone we love deeply. One of the most painful moments in our lives comes with the insight that an age has been reached when there is more to look back on than ahead. This must never compromise our love of being alive today.

The Talmud tells us that we should not celebrate when a ship leaves port to begin its journey but only when it returns. We live to complete our journeys; rituals and customs such as *kaddish*, *yartzheit* and *Yizkor* help us remember the journeys of our loved ones and our own. Rabbi Mychal Copeland teaches that rituals are reminders that help us understand that time is fluid and that our past, present and future are deeply connected. Too often the present becomes the past before we experience it. Even a non-believer like Phillip Roth found deep meaning in saying *Kaddish*, observing *yartzheit* and visiting the graves of his parents.

Buddhism teaches that only when we calmly accept that everything ends, including ourselves, can we have peace. Judaism teaches that we should live life accepting that only G-d knows what is beyond and that everything born including us will die. We are to remember every day to embrace the mystery and accept that we cannot explain everything. We are to remember that we mortal beings can find meaning in what often seems to be an apparently meaningless universe. We need to allow ourselves to be awed and experience wonderment; not to feel small or threatened by knowing we are part of something infinitely bigger than ourselves. The

great equalizer of life is that everyone dies. The Greeks had immortal gods who were just like human beings. We have an immortal G-d in Whose image we are created. This is why every one of us is important and precious and why every one of us is responsible.

Remember the Holocaust, *zachor!* Remembering is an active process. We are to remember in ways that produce real results in our lives. Are we genuinely and sufficiently remembering simply when we say *kaddish* at Auschwitz or on *Yom HaShoah*? When we think of the children being dragged out of their Jewish schools, families violently pulled away from their Shabbos tables and synagogues filled with Jews burned down, it tears our hearts apart. If we intend to remember the Holocaust and all are people including children and babies who were murdered, what other way can we do this than by living meaningful Jewish lives and raising Jewish children to live meaningful Jewish lives?

Therapist Melanie Weiner talks about “a profound and unique paradox that distinguishes our human condition. We are creatures who crave security and attach deeply. Yet we are creatures both gifted and burdened with the awareness that everything and everyone is impermanent. We know that everyone we love will die.” Contemplating this, she says, “it’s a wonder we’re not crazier than we are.” We are not in control. Netaneh Tokef reminds us of this every Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur; we do not know what will be a moment from now yet alone a year from now. Optimism that is needed now perhaps more than ever means acknowledging our craving for security and certainty while embracing the fact that no such security or certainty may exist. “Optimism allows us to stay present,” Weiner points out, “and embrace our full potential to meet life as it comes.” Optimism requires intentionality, faith, and a lot of righteous stubbornness.

One of the most significant aspects of being alive as a human being is our potential for being empathic—to put ourselves in another’s shoes and feel what that person is feeling. This is at the heart of the commandment “to love your neighbor as yourself.” In Mahayana Buddhism, there is a practice of breathing in the pain of others and breathing out into the one in pain the goodness, pleasure and comforts of our life. We become the other and the other becomes us. Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” understanding of the ideal human relationship is predicated on this exchange, on this ultimate intimacy between two human beings. This is what true altruism is. How different would our world be if we remembered every day to be empathic and raise our children to be empathic? Yom Kippur reminds us of this mitzvah.

In 2008, Jenni Sapien’s father was murdered and her family donated his organs. Arthur Thomas received her father’s heart and he wrote the family and they stayed in touch. Ten years later Jenni was getting married and she invited Arthur Thomas to the wedding. Jenni asked him to walk her down the aisle. Arthur asked Jenni to grip his wrist as he walked with her telling Jenni that this is where she will feel her father’s pulse the strongest. Jenni then put her hand on Arthur’s chest where her father’s heart was. After the wedding Arthur shared how thankful he was and wonderful he felt having brought Jenni’s father to her wedding. Let us all remember that saving one life is regarded as saving the entire world.

May we all be blessed not to be afraid when our time comes because we know we are loved, and we know because we are loved we will never disappear. This knowledge is at the heart of *Yizkor*.