

Shemini Atzeret 5780
Sermon Before Yizkor: Love and Memory
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On the Shabbat preceding Rosh HaShanah, we studied together the text of *Un'taneh Tokef* prayer, specifically the part that refers to a human life as but dust and ashes, a fleeting shadow, a dream that slips away. We saw that those words were meant to resonate for us based on their connections to the rest of the psalm from which they are drawn, and from other earlier sources. Based on those associations, in the end, the prayer's author wants to tell us that human life, while limited, is *not* desperate. Human beings have great potential to affect reality, even the capacity to influence God.

When we say Yizkor, we are pulled emotionally in two directions. On the one hand, we are painfully aware that those we remember today no longer walk the earth. We cannot have a conversation with them like we used to do. We cannot sit at the same table together, celebrate with them, face life's challenges with them, or simply behold their presence. We cannot touch them. Our sadness and despair that they are not here with us hovers in this room like a dark cloud.

On the other hand, we treasure the truth we know in our hearts: that they *are* here with us still, even though removed. They are with us in memory and in the effect they had and continue to have on our lives.

As the years pass, many of us come to look forward to *Yizkor*, as an opportunity to spread our memories before us, reflect on the people who have made a difference in our lives, and affirm that their lives mattered. The memories we carry with show that we carry their influence and their love with us. We are different because we shared life together.

Some of us have the benefit of tangible reminders of those we remember. My father grew up in rural upstate New York. His father was a country doctor. My grandparents built the one large home in town, with my grandfather's medical office attached. That was for well visits. Sick visits, births, and deaths were all house calls. My grandmother enjoyed hosting friends and family, serving beautiful meals on a stunning collection of serveware.

When I was a kid, the entire family would gather at my grandparents' home on Oneida Lake. I spent long hours at the lake with my cousins, digging up mussels and playing in the water. Unsupervised. Life was different then.

My grandmother died at age 62. She was the love of my grandfather's life, and he could not bear to look at the lovely things she left behind. He quickly sold them or gave them away. But for some reason, there were some odd things left, like nightgowns. To this day, I wear my grandmother's nightgowns.

My grandfather had a pearl necklace made for each of their 7 granddaughters from my grandmother's long double-strand. I am wearing mine today. Someday I hope that I will be able to give it to a grandchild of my own.

My grandmother made pies--actually, both of my grandmothers were expert pie bakers, as is my mother. And so am I. To this day, the dessert I make is pie, and it's because of my grandmothers. I make my own gorgeous crust, like they did, *because* they did. Every summer, I make at least one fresh raspberry pie to remember those my father's mother made for all of us. It takes time to make a great pie, and I as weave the top crust, I am brought back to my grandparents' patio, looking out on Oneida Lake, sitting with my cousins and my sister in our sunsuits (remember those?) after a long day of playing outside together. I am 54 years old now, and I can still taste that pie, and I can almost feel my suntanned little body, tired, happy, loved, and in need of a good bath, eating that pie, with my grandmother laughing in the background.

My grandfather was a man who valued achievement. He liked when someone got published or won an award. He seemed less interested in the ordinary events of our lives. But that was not true. I think he just didn't know what to say about ordinary things. We buried him in Arizona and I helped to go through the files he had left behind. There, I found a folder with my name on it. Inside were every letter I had written him, every card or photo I'd sent him over the 25+ years since my grandmother had died, and, yes, a bit of professional writing I'd published. I'd never known if he'd read my letters. He'd never mentioned them, never thanked me or written back, yet he had kept every one of them with him as he moved to Arizona, remarried, and lived in a much smaller home, where there wasn't space to store many things.

We carry memories of people we love through objects we can hold and by recalling words that were said or deeds that were done by good people in our lives which changed us forever. They are often small things, the "stuff" of life--a daily "I love you!"

note in a lunch box, the sound of “honey, I’m home,” the way a person made kiddush, the kugel someone made because they knew we loved it, an obsession with clean clothes, the 10:00 news, or with books, or art; the way they held us when we danced together, the way they watched our faces when we opened their gifts.

I heard a wonderful, true story that Rabbi Micah Greenstein learned from his father, who was also a rabbi. The senior Rabbi Greenstein had in his congregation a loving and warmhearted Polish-born Jew who had immigrated from South Africa many years before. Someone at shul asked him, “tell me, sir, where do you get all your warmth from?” The elderly man answered with the following story:

“When I left Poland, I was only 7 years old. On the last Shabbat before I left, my father took me and my brother to the rabbi in the next town for a special blessing. We stayed in the rabbi’s home, and my brother and I slept in the rabbi’s study. But I was so thrilled and excited, I couldn’t possibly sleep. In the middle of the night, I heard someone enter the room. I pretended to be asleep. It was the rabbi. He shuffled over to the couch on which I was pretending to sleep. The rabbi stood over me, looked down at me and whispered, “such a sweet child.” And then, I supposed he thought I might be chilly, so he took off his coat and draped it over me. I am now almost 80 years old. That was 73 years ago. And do you know something? I am still warm from that coat.”

That story captures what we need to know about love and memory: “I am still warm from that coat.”

We are who we are because of all the warm coats, the dishes, kiddush cups, and the words that stuck with us, hopefully more tender than not. I am still a granddaughter linked to a woman with a large laugh who lived out in the country and served a full course meal in her kitchen to a medical staff precisely at noon every day for half a century--I am linked to her by her Quaker Oats recipe box and the empty tin of mustard powder that I took from her pantry, which now sit in my *pantry*. I am connected to my grandfather by his medical bag, with the stethoscope he used to listen to the hearts of every person in a 2-hour country radius for those many years. I am connected to them through pearls and words and letters and laughter and more.

I encourage you to picture those things, or to relive moments that link you to those you have loved who walk the earth no longer. Try to feel the way you felt when you heard them speak, when you embraced, when together you experienced the moments of life, from the million or more possible memories, that you choose to bring to mind at this

time. As we create a space in this room to stand together with our memories, let's take them out and try to feel them.

We will begin the Yizkor service seated, on page 330, and then we will lift the Torah scrolls and stand for the private meditations beginning on page 335 and the memorial prayers for members of our congregation, those who were murdered in the Shoah, and those who died for the State of Israel. After our private reflections I will recite the "Kel Malei" for all of those we remember today.