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Yom Kippur 2014/5775

“When is Yizkor?”

I.

Achat sha'alti me'et ado-nai, ota avakesh

One thing alone do I seek from you, only one thing dare I ask for

Shivti b'veit ado-nai kol y'mey chayai

To dwell in your home, your place, all the fleeting days of my life

Lachazot b'no'am ado-nai u'l'vaker b'heycho

To see in my own lifetime the comfort of knowing you

To know that I have had the privilege of visiting – however briefly - your

inner sanctuary, your “place” wherein a senseless universe makes sense

We Jews are a questioning people. Not a questionable people, though sometimes we are that, too. But questioning is our lifeline to our inner selves. When we take what's given and probe it for more meaning, for mistakes, for oversights and omissions, for paradoxes and contradictions, we are “at home.” That's our religion: the question. The *kashya*. The *shayla*.

So when we rabbis get the same simple straightforward question over and over again as Yom Kippur approaches each year, we assume it is being asked not as a mere inquiry for information, like “how much does this magazine cost?” but as a *kashya*, a probe into the depths of ultimate meaning.

What is that question? What do people ask us rabbis each year, like clockwork? It is not “how do I truly repent? How do I achieve *teshuvah*?” It is not “how can I forgive someone who has deeply wronged me, even though he or she is asking for my forgiveness?” It is not even “how can I understand our ancient liturgy in a way that will reveal something of its majesty to me, a latter-day agnostic, though a loyal member of the Jewish people nonetheless?”

Aren't those good questions? We should spend time on them, perhaps the whole of Yom Kippur. But that's not the question Jews ask the rabbi in the days leading up to this most awesome of days, this most holy of nights. Rather, here is the question to which the Jews of our time seek an unequivocal answer: “What time is Yizkor?”

[By the way, Yizkor tomorrow morning begins around 11:20AM, give or take. If that's what you needed to know, you're all set. You can go.]

Why do people want to know this? After all, if they only want to experience one small part of Yom Kippur, there are more interesting events than Yizkor, certainly from a musical standpoint. If they intended to come to synagogue in the morning and stay throughout the day until the shofar is sounded and the havdallah candle doused, wouldn't this obviate the need to know the time of Yizkor, or indeed of any other specific event like the Torah reading or the d'rash? Or the break? Or the break-fast?

Apparently not. People who plan to be with us from dawn to dark nonetheless live in fear that they will miss this one piece of the whole. People who desire to spend only a small amount of time with us choose Yizkor over far more inspiring moments in the day, and they, too, fear they will arrive a moment too late and miss it all.

And why such fear? What would they miss? There are other opportunities to recite Yizkor during the year. (One of them comes in two weeks.) There are also occasions such as our deceased loved ones' yahrzeits when we can reflect on their memory and recite the kaddish. And don't we think of our dear ones often, perhaps daily as we look at a favorite photograph displayed in our home or on our cell phone screen saver? What's with Yizkor?

II.

In case you don't know what I'm talking about: Yizkor is a brief insert into the Torah service on each festival, including Yom Kippur, in which we take a moment to remember our deceased. It dates back to the Middle Ages, when Jews needed a collective yahrzeit for the thousands slaughtered by Crusaders passing through on their way to liberate the Holy Land.

We say, for instance, Yizkor elo-him et avi Moshe Baer ben Michael v'Yocheved – "let God remember my dear father (and you insert his name) who has gone to his eternal home. May his soul rest in peace and be bound up in the bond of life." Then a few psalms and readings are

tacked on, plus the traditional memorial prayer *eil maley rachamim*, and the Kaddish, and another *eil maley* for the martyrs of our people, and that's it. It takes fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty if we fold in some poems to commemorate the sacrifice of our martyrs during the Holocaust, as we will do tomorrow.

That's the service that people don't want to miss? Hence their anxious question about the starting time of Yizkor?

III.

But our group of rabbis concluded that this is not what people are asking. When they say "what time is Yizkor?" what they're really asking is "*will my own life be remembered or forgotten?*"

When you're younger, and you're new at saying Yizkor, you stand there and think about your loved ones, as is appropriate. And though you never stop thinking about them, as the years wear on you find you're standing there thinking not only about your deceased predecessors, but about your descendants. Your *living* descendants. Why? Because you

begin to picture the prayer room full of people reciting Yizkor, but you're no longer there. You're the one being remembered, you hope.

Unless no one wants to remember you. Or not so much *you*, per se, but what you strove for. What you accomplished. What you believed in. What you stood for. What you tried to do to improve the tiny corner of the universe that was assigned to you. And this includes the effort you made to create a sacred community, like this very community that will say Yizkor, among other things, tomorrow at 11:20AM.

You don't want all of that to be forgotten. And as you age, you realize that if you don't keep this quaint custom going, then it won't be there when you really need it most, which is not when you want to recite Yizkor yourself, but when you're dead and gone. When you want someone *else* to recite Yizkor, and to remember - among the many things and people and ideas and values and sacrifices of our people through the eons and millennia - to remember the little bit that you did to make the world a menschlich place.

Here's the good news: All of Yom Kippur is Yizkor. Whenever you come, for however long or short a time you come, it's Yizkor. It's all an act of remembering and reminding. You can't miss Yizkor, because *the whole holiday is Yizkor*.

Moreover, *all religion is Yizkor*. Certainly all Judaism, but probably all religion in general. This is especially true in our age, when prayer is no longer about miraculous intervention, but rather about a sense of place – moral and mortal place – in a seemingly rudderless universe.

IV.

Tomorrow when you come to recite the official Yizkor, I will give you a key to finding your “place” in the mysterious continuum between those who preceded you and those who follow after. I learned it from Rabbi Harold Kushner, who shared it with rabbis a few months back in anticipation of these days of awe.

He suggests that when you stand in silence to recall each deceased loved one on your list, that in addition to the standard formula “May God remember so-and-so,” you add four *z'chilot*, four “remembrances.” You

address the memory of your dear one directly and you say (in your heart): “Thank you; I am sorry; I forgive you; I love you.”

You can say them in any order you like. But don't leave any out. Make sure you thank your kin for the privilege of spending so much of your life in their company. Make sure you sincerely apologize for whatever you did or failed to do, that still weighs you down vis-à-vis this person. Make sure you forgive *them*, even if you are sure that they died unrepentant, perhaps oblivious, to the hurt they caused you. And tell them you love them. That you love them still. That because of your relationship with them you understand the meaning of love, of godliness, of life itself.

And I will give you one more key, this time not only to Yizkor, but to all of Yom Kippur, indeed to all of religious life. As I said before, religion in our time (and perhaps in ancient times as well) is not about miraculous intervention. It is not about praying for wonders and against misfortunes. It is not about superstition, though much superstition adheres itself to religion's sancta.

Religion is about locating oneself in the frighteningly unfamiliar terrain of the universe we inhabit. It is about finding a place of moral meaning, and of *mortal* meaning.

This tent is a good metaphor for what I am saying. The tent goes up in an empty yard. The chairs go out. We worshipers arrive at an agreed-upon arbitrary time (like, e.g., 11:20AM). We recite time-honored words, like “Yizkor Elo-him et nishmat avi” – “Let God remember the soul of my beloved father.” Or like “*avinu malkenu, choneynu va’aneynu*” – “Our loving parental sovereign, be gracious to us and answer us.”

Gradually, those other questions begin to be addressed: How do we achieve *teshuvah*, true turning? How do we let the majesty of the liturgy speak to us through our carefully nurtured agnosticism? How do we find our place, not only in the rudderless world, but also in the continuum of time stretching from the treasured values of our grandparents to the still-unformed principles of our grandchildren? How do we remember? And how will we be remembered? And will we be remembered at all?

So here is the second key: When we recite Psalm 29, which is one of the great components of the penitential liturgy, we stumble over the verse that is always mistranslated as “for my father and mother have abandoned me, but God will take me in.” *ki avi v’imi ya’azvuni, v’ado-nai ya’asfeni*. The verse has nothing to do with abandonment. It means simply that my parents and grandparents, over the course of natural time, have died. That’s as it should be. But that nonetheless, my own understanding of Godliness imbued by them into me over a lifetime of countless acts of gratitude, apology, forgiveness, and love, give me a sense of place in my own life.

V.

This must be why the psalmist prays this prayer that embodies all of the thousands of words our tradition asks us to recite on these Days of Awe, from Selichot to Hamelech to U’n’taneh Tokef to the Shofar blasts, to Ashamnu, to Avinu Malkenu, and even to Yizkor and the blessing for apples and honey. It is the key line in Psalm 27:

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To know that I have had the privilege of visiting – however briefly - your inner sanctuary, your “place” wherein a senseless universe makes sense

When is Yizkor? Right now. You're in it. And here's what you need to say: To your departed loved ones, say “thank you; I'm sorry; I forgive you; I love you.” And say it to your descendants as well, while they can still hear you.

And to the one whose reality is illusive but whose presence is all too real, say this: “*achat sha'alti* - One thing I ask, one thing I seek – not a long life, but a true life; not the miraculous end of suffering, but a chance to lessen suffering; not “my ancestors have abandoned me” but “my ancestors have died, as is natural and inevitable, yet I still seek and receive parental love and support from you, O God of place and home.”