

YIZKOR 5779
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Recently, I had a conversation with my folks about where they wanted to be buried when they died. (They brought it up.... not me.)

It's a question that I imagine hundreds of years ago few people asked. For the most part people stayed put in their villages and towns and multiple generations were buried side by side. Much like our community here in San Antonio. The question was never where.... but when?

But my mother is from Cranston, Rhode Island- and her family is buried there. My father's parents' graves are in Meriden, Connecticut. With children in New York, California and Texas it's hard to know what is best. "I don't want it to be an inconvenience, to *any of you*," my mother said.

But the truth is, after burial and shiva--- may they be a LONG time in the future.... I doubt I'll visit their graves very much. My parents haven't put much emphasis on this particular way of honoring our dead. When I asked her about it, my mother admitted that she had absolutely no memory of going to a funeral until she was an adult. And that the parents of her generation all protected the children from death and funerals. Whether it was a reaction to having faced so much death in their own families during the Holocaust and in the previous generations in Russia or good old fashioned superstition--- that one shouldn't tempt the Ayin Ha-ra....the evil eye I cannot be certain. But for my parents growing up and also for my siblings and me, Yizkor, and funerals and cemeteries were no place for children.

I know they both visit their parent's graves occasionally, but the devotion and dedication to cemeteries I see in so many of our members here. Was simply not part of our Jewish lives....it was not how we chose to remember.

I have often searched within myself to try and understand the pull to visit a place where one's loved ones remains are kept. But whose essence.... their soul...I believe, is no longer present....That is until this Spring when my dear friend, colleague and mentor, Rabbi Aaron Panken died very unexpectedly and tragically. He was a licensed and very experienced pilot, but he died flying his plane. He was also the president of Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion - the Seminary from where Rabbi Yergin, Cantor Berlin, Rabbi Berlin and I all received ordination. He was a very public and very important person in the Jewish world. But Aaron was also my advisor in rabbinical school and installed me as an assistant rabbi at Larchmont Temple. I had known him since I was a young child at summer camp. We didn't live too far from each other in New York. He was my friend.

I flew to New York for his funeral and joined 1000s of people at his memorial service. (Who knows how many watched on their computers around the world.) But burial (understandably so for his wife, two children, parents and extended family) was private.

I felt incomplete. How could I not be at graveside, to recite Kaddish...to help shovel earth....as jarring as our burial rituals are, they are powerful in their visceral nature. When we say: *Afar Atah v'el afar Tashuv*, from dust you come and to dust you return.... we mean it literally. As a mourner---if only be extension---I wanted to partake and I had an overwhelming desire to visit Aaron's grave. There was no question, however that out of respect to the family I would stay away.

That evening at shiva, I discovered that another friend felt the same way. He wondered if it would be ok to visit the grave and say Kaddish. Since I was leaving early the next morning to come back to San Antonio, this was not possible for me, but a few days later he called me from the cemetery. Mt. Eden. He was standing at Aaron's grave. Tears were shed, and prayers were said. We shared in a virtual burial and the physicality of the moment was powerful for us both.

And I finally understood- if only a little better- why knowing we have buried our dead properly is often not enough. We must go back...sometimes again and again....to see their names engraved on stone, to look at the gently sloped mound in front of us- and remind ourselves that it is true. The person we loved so well is gone.

Yizkor, then is our virtual graveside visit. We take the time to remember....to reckon with the worst, and appreciate the best of who they were. Each person that we have lost, every loved one we keep in our hearts has had a fundamental impact on who we are. A parent or grandparent, a spouse, a brother or sister, a dear friend....God forbid--- a child. Through all the good and bad, their lives are part of our lives simply because they were in our lives in the most intimate of ways.

I love the line in Merrit Malloy's poem Epithet when she says, *If you cannot give me away, at least let me live in your eyes and not on your mind.*

We see the world through eyes altered by the fundamental impact those we have loved and lost have had on our lives. But at this Yizkor moment- we give ourselves permission to open our minds and remember. Yizkor...is our moment to remember.