

YIZKOR 5781- Rabbi Mara Nathan

Every year this moment of remembering...of Yizkor, is one we anticipate but also of dread. So many of us would not miss it. Book of Remembrance in hand. Reciting cherished readings and prayers. We are grateful for this time that is set aside to think about the people that were so important in our lives who are here no more. To picture their faces and see what fleeting memories might peak out from our subconsciousness...to commune with our memories from times that have gone by.

Jewish American author Philip Roth described the power of remembering in his novel, *Patrimony*. "To be alive....he wrote...is to be made of memory...if a person is not made of memory, he's made of nothing."

What does it mean to be made of memory? Certainly not that we should live fully in the past. Our mourning rituals and traditions emphasize that life is to be experienced in the present.

Rather, I think, to be made of memory is to acknowledge that each experience whether good or bad is part of our life's ongoing construction. And every relationship we nurture helps to bring purpose and meaning to the endeavor.

That's why it is so important as part of the preparations for a funeral to sit together and talk about our loved ones after they die. I find leading these discussions to be one of the most meaningful parts of my work as a rabbi.

While we ostensibly gather to discuss funeral plans. The real purpose of these meetings is to share memories. To laugh and cry....to create some psychological distance from the pain and suffering our loved one may have experienced at the end of their life. To focus on who they were at their best...or as I often say, to think about how they would want to be remembered.

When we recall details of our loved one's childhood or young adulthood. When we retell the stories of how someone fell in love or established their career...or mentored others; when we note their passions and hobbies...a particular turn of phrase or a beloved recipe...When we acknowledge the impact, they had on their

children, their grandchildren, their extended family and friends. We are doing the holy work of collecting their memories as much for our own sake as for theirs.

The first, small steps through the grieving process are cushioned through this ritual of remembering.

This is why we should share these memories with each other- now. We should tell our stories to our children and our children's children...So that they have them long in advance....a living legacy to enjoy together.

I find that there are still new things to learn about my parents, about Larry's parents...and when I hear a story I haven't heard before I feel like I know them better and appreciate them more. We each have so many facets to our lives... we must remember to reveal them to those we love.

This year, while we remember the people, who died in our community and in our families, we must also remember the over 200,000 souls who have died in America due to complications associated with COVID-19. The loss of human creativity, love and connection around the world because of this pandemic has been extraordinary and is truly devastating.

Every one of those lives lost deserves to be remembered too. As Elie Wiesel counseled in the wake of the Shoah: "We cannot only focus on statistics. We must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph."

When someone we love dies, the time we shared with them and the love we feel toward them doesn't vanish. If anything by recalling their stories- that love becomes stronger...a legacy, we can turn to when we need- what that person is no longer here to give us. Even in the pain of loss that we feel there is beauty and uplift and purpose in remembering.

This is what makes Yizkor so powerful. It is a mixture of communal gathering – and personal grief. A time to honor our longing and our sadness. A chance to find comfort and healing in the knowledge that while our loss is intensely personal, we are not alone. At this sacred moment we turn to pg. 549 and through our tears...we remember together.

