

YIZKOR –
October 12, 2024

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“Choose to Remember”

These last 370 days since October 7th, cannot be swept under the rug where other messy subjects are hidden. The more we address them the better able we are to see them for what they are and what they can be. Is there anything that we can retrieve from this pile of losses, grief, and tragedy?

The poet Alden Solovy, our guest last month, writes in his poem, “Eleh Ezk’rah; After October 7th”

These I remember...

*The young and the old,
The children, the mothers,
The babies, the fathers,
And I do not look away.
The brutalized, the maimed,
The assaulted, the raped,
Burnt alive,
Terrorized and tortured,
Killed and kidnapped,
And I do not look away.*

For these I weep...

*In every age,
In our homes and our villages,
In the fields and on the streets,
In our cities and our towns,
Death and terror stalk...*

My eyes, my eyes flow like streams of water...

*For Re'im and Be'eri,
For Pittsburgh and Toulouse,
For Kfar Aza, Netiv HaAsara, and Nachal Oz,
For Mumbai and Colleyville...
For Paris and Poway...*

*For...Overland Park...
For every community
In every generation...*

*These I remember...
But how can I remember
What was stolen?
The loves, lost.
The dreams, lost.
Scientists, poets,
Artists, visionaries,
Leaders, learners
Teachers of Torah
The generations, lost.
The children of children,
And their children, and theirs,
Never to be.*

*These I remember,
I pour out my soul from within me...*

*And I call out...
God, God compassionate and gracious...*

Remember us.

The long and deep poem comes so close to us, then moves father away from us, and then it comes close to us, again. We're part of the rhythm that this year has endured. In the list of places where life was lost we heard names we've never known, some places we've come to know, and others that are so close to home in Texas. And there, in all those city names, the people who lived there are just like us --- scientists and poets, parents and grandparents, teachers and students. What have we endured? What have we done? What are we going to do? On this holy day, the poet gives us words to use and ways to respond. He gifts us these words:

*I pour out my soul from within me...
And I call out...
God, God compassionate and gracious...*

Remember us.

Isn't that all we want, to remember and to be remembered? The fear of being forgotten leaves us bereft and alone. But we are not alone, not as long as we are sitting here, or livestreaming, or in the company of those who are dear to us. But even as we plead to God, "Remember us!" we endeavor and strive to remember *them* --- our parents, spouses, siblings, children, grandchildren, and friends.

Elie Wiesel taught, "Without memory...there would be no future." In his words, he validates what we know is true. The future depends on what we can remember about how we experienced our loved ones. We build on joys and strength, and we learn to forgive sorrows and weaknesses. Our tradition builds holidays to commemorate victories, and fast days to remember how we once were. The past isn't cleansed or expunged of evil; rather it's incorporated into a texturized whole that tells a story of resilience and wonder. That's why Wiesel, who saw both horror and hope, teaches us that memory isn't only about the past; it's the bedrock on which the future can be built.

So, memories are vital to us. They are all we have to see the future that depends on how we choose to shape it. Though Yizkor can be a time of emotional sadness and reasons to feel bereft, Yizkor is also a beginning. We begin to call up memories that gladdened us more often; we call up memories that supported us more easily; and we even call up memories that stung a little bit because they teach us what we should avoid. Without all of them we would have no future. That's what Wiesel warns us against. He could have succumbed to his memories of the Holocaust, but he didn't. Memories built his future and his contributions to build the world he shared with us.

Only to despair our losses would deprive us of the future that is ours. It would also deprive us of the future that our loved ones, though gone, would want us to enjoy. As we engage in the world with this assurance, our home, our community, our people, and the world we've come to know takes shape with us and not without us.

We are a choosing people. We read in Torah earlier today, about life's ambiguities. In light of, and not in spite of, life, death, prosperity, adversity, and more, Torah commands us, "Choose life!" But when it feels so difficult to do, why does Judaism press us this way? What if we're tired of so much grief?

Because only in life can we do a mitzvah. Only in life can we model for the next generation how to live, even when life is hard. We can't afford to allow them to suffer, to succumb, and to

despair because of us. Memories are how we shape the future. Choose to talk about loved ones, choose to laugh about memories gone by, and choose to talk about the hard stuff, too.

In the past, I spoke to you about my father after he died in 2011. My brother and I, the youngest of four and the family twins, were sometimes, but not always, the brunt of his discipline. Even now, we talk about it, and after we do, we share a bond that helps us do better, every time.

Mark Twain taught, “A clear conscience is the sure sign of a bad memory.” Twain teaches us that even if the past isn’t perfect or kind or wholesome, we can’t escape it. And anybody who thinks they can, is probably fooling themselves, anyway.

In this hour of Yizkor, reflect on all the memories. Put them into proper perspective. Retrieve from the past the best times and use them to satisfy yourself with memories that make you feel glad, again. And still we plead to God to know that we will never cease to want our loved ones for another moment, and need them for another word, or love them for another day.

So we pray: O God, remember all our loved ones who graced our days, that we may know that love once shared in this world is a love that endures in the peace of life eternal. May you embrace them, God, as they once embraced us; love them as they loved us; and, then with grateful hearts, may we all be comforted. Amen.