

Yizkor service, Yom Kippur – 5758 – Oct. 10, 1997

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A few weeks ago, as we were reading from the Torah on a Shabbat morning, we discovered an error in the Torah scroll. According to the traditional procedure, we immediately returned that Torah back to the Ark and took out another Torah scroll to complete the reading. Later this month, we will take that Torah scroll to a scribe to have the mistake repaired, and then we will be able to continue using it.

It's a rather amazing point of Jewish law. There are about 600,000 letters in the Torah. And if there's a problem with any ONE of those letters, the Torah is rendered unfit for use. We hold a Torah scroll up to a remarkably demanding standard for perfection and completeness.

There is a related tradition that the number of Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai as the Torah was given was also 600,000 people. So that's about one letter for each person.

The Hasidic master Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav derives a profound teaching from this numerical coincidence. According to Jewish tradition, it's not just the people of the generation of the desert who stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. ALL the members of the Jewish people - past, present, and future - stood together at Mount Sinai, in some spiritual way, to receive the Torah. And that means that each of us received a little bit of the Torah that no one else received. Each of us goes through life carrying around a bit of Torah without which the world's understanding of the Torah is incomplete. And so - throughout our lives - consciously or unconsciously - we each make an effort to share our bit of Torah with the rest of the world.

This is also an additional reason why we are overcome with sorrow when a loved one dies - because death marks the end of that person's opportunity to teach their own personal Torah.

The story is told in the Talmud [Berakhot 42b-43a] that upon the death of Rav, one of the early Babylonian sages, his disciples gathered together shortly after the funeral, and they had a picnic lunch together by the Danak River in Babylonia. During the meal, a question of Jewish law came up - a question about the laws of Birkat HaMazon. The disciples tried valiantly to find an answer - but they were unable to.

And then- in frustration and sorrow - one of Rav's disciples, Rav Adda bar Ahavah, rose and lamented: "Not only has Rav died - but we have not learned from him all the laws of Birkat HaMazon." Not only is Rav gone from the earth - but we missed the opportunity to learn from him so many things that we could have learned.

And while Rav Adda bar Ahavah spoke, he did something especially poignant. Like all the other disciples, at the burial of his teacher, he had already made a tear in the front of his garment as a sign of mourning. Rav Adda bar Ahavah now reversed his garment - and made an additional tear, this one in the back of the garment. At the burial, he had mourned the loss of a person with whom he was close - a person about whom he had so many fond memories. But only after the picnic lunch by the river did he begin to comprehend his loss on an additional level - at that moment he began to mourn the loss of his teacher - the loss of his spiritual guide.

I find this story from the Talmud to be so powerful because it bears out our own experience with loss. One of the emotions I have heard when relatives discuss the death of a loved one is: I was not finished receiving everything I was supposed to receive from this person. What will happen in the future, when I

needed to ask this person for advice - when I needed to consult this person - when I need to follow this person's example for my own behavior?

In a very real way, the death of a loved one feels like the erasure of a letter from a Torah scroll. Death marks the end of the opportunity for the deceased to teach his or her own personal bit of Torah to friends and family, and to the rest of the world. And the world seems all the more incomplete and fragmented.

And at such moments, we are that much more aware of our great and urgent need to appreciate our loved ones who are still living, and to learn as much of their own personal teaching as we can while they are still alive.

My wife Naomi has spent a few summers working as a hospital chaplain. If you ask her, "Now exactly what does a hospital chaplain do?" One of the answers she will give is: "A hospital chaplain listens to people's sacred stories."

So what's a sacred story? It's a story from a person's life - not necessarily a story that overtly has anything to do with religion or spirituality. But it's called a "sacred story" because it's a story that is pivotal to that person's identity. It's a story that represents how that person makes sense of the world. It's a story that highlights that person's most important experiences and values. And very often, it's by listening to other people's sacred stories that we permit their own personal bit of Torah to be heard in the world.

Every year on Yom Kippur, before Yizkor, I like to think about the people I have known in the past year who have died and some of the teachings I have learned from them - some of their personal Torah that only they could truly bring into the world.

This year, as we begin this Yizkor service, I think especially of my grandmother, Edith Scheinberg, who died this past October after a long illness. And I think about: what were her sacred stories? What was her bit of Torah, what was the bit of life's wisdom that was assigned to her at Mount Sinai, to transmit to her loved ones?

And then I think of my grandmother's stories about West Virginia.

Now, my grandmother didn't grow up in West Virginia; she grew up in Brooklyn, in an observant and fairly insular Jewish community; speaking only Yiddish until she was 5 years old.

But immediately after she married my grandfather, who was a doctor, the two of them volunteered to spend a couple of years together in a coal mining town in West Virginia, where he served as the country doctor. It was the first time in her life that my grandmother spent any significant amount of time outside of New York City.

I remember how much she loved to talk about those days: about the warmth of the community in which they had been placed; about how she hardly knew my grandfather at all when they moved to West Virginia, but how the experience forged such a strong bond between them; about how she had the opportunity to assist my grandfather in the delivery of numerous babies; about the struggles to maintain a Jewish identity as the only Jews in the entire county; and her favorite story, about coming back home one winter's night, after delivering a baby, and the air raid sirens began to blare - and everyone in the entire town immediately turned off their electric lights. And as she and my grandfather were returning home, the only lights to be seen for miles around were the Hanukkah candles my grandparents had kindled before they left.

And then some elements of her personal Torah come into focus - or at least her personal Torah for me. I remember that when I would talk with her about my career plans, or about particular social settings, and I would say: such and such a setting, or such and such a career path, doesn't make me comfortable.

And she would always respond, in a way that seemed somewhat abrasive at the time: "I hope you don't plan on always being comfortable." Or: "I hope you give yourself the opportunity to be a little more uncomfortable. You grow from it."

And then I remember my grandmother's experience - how she plunged herself into a completely unknown and sometimes terrifying environment, knowing absolutely no one but her husband of a few months - and then looked back on those experiences as formative ' among her happiest and most meaningful moments. And then I hear her guiding me to allow myself to have the kinds of transformative experiences that were so crucial for her.

My grandmother's sacred stories and her personal bit of Torah fit like a glove.

If only I had the opportunity to thank her today for the lessons she taught me.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber reminds us that God is present in every human relationship - or at least, God has the potential to be present in every human relationship. If only we stay focused and truly listen to our loved ones and acquaintances - if only we listen to their sacred stories - we will find that the words emerging from their lips are words of revelation, words of Torah.

Each of us has our own personal memories of our loved ones. They are entirely ours, embedded in our minds. We are free to rehearse them whenever we choose. So why do we gather in the synagogue for Yizkor? Why don't we each remember our loved ones on our own time, in comfortable places of our own choosing?

I return once again to the image of the Torah scroll. Our memories do not belong to us alone. The sacred stories, the Torah of our loved ones is in some way the property of the entire Jewish people. And thus when we gather to rehearse those teachings, and to recall those memories and stories, we do it as individuals - but we do it in a communal framework.

We gather together, praying in a community - but each of us is immersed in our own thoughts, as we summon up mental images of family members and close friends who are no longer with us. We think of their sacred stories, of the wisdom that the example of their lives alone was able to bring into the world.

But the presence of the other worshippers in this room strengthens us all. We are all part of a community that affirms its members in time of need. And we know that when we pass from this earth, we will also be remembered by a community such as this one.

Before we begin our Yizkor prayers, let us each close our eyes, as we call to mind the beloved parents, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and other relatives and dear friends whom we recall on this day. Let us see their faces in our minds / hear their voices / feel their embraces / hear their sacred stories. Let us take a few minutes of silent meditation.

Some Jews have the custom of leaving the room during the Yizkor prayers if their parents are still living. I would like to recommend that all adults remain in the sanctuary during the Yizkor prayers, unless this is

an especially strong custom in your family. All of us can participate in Yizkor by remembering other relatives and friends, as well as those of our people who have no one to remember them. And we can participate by standing in solidarity with the other members of our community.