

Yom Kippur Day Sermon 2010

One of my most powerful memories as a child was seeing the Yahrzeit glasses on the window sill in my house in Flushing, Queens. There were lot of them – four for my grandparents. My mother lost her father when she was a teenager and my grandmother died in 1950. My father's parents both died when I was a small child. Later on, my Uncle Abe and my Uncle Milton died when I was in elementary school. Two more yahrzeit glasses. I don't know why – but New York Jews used to wash out the yahrzeit glasses and recycle them as drinking glasses for their meals. Maybe they were ahead of their time by recycling. Or maybe it was a way of remembering your loved ones every time you had some Seltzer or a Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray soda. Does anyone remember Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray?

Judaism has survived because of the gift of memory. We have remained alive as a people because we have remembered. We remember our origins in Mesopotamia as the clan of Hebrews settled in the hilly spine of the land of Canaan. We remember the experience of slavery in Egypt which became the bedrock of our sense of ethics and morality. We remember the great kings of Israel – Saul, David and Solomon. We remember the words of the prophets demanding justice, mercy and compassion. We remembered the destruction of the First Temple and the experience of Exile. We remember the challenges to our people by the might of the Greeks and the Romans. We remember the teachings of the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Gemara. We remember the exile of our people throughout the Christian and Muslim empires – their challenges and their triumphs. We remember the Holocaust. We remember the struggle for the rebirth of Israel.

Memory has sustained the Jewish people for our four thousand year existence. The Hebrew word for memory is the source of the special service we observe on Yom Kippur and the three Pilgrimage Festivals – Yizkor – May G-d remember the souls of our beloved departed.

Yizkor – May G-d remember the souls of our beloved departed. May we remember the souls of our beloved departed. Without memory, we do not have a past – but we also do not have a present or a future. Let us recall those precious memories as they are the source of our strength, the source of our wisdom, and the source of our foundation. Memory is God's gift to us to reach out to the future through our roots in the past. In honor of the recent movie, I think of three beautiful types of memory: memories of food, memories of prayer, memories of love. Eat! Pray! Love!

Some of our earliest memories are of food. Often, the most powerful memories that we have involve special meals that we have shared with one another. Have you seen the short video “Gefilte Fish”? Three generations of Jewish women share their memories of making gefilte fish. The bubbe begins reflecting upon the art of making gefilte fish. You go to the fish market. You buy carp or pike and mash it up with matzah meal and spices. You shape the mixture into the gefilte fish balls which you boil in a pot. The middle aged daughter reflects on her memories of making gefilte fish. You take a Cuisinart put in the ingredients and let the blender do its work. Finally, the college-aged granddaughter shares her memories of gefilte fish. You go to the grocery store and find the jars of gefilte fish. You put it on a bed of lettuce to be fancy. Each woman has a powerful memory of gefilte fish and how it has inspired her in its own way.

A food that can evoke powerful memories is horseradish. I am sure all of us at one time

or another has ingested too much horseradish at one time and waited until that powerful, burning sensation has died within their throat. Of course, in Jewish tradition, horseradish serves as a reminder of the horrors of slavery. In the Israeli musical “Kazablan”, the Moroccan Israeli boyfriend tries horseradish with gefilte fish for the first time at his girlfriend's Shabbat dinner. He has no idea how much horseradish to take, so he smothers the fish with horseradish. When he realizes how deadly and awful the food is, he places it under the table and the family cat eats it up. Food can provide us with powerful memories.

Pray! The memory of prayer can inspire us in our current religious lives. I remember when I was a very little child going to my grandparents' graves in the Maspeth section of Queens. The area was like the City of the Dead – there are literally thousands and thousands and thousands of graves in that part of New York City. Outside the gates of the cemetery, there were dozens of old Jewish men ready to pounce on you. They were called “the Mulleh men”. They said a prayer over your loved one and then they put out their palm for some cash. I think it dawned on me when I was in rabbinical school why they were called the Mulleh Men. Their name came from the beautiful prayer for the deceased – El Maleh Rahamim – G-d, Full of Compassion. The prayer asks for the eternal rest of the dead in Paradise, the Garden of Eden. It has a mournful, melodic tune that truly makes us reflect on the meaning of life. When I chant it, I still think of those Mulleh Men outside the gates of the cemetery in Queens.

One of the most powerful traditions of Jewish prayer is the Yizkor service itself. It began in the late Middle Ages as a response to the annihilation of the Jewish communities along the Rhine River in Germany. The Jews were overwhelmed with the loss of thousands of their brothers and sisters. They began a communal service of remembrance – the Yizkor. Ultimately, the Yizkor service was recited on Yom Kippur and the Three Pilgrimage Festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Shmini Atzeret. It has become a way for the entire community to remember their beloved departed together.

There is one Jewish custom I have never, ever understood – that is the young people running out of synagogue during Yizkor. Allegedly, it is done out of respect to living parents – but I think it is much more respectful to stay in the synagogue. As a child, I decided I would never leave the synagogue during Yizkor. I never really knew my grandparents except through the experience of visiting their graves and reciting Yizkor. I also thought it was the right thing to be with my own parents during the service. The young people just gossiped in the hallway any way. It made much more sense to stay in the service. When my wife died in 2004, the idea of the young people leaving the Yizkor service became even more disturbing to me. All the young people had left the synagogue leaving my four daughters behind to recite Yizkor in memory of their mother. Wouldn't it have been more appropriate for the young people to sit next to my daughters? I think many of us try to run away from death rather than confronting it as a part of life. Judaism helps us confront the challenge of loss through the gift of memory.

Love! The most beautiful memories we have are memories of love. Love truly is more powerful than death as we think of the love which our departed have shared with us. I think of the beautiful theme song “Seasons of Love” from the musical “Rent”. 625,600 minutes – how do you measure a year? The way we can best measure the time of our lives is through those seasons of love which have been shared with us. When we reflect upon the memory of our beloved departed, the most important thing we remember is the love that they have shared with us. It is the love that we have received in the past that we wish to impart to future generations. My father-in-law died in 2005. I had the task of going through all his things

that were stored in my garage. Of course, there was a lot of stuff to go through – but then I found something that was worth more than all the trinkets. I found the love letters which my father-in-law had written to my mother-in-law. Of course, those were the days when people wrote handwritten letters in their best penmanship to impress others. I still think “I love you” means much more when it is handwritten rather than sent through a text message – especially when the letter “u” is used. Love is the most precious memory we have from the past.

I think the most beautiful Jewish love story of the twentieth century is that of Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah. And since Henrietta Szold was a Baltimore Jew, I can tell her story. Ms Szold was the first born of eight daughters. Her father, Benjamin Szold, was a prominent rabbi in Baltimore. When he died, she enrolled at the Jewish Theological Seminary. She was the first woman to study Talmud in rabbinical school. The school made her sign a note saying she was not interested in becoming a rabbi. (I can tell Henrietta she was better off!) Henrietta developed a passionate crush on her teacher, Professor Louis Ginzberg. He asked her to help with his translations from German into English. Henrietta was thrilled. She and the professor would take walks through Riverside Park in Manhattan. One day, Prof. Ginzberg gave Henrietta his handkerchief. She saved it in her top dresser drawer. Then Prof. Ginzberg's father died in Europe. He traveled for the funeral. There, the professor met Adele Katzenstein – she was young and pretty. Prof Ginzberg returned to his class and announced he was engaged. Henrietta was crushed and depressed. Her mother took her on a trip to Palestine to deal with her feelings. It was in Palestine that Henrietta developed a vision – to provide superior medical care for the Holy Land. She returned to found Hadassah, the Woman's Zionist Organization. Of course, today, Hadassah Hospital of Jerusalem is one of the finest hospitals in the world. Ms Szold also saved the lives of some 30,000 children during the Holocaust as they were brought to live in Palestine. So, see what happens when your boyfriend dumps you – you can go on to much more important things. The love that Henrietta Szold had within her was ultimately used to save countless thousands of lives in Israel.

Yizkor is a time for memories – memories of those whom we love. Memory is the most precious gift that God has given to us. Let us cherish those beautiful memories – memories of eating, memories of praying, memories of loving. We Jews are a people of memory. The memories of the past will give us the strength, the hope, and the faith to face the future.