

YIZKOR 2019

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There is both an irony and a lesson in the celebration of Shavuot. This holiday commemorates a time of birth for the Israelites. We had been forged into a nation through the hardships of slavery in Egypt and in the exodus that followed. But our real beginning as a faith occurs only now, on Shavuot, at the foot of Mt Sinai in the midst of the desert. This is where the Tanach tells us God gave us the Ten Commandments that forms the basis of our laws and the way we relate to each other as a people. Here, at Mount Sinai, we also received the promise of a land that would become ours – a land of milk and honey that represents all of our hopes for freedom, justice and a better life ahead.

The irony is that, while none of them knew it yet, every one of those people who were gathered at the foot of the mountain who were twenty years or older was never going to cross the Jordan. They would die in the wilderness, Moses included. Their fate was sealed. The promised land was unattainable by those of that generation. All they could do was to bring everyone closer to their own unfulfilled dreams, for the benefit of their descendants and all of those who came after.

This is how all of us live today. Even if our loved ones die at a ripe old age, it is too soon for them to fulfill of their dreams and ours. I was struck that the obituaries of IM Pei at 102 and Herman Wouk at 104 bemoaned the projects that were left unfinished. If only they could have lived a little longer. ***If only there could be just more celebration or accomplishment... But no, we cannot have it all before we are called home.*** No matter how old our loved ones were when they died, it is always too soon.

This is how life works. At best, all of us are only a link in the chain, or a bridge to the next crossing, a 5k sprint in the journey of our people and in the life of our planet.

John Spiegel asked me to offer this short drash today because of my own loss 14 months ago of my best friend, my husband Bernd. The first year was very tough but there were a lot of rituals to perform and people kept asking me how I was doing – and that helped a lot. (Fabrangen was great.) At the same time, a couple of friends warned me that the second year would be tougher because many people stop asking, and the expectation is that I would sort of know how this bereavement process works now. I

am already finding that the second year is lonelier because it feels so permanent. Bernd is never coming back. I am on my own.

That's why Yizkor helps. We **are** alone in our grief, but we are also part of our community. In addition, today's Yizkor, juxtaposing the promise of Eretz Yisrael against the reality that none of the adults at Sinai would ever reach there themselves, helps us focus on legacy. As we remember our loved ones, we have the opportunity – in fact, the obligation --to help carry their legacy forward to others and to the next generation. It's not just that we miss them or that we remember them. We have work to do. In what we do and in the stories we tell, we are carrying their lives towards the promised land. Their legacy is the bridge to the next road forward.

So let's take a couple minutes, and think of one person for whom you are saying Yizkor today – and think of two, maximum three words, that describes some aspect of that person's legacy. Not that person's entire legacy, of course – but the first words that come to mind. For example, maybe your words are Loving-Kindness, or being a Great Gardener, or maybe words like Pursuit of Justice.

Now turn to your neighbor. Each one of you should tell the other who you are thinking about and what is that person's two or three word legacy that you want to communicate. Pass it on. Pass it forward. The journey continues.

I recently finished reading the book about Manny Thorne's father, *It Will Yet Be Heard*. Except for his brother, no one else in Rabbi Thorne's family survived the Holocaust. But in the book's final chapter we get to read the ethical will from his grandfather's grandfather, Meilich Backenroth, that Manny's father carried in his wallet throughout the Shoah and afterwards.

My precious children, grandchildren and all the offspring who come from their loins. Hold dear our luminous treasure, our sacred Torah, always love your Jewish people and what the Jewish people represent, never be over-proud and arrogant, help the Jewish people with your money and have the faith of the righteous. Amen.