Rabbi Charles K. Briskin
Reading Obituaries
Yom Kippur Yizkor Service 5769
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I subscribe to several magazines. *Vanity Fair* is not one of them. But earlier this summer a colleague gave me a copy of *Vanity Fair* that he was about to recycle. Buried deep amongst the glossy ads for Prada, Gucci and Ralph Lauren was a lovely and wide-ranging biographical article about Paul Newman. I'm not a devoted fan of Newman; I likely know the basic things about his career that most of us know as well. He was a screen actor, philanthropist, race car driver, and devoted husband, father and grandfather. He was above all a fiercely private man. I hadn't thought much about that article until I read several of the obituaries and tributes written for him after his death a few weeks ago. In some ways, there was very little substantial difference between the obituaries and this article. All chronicled his long life and various endeavors and honored the man for his many contributions to society. All were written with tremendous love and respect.

I'm often drawn to the obituary page. I look to the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* to learn, from their deaths, more about the lives of fascinating people. Some are well known; others are not. Most have made a lasting and positive contribution to society; they were community activists, inventors, philanthropists, artists, leaders in business, politics, or entertainment. Some have diminished our world, and too need to be remembered, as a warning for us. Most often, newspaper obituaries share the public lives of the person whom it profiles. We don't learn much about their private affairs.

Every now and then, however, an obituary is published that shares the painful and private truth of the survivors of the deceased. These obituaries are paid for by surviving friends or family members. This obituary ran two months ago in *The Vallejo Times-Herald*: "Dolores Aguilar, born in 1929 in New Mexico, left us on Aug. 7, 2008. Dolores had no hobbies, made no contribution to society and rarely shared a kind word or deed in her life. I speak for the majority of her family when I say her presence will not be missed by many; very few tears will be shed and there will be no lamenting over her passing.

"Her family will remember Dolores, and amongst ourselves we will remember her each in our own way, which were mostly sad and troubling times throughout the years. We may have some fond memories of her and perhaps we will think of those times, too. But I truly believe at the end of the day all of us will really only miss what we never had, a good and kind mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. I hope she is finally at peace with herself. As for the rest of us left behind, I hope this is the beginning of a time of healing and learning to be a family again.

"There will be no service, no prayers and no closure for the family she spent a lifetime tearing apart. We cannot come together in the end to see to it that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren can say their goodbyes. So I say here for all of us, goodbye Mom."

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The Daily Breeze columnist John Bogert shared this obituary in a recent column. To verify its authenticity, he tracked down Ms. Aguilar's daughter who wrote the obituary. Sadly, what she said was true.

Yizkor is the time when we re-read the obituaries of our loved ones. Hopefully these obituaries resemble Paul Newman's rather than Dolores Aguilar's. But that's not always the case. Four times a year we gather in our synagogues to recite these memorial prayers from our tradition and to share memories from our hearts, most sweet, yet some bitter. Each *Yizkor* service takes us back to that terrible time in our lives when the wound of our loss was open and fresh. But each successive *Yizkor* hopefully becomes a bit easier as the time between death and memory increases. It's not likely that we remember with clarity the eulogies that the rabbi, family members or friends shared for our loved one. But often times we keep a text of the remarks that help us remember people's stories and words of comfort. These texts become the unpublished obituary that we most need to help us as we mourn.

It is hard to believe, but the last funeral service for a temple member that I officiated at was last March, when our community gathered in unprecedented numbers to mourn the loss of our beloved Rabbi Emeritus, David S. Lieb. In the weeks that followed, many of those who spoke at the funeral and at the *shiva minyan* services sent me their remarks, which I in turn forwarded to Estelle. I know how much I appreciated reading these words a second and third time, without distraction, in the privacy of my office. I can only imagine how the printed words on the page have comforted Estelle and her children, on those difficult nights and have given her strength to endure these difficult months. I imagine that all of us can read eulogies of our loved ones and glean new insight, while being comforted as well.

Most of us, not all of us, but most of us can reread the obituaries and eulogies of our loved ones with a feeling of love and nostalgia for a good life once lived that is no longer. *Yizkor* is the time to remove the eulogies from that special folder and relive, not the painful time of death and immediate mourning, but rather the fullness and even complexity of our loved one's life. Most often our memories are pleasant, as I imagine are the memories of the extended Newman-Woodward family. Sometimes our memories are painful, like those of the Aguilar family. Most families likely share the complicated emotions of mourning, manifest at the time of death and at our seasons of remembrance.

There are few Randy Pausches who inspire us with "Last Lectures." There are few who touch us as Mitch Albom's did, when he published his reflections of his *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Many today remember Rabbi Lieb's final sermon for our community, delivered last Rosh Hashanah. It's still on our website and will remain there. These reflections written by others comfort us. But the memories of our family and friends endure through the unpublished remarks shared by those closest to the people we mourn.

When we die, how will our obituary read? When people come to mourn our death, what will they say in their eulogies? How will we be remembered? *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur

give us the opportunity to renew ourselves and return to the essence of who we wish to be. We can change our ways and be remembered for good and blessing; it is up to us. *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity to remember our loved ones for their goodness. It also gives us an opportunity to forgive, even in death, if possible, deeds done, but not forgotten. *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur will be, I pray, a time to remember all those who touched our lives for the good. We will put the obituaries and the eulogies back in the envelope until the next time we say *Yizkor*, as we gather to remember those who brought meaning to our lives.

Amen

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