

Close your eyes and remember; where were you one week ago today? Who were you with, what did you do? Now remember the last vacation you took; where did you go? What did you see and hear? What did you eat? Can you recall that taste right now, as if it were yesterday? Think of the most beautiful places you've visited. What memories have left an indelible imprint? Was it the tropical setting of a Hawaiian island? Or a quaint Tuscan village? Or sunset over the Old City in Jerusalem? Remember the people that you traveled with; friends, extended family, a spouse or child. What was it like sharing that experience? Now remember world events. Do you remember where you were when you learned that President Kennedy was assassinated? Or Yitzchak Rabin? Where were you when the towers fell on 9/11? Where were you during the Northridge Quake? Do you remember where you were when the Dodgers won their last World Series? Or the Angels? Or the Red Sox; (though not the Cubs).

Now remember the most significant events in your life; giving birth to your child; getting married; getting divorced; earning a graduate degree; landing your dream job; fulfilling a dream; living a nightmare; burying a loved one. Who was with you when you were going through these experiences? Now, remember your childhood. What images flash into your head? Staring out the window at a falling snow? Playing make-believe with a bucket full of toys? Running through the neighborhood with the other boys and girls? What childhood experience left the greatest mark on you? Was it a moment of blessing or misfortune? What did you learn from that experience? What childhood memories do you have of your parents, or siblings? Are they warm and fuzzy or are they unsettling? Now, pick a word: ocean, beach, snow, airplane, mountain, car, forest, lake, family, home. How many rapid-fire images come to mind, and what point of your life do they represent?

Memory is powerful. Our brains are wired to recall clearly everything that I just asked you to remember; from the mundane events of last week, to seminal events that have shaped you into the person you are today. Most often our memories involve people who shared that experience. Now imagine if your ability to form new memories was suddenly cut off? This is what happened to a man known as H.M. fifty years ago.<sup>1</sup> He had suffered from severe epilepsy marked by regular huge and minor seizures. His condition made it difficult for him to hold down a job, to live a regular life. In 1953, a neurosurgeon named William Beecher Scoville performed an experimental operation removing a part of H.M.'s brain where he thought the seizures originated. His hunch was right, and H.M.'s

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<sup>1</sup> From a report on National Public Radio's Weekend Edition Saturday; February 24, 2007

seizures were reduced dramatically. But at a terrible price. Since 1953, H.M. has been unable to acquire any new memories. He can't remember what he had for breakfast earlier that day, the people he's talked to, let alone major events of the past fifty-plus years.

The surgeon removed the medial temporal lobes, including the hippocampus, which is the place in the brain that converts short term memory into long term memory. H.M. could still remember events from before the surgery. Apparently the hippocampus was needed to make new memories, but not to retrieve old ones. H.M. could recall what happened in October of 1929 (that's when the stock market crashed), but not what happened on November 22, 1963, the day President Kennedy was shot.

I remember where I was when I heard the story of H.M. It was a Shabbat morning last February. I was driving south on the 405 in Orange County to the Union for Reform Judaism's regional biennial. I thought to myself, "This would make a great story for a *Yizkor* service." Obviously, for me, and for most of us, we could recall a moment like this, especially if it had an impact on us.

*Yizkor* is about remembering, and memory is essential to life. It is what sustains us as individuals; it is what preserves us as Jews. When we lose memory, we lose a piece of ourselves. When we lose memory we lose a piece of our history. Our sacred texts point to the power of memory and the curse of forgetting. The words of Kiddush remember God's creation—*zikaron l'ma'aseh v'reshit*—and also the Exodus from Egypt—*zecher l'tziyat mitzrayim*. A section of the Shofar service is called *Zichronot*—memories. The *avodah* section of the Yom Kippur afternoon service takes us through the major events in our people's history, events we remember and from which we learn and grow. The psalmist declares: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither and my tongue cleave to its palate." Remembering preserves us as a people.

But *Yizkor* is less about remembering the history of our people than it is about remembering the history of a person—a spouse, a parent, a sibling or child—who has died, and whose memories live on in us. *Yizkor* is about guarding those memories, and creating a legacy from them that will endure.

Earlier this year, a twenty-two year old woman in our community died in a tragic accident. Amy was preparing to graduate from UCLA, weighing many options for the following year, ready to begin what would have been a stellar career. Distress, disconsolation and disbelief just begin to describe the feelings of those closest to her, and even those who didn't know her personally. Yet since her death, Amy's parents, sister and friends have been continually preserving her memories, and have even created more as a way to honor her in her death. A few months before she died, Amy created a list of things she wanted to do before graduating college.

Each month, her mother has posted an announcement on Facebook—an online community of friends—inviting them to participate in one of her daughter’s “things to do before I graduate.” This has been a remarkable way for Amy’s family and friends to preserve the memory of their friend. The private school which Amy attended created a scholarship in her memory that was to be given to a student who shared her values and passions. Amy’s death was senseless. But people have been finding meaning from it. And not a day goes by that those who were touched by Amy’s life, and crushed by her death, don’t recall with fondness and appreciation the gifts, the inspiration and the memories she left behind, that will help all of the living endure.

That is a task of *Yizkor*. To appreciate the gifts of those who have left this earth. To remember the life lessons they have taught us, and to live by them. We remember the courage of a sibling who lost a battle to cancer; or the grace of a parent who approached death with calming resolve. We remember the joy and exuberance of a child; we create a legacy for that person so that her death does not seem to be in vain. We remember all those, great and ordinary, whose lives touched us and continue to inspire us long after they have died.

Rabbi Jacob Rudin writes, “Death will come. Its hand will not be stayed even an instant; nor can we enter into judgment with it. Our question ‘Why?’ will go unanswered. But this does not mean that we are helpless in the face of death. We can and we do rob death of ultimate victory by living life as long as it is ours to live. To ask of death that it never come is futile, but it is not futility to pray that when death comes for us, it may take us from a world one corner of which is a little better because we were there. When we are dead, and people weep for us and grieve, let it be because we touched their lives with beauty and simplicity. Let it not be said that life was good to us, but, rather that we were good to life.”

All those whom we mourn, have, God willing, touched our lives. And their absence, as painful as it might be, has left behind a world better because they were there. So, at this service of *Yizkor*, we pause to remember the goodness of those we loved, and whose love endures through memory.

Amen