



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart*

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Enter the Heart”

Yom Kippur > Yizkor > The Power of Eternity

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ABSTRACT

Why have Jewish enemies always sought to destroy Jewish cemeteries? What is so threatening about the concept of Jewish memory?

Memory – *zachor* from which *Yizkor* comes – endows the Jewish people with a power of eternity. And in remembering our loved ones on Yom Kippur, this is what we seek to connect with.

Rich with moving stories, this sermon tackles the concept of life after death in an unusual and engaging manner, along the way answering such disparate questions as: Where does the soul go after a person dies? How is the human being like a toaster? And: What sin did the Klausenberger Rebbe confess on Yom Kippur 1945, in the shadow of the Holocaust?

1. The Threat of a Jewish Cemetery

Historically, what was the first thing anti-Semites would attack when entering a Jewish city or town?

Not the synagogues, not the yeshivas, not the homes, nor the stores. Oh yes, they would destroy them too, but first they would destroy tombstones, ransack the cemeteries. Why?

Of all things, the cemetery seems the least threatening. No one there could fight, or raise a hue and cry, or in any way harm the attacking hordes. So why were they bent on desecrating the memorial of those laid to rest. Why did they engage in such irrational destruction to no apparent end?

“My enemies make me wise,” says the Book of Psalms.¹ Indeed, we have learned much from our enemies. Unconsciously, our enemies have always sensed that the power of the Jewish people lies in their memory – in their past, in their history, in their roots. Our enemies have always known that only by annihilating our past can they destroy our future. Only by attacking our roots can they deny us our fruits.

Zachor (“remember”) – the word from which *Yizkor* comes – is one of the most powerful commandments of the Torah. Remember the day you left Egypt, remember Shabbat, remember Amalek. Remembering the Exodus alone is mentioned over 70 times – and many rites of Judaism are associated with this memory.

So, too, the tradition of remembering our loved ones who are no longer in this world. It is not just a nice thing – a respectful thing – to do. It is an act of attaching ourselves to our heritage which is our very lifeline.

2. Lifeline

Rabbi Israel Spira of Bluzhov, Poland, found out just how literal this can be. ² Imprisoned in the Janowska Concentration Camp on the outskirts

¹ Psalms 119:98.

² This story was related by the Rebbe of Bluzhov to Baruch Singer on Jan. 3, 1975 and recorded by Yaffa Eliach in the *Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust*.

of Lvov, the Rebbe awakened one morning to the shouting of SS guards. His block was being emptied and all the inmates herded at gunpoint to the edge of the forest where a large pit had been dug – their grave. But the SS were not content with just murdering the poor, half-starved Jews. They also wanted to have some macabre fun at the expense of their victims. And so they ordered the Jews to jump across the pit. Those who could achieve this impossible feat would live.

A few tried only to be cut down by a hail of bullets as they inevitably fell in.

Standing next to Rabbi Spira was a young Polish Jew – a “free-thinker,” as the Rabbi later described him – and he argued that they should deprive the Nazis of their sadistic game. He said, “Let’s sit down in the pit. Let’s not give them the satisfaction of jumping.”

But the Rabbi said, “My friend, man must obey the will of God. If it was decreed from heaven that pits be dug and we be commanded to jump, pits will be dug and jump we must.” He grabbed his young friend’s skeletal hand and urged him, “Jump!”

They closed their eyes, and though weak and bone weary, they made an attempt at a flying leap.

Lo and behold, they landed on the other side. The young man was so overwhelmed he burst into tears, “We are here! We are alive!” he shouted, and then he asked Rabbi Spira, “How did you do it?”

The Rabbi answered, “In my mind, I was holding onto the coattails of my father of blessed memory, and my grandfather and my great-grandfather.” And then he asked, “And you, my friend, how did you do it?”

He said, “I was holding on to you.”

3. To Remember

Today we have gathered here to remember, and by remembering to strengthen our link to the past, to reinforce our lifeline.

We are a nation that loves life, cherishes life, is zestful about life, and considers life sacred and holy. The famous words of Moses at the end of his own life, “Choose life,” have become the motto of our people throughout our long and difficult journey. At the worst moments in our history, we never embraced a culture of death or glorified martyrdom. Just about any commandment of the Torah can be violated in order to save a life. We believe in life. We believe in building a future for our children and for our grandchildren.

But in order to build a successful future, we must know the past, we must honor the past, we must remember. No fruits can grow without ingrained roots.

And so today, we are called upon to say *Yizkor*, to remember! To remember our parents, our grandparents, our great grandparents, and all of our loved ones who are not here with us any longer.

And along with them, we will also remember the six million, including one and a half million children, who perished in the Holocaust. And all those blown up to pieces in the streets of Israel. And the young Israeli soldiers killed in combat; many of them were mere teenagers when they died in protecting their fellow Jews. We will remember all the innocent people whose lives have been cut short – in Sudan, in Iraq, in Russia, in Spain, in Afghanistan, and the world over.

We will remember.

4. To Believe

And now the question before us is how best to honor their memory.

To answer that question, I will tell you another story:

It was Yom Kippur Eve, 1945 – the war was over, but the pain was not.

Some 5,000 Holocaust survivors had gathered in a DP camp (in

¹ The story is also included in the collection *Legends of Our Time*.

Foerhrenwald) near Munich to observe the holiest day of the year in a make-shift synagogue. Leading the services would be Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam – better known as the Klausenburger Rebbe – who himself had lost his wife, his eleven children and most of his followers in the Holocaust.

As the praying progressed, the congregation reached the part where the *Vidui*, the confession of sins is recited. And one Jew stood up and asked permission to ask the Rebbe a question.

He said, “Rebbe, I do not understand. Why should *we* confess? What sins have *we* committed? Which one of us had the means, the time, the energy, to sin? If anything let God confess for allowing six million of His children to be exterminated! If anything, let God ask forgiveness from us for allowing Hitler to destroy all of our loved ones!”

You could imagine the reaction in the room.

Gently, the Rebbe replied: “My dearest brother, *you* need not confess. Your soul is as pure as gold. But, my dearest brother, I do need to confess. And I want to share with you the sin that I will confess tonight.”

The room fell silent. You could hear a pin drop. What sin had the Rebbe committed?

He continued: “The horrors that I experienced were was so great that when I would lie down to get a few hours of sleep on the hard planks of my barrack, I’d pray to God to let me die. I just wanted it to be over. I never prayed that I should be liberated, only that I would be able to slip quietly out of this world. You know why I did not pray for liberation? Because I did not believe that it was possible. I could not imagine that this hell would ever come to an end ... That was my sin: I did not believe in *Netzach Yisrael*, in the eternity of Israel. I underestimated the enduring power of the Nation of Israel, though God had promised time and again that we would be an eternal people. And this is the sin I confess this evening.”

How many of us here believe in the eternity of our people? How many of us believe in the promise of God? If our faith has ever wavered, let’s renew it in this moment.

For this is the best way to honor the memory of our loved ones who are no longer in this world – by believing that their spirit lives on.

5. Eternity of the Spirit

Have you had doubts about God's promise about the eternity of the Jewish people? Have you had doubts about the eternity of the spirit? Have you had doubts about life after death?

Who hasn't?

In this material world, we are accustomed to believing only what we can see, taste and feel. Abstractions are for scientists and mystics, but we normal folk cannot easily wrap our minds around such ephemeral concepts and tend to be skeptical about any answers we hear.

If anyone attempts to explain life after death, even before he or she starts speaking, a little voice in our heads is already saying, "How do you know? Ever been there?"

It's so hard for us, in this material world to fully comprehend the idea of a spiritual existence. That is precisely why reincarnation and the afterlife are very exotic concepts and so difficult to grasp. That does not mean though that they are not real.

"Do you believe in life after death?" the boss asked one of his employees.

"Yes sir," the employee replied.

"Well, then, that makes everything just fine," the boss went on.

"After you left early yesterday – as you said, to attend your grandmother's funeral – she stopped in to see you."

Here's the best answer I ever heard to the question: "Where does the soul go after a person dies?"

"Who says it goes somewhere? Maybe the soul is where it's at, and *we* go somewhere."

Think about that.

Where does electricity go when an appliance is shut off, or when you pull out the plug? Where does electricity go? Does it run back up the wire to the city generator to sit there and wait till you turn on your toaster again?

No. It doesn't go anywhere. It is always there. All around us. Electricity was with us from the beginning of time. At some point in history, we human beings came in contact with it by accident. We then learned that there's a power in the air, and we called it electricity. We learned to build generators. We learned to transmit the electricity through wires, and bring it to our cities, light up our homes and energize our appliances.

And we learned to turn it off and on.

We are not destroying electricity when we turn off the switch, we are merely closing a circuit so that electricity doesn't continue to flow in that particular direction. It's as if we had built a dam so water couldn't flow, but the water would still be there. So, too, the electricity is still there - in its natural, non-tangible state - it's just that when the switch is turned off, it is not actively powering anything.

Electricity is a great analogy for the body and soul.

The soul, too, is a form of energy. Upon conception, when a new body is formed, the circuit is switched on. The soul begins to flow through the body, enlivening it. Upon death, what happens is essentially the equivalent of the switch being shut off, as the body ceases to be connected to the soul's flow of energy. And the soul returns to its natural state.

Imagine asking your loved ones, "Where are you?"

If they could answer, they would say, "I'm in a different world than you are, but I am here. I can see you even though you don't see me."

One tool of bridging the gap between our physical world and their spiritual world is memory - and that is why *Yizkor* was instituted by the sages, and why it is possibly the most widely observed Jewish tradition.

6. A Message from Beyond

Yizkor is not just about us remembering our loved ones who have passed on; it is also about us opening our hearts to the messages they might be communicating to us from beyond.

What are they telling us? No doubt, each person here intuitively feels a personal message. But I would suggest that there is one universal message that applies to us all.

A story is told about a man who ran into a burning building to pull out a teenage girl stuck on one of the upper floors. Though he risked his life and suffered multiple burns, he managed to save the young woman's life.

Afterwards, she came to see him in the hospital to thank him for his act of bravery. And she said, "How can I repay you for saving my life?"

"No need," the man said. "I just did what had to be done."

"Please!" she pleaded. "I want to pay you. My Dad is a very, very rich man. Name your fee, and you will get it."

The man said, "No, I will not take money for fulfilling my duty to save another life."

"So how can I pay you back?" asked the youngster.

The man looked into her eyes and said, "You can pay me back by living a life that was worth saving."

This is the universal message to us all, as we remember our loved ones who are no longer here. This is how we can connect to their souls in the spiritual world where they dwell:

Live a life that's worth something. Live a life that's worth remembering. This *Yizkor* let us all commit ourselves to live such a life.

And let's do one more thing:

During *Yizkor* prayers we commit to giving charity. What connection is there between money – the epitome of materialism – and the souls of our loved ones in heaven? When we contribute physical money, or we build something tangible in honor of our loved ones, we – in effect – channel their souls into a living memorial here on earth. We don't just remember, we turn our memory into action. And an action lives on forever. Thus, we transform the past into the future – into a life-worth remembering for generations to come. Amen.