



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5773 • 2012

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 26, 2012

Yom Kippur - Yizkor

**The Empty Chair:
How Much is a Life Worth?**



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

How valuable is a life?

Consider how contemporary society measures the value of people, placing a premium on looks, age, performance, economic class, status and buying power. There are even those who argue that human life is no different than bacteria and has no inherent value, that it only has subjective value invested in it by the individual's loved ones and by his/her own self love.

And then contrast that against the awesome message of Yom Kippur, when we celebrate the sanctity of the inestimable soul.

Now imagine: A city of 1 million people is held captive. The captors offer the city dwellers an ultimatum: Give us one of you to kill and we will spare the rest, or we will kill you all? What is their obligation?

Remember: One of the most heart-rending stories of the Holocaust, when a sadistic Nazi forced a Jewish mother to choose which of her two children should be killed, or have them both die. What she did teaches us about the indispensability of life?

And there is more...

The shocking story of the candle lit by an innocent girl who wanted to light a Shabbat flame for her mother despite her mother's opposition, the power of the empty chair, the dilemma of honoring parents who don't seem to deserve honor – all paint for us an extraordinary portrait of the priceless power of every soul, both on earth and in heaven.

This sermon helps us appreciate the awesome power of *Yizkor* which, like an empty chair, connects us even more with the souls of our beloved, and ironically reminds us of our own true value, answering the question: Do departed souls see and hear us?

THE EMPTY CHAIR HOW MUCH IS A LIFE WORTH?

1. The Sad Yahrzeit Candle

Let me begin by sharing with you a very moving story:

A young Jewish girl, from a very secular and anti-religious home, came home from school one day with a package in hand all excited. And the girl's mother was very curious to know what energized her daughter so.

Out of breath, the girl told her mother: "Today a nice young woman visited our public school and asked if anyone in my class was Jewish. I raised my hand. Then this woman gave me and the other Jewish girls a candle-lighting package. She explained that Jewish women and girls have a special privilege to kindle Shabbat and holiday candles before sunset every Friday and before the holiday. When we do so, we bring extra light into this dark world which is in much need of illumination."

With that the little girl opened up the package and gave it to her mother, saying: "I can't wait till we can light these candles on Friday."

In response, the mother angrily told her daughter: "We don't do these things around here!" Despite her daughter's pleas, the mother took the package and threw it into the garbage.

That was that. The daughter cried, but the mother – scarred by past life experiences – did not relent.

Then came late Friday afternoon. The mother had just returned from work, and upon walking in the door, she beheld a shocking sight. A lit candle sat on the table. Her daughter was standing nearby, sheepishly smiling.

The shock was not simply due to her daughter lighting Shabbat candles despite her opposition. The real shock was from the type of candle it was.

Hardly able to speak the mother asked her daughter: "Whe... Whe... Where did you get this candle from?"

In her simple innocence, the girl blurted out: "When I saw that you wouldn't light the candles yourself, I decided to light one for you. So I went to the store and asked the shopkeeper for a Jewish candle. And this is what he gave me."

Little did the girl know that she had lit a ... *yahrzeit* candle!

End of story:

Crying uncontrollably, the mother lifted her daughter into her arms. "My beautiful little Lisa, I will find the candelabra that Grandma used, and I promise you that from now on we will light candles together every Friday night, for many healthy years."

With a *yahrzeit* candle, little Lisa taught her mother the meaning of true and eternal life.

And that is the subject for today: the true and eternal value of human life.

2. Human for Sale

"The moon is far greater than the sun," said the Chelem fool.
"Because it shines when we need it most – at night!"

Beauty can best be appreciated in contrast to its opposite, like light that illuminates the dark. Often, to appreciate our blessings in our life, we have to step back, juxtapose and compare it to its antithesis.

We can appreciate the awesome power of Yom Kippur – when we honor the sanctity of the soul – by examining how contemporary society values life.

Though clearly tongue in cheek, there is a website called www.humanforsale.com, which presents the following:

Have you been thinking about putting yourself up for sale lately? Ever wonder how much money you could get on the open human market? This fun quiz will attempt to place a value on your life using a variety of criteria ... including athletic ability, education level, income, amount of exercise, weight, and sense of humor. This is obviously a very subjective survey ... [which] does not claim to be scientifically accurate. The more honestly you answer the questions, the more realistic the dollar value returned will be.

All kidding aside, current social standards for measuring the value of different people and different age groups (and even their credit scores and buying potential scores) makes you realize how devalued life today has become. Most people, whether they acknowledge it or not, define their self value by their net value.

If this is how people see themselves, how much more devalued are we in the eyes of others? As one cold-hearted executive put it: "We see people today not as humans with feelings and relationships, but as statistics, as numbers, as potential customers – valued by their looks, age, performance, economic class, status and buying power."

There are even those who argue that human life is no different than bacteria and has no *inherent* value, that it only has subjective value invested in it by the individual's loved ones and by his/her own self love.

3. Jewish View of Life

Contrast this with the Jewish view on life – as reflected in Yom Kippur:

A city of say 1 million people is held captive. The captors offer the city dwellers an ultimatum: Give us one of you to kill and we will spare the rest, or we will kill you all? What is their obligation?

What do you think?

[Pause]

Here is the Talmud's ruling: The entire city must be killed before giving up one person! This demonstrates the qualitative, not quantitative, indispensable value of every life.¹

¹ Jerusalem Talmud, Terumot end of ch. 8. Rambam Yisodei HaTorah 5:5. See Pesachim 25b.

4. Saving One Life (Inspirational Story)

Once, on Yom Kippur morning, the Alter Rebbe – Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement – took off his *tallis* (prayer shawl) and *kittel* (the white robe worn on Yom Kippur) and went to the edge of the city. Once there, he cut some wood to make a fire in order to cook soup for a woman who had just given birth and had no one to help her.

Why did the Alter Rebbe do it himself and did not send an emissary? Because in a case of *pikuach nefesh* – a life-saving situation – the *mitzvah* is not to pass on to someone else, but that the greatest Jews should *do it*.²

“Saving one life,” the Talmud says, “is like saving a universe.”³

5. The Day of the Soul

On Yom Kippur we honor and celebrate the distinct, indispensable divine soul of every individual Jew on earth, and also in heaven.

On Yom Kippur, by refraining from our usual immersion in the material world – eating and drinking, working, leisure – we enter into the world of the soul. The five prayers of Yom Kippur (the only day of the year when we have five prayers) correspond to the five dimensions of the soul, which shine and radiate on the holiest day of the year.

Yom Kippur is the day of the soul – of your soul, of my soul, of every soul on earth.

On this day we have the extraordinary opportunity to peer beneath the material veneer and surface, which usually shrouds the soul, and experience the spirit within.

²See Yoma 84b, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 328:12.

³Sanhedrin 37a.

Today we learn to value ourselves not for any superficial reasons – our looks, age, performance, economic class, status and buying power – but for our true inner selves, the core of what makes us who we are. Today you can get to see yourself face to face in the most intimate way – to enter into your own “holy of holies.”

6. Remembering the Souls

As the day of the soul, Yom Kippur is also the most fitting time to connect to the souls of our loved ones wherever they may be, even in heaven.

Those of us whose parent or parents have left this world say *Yizkor* and mention them by name, pledging to commit to doing good and giving charity in their honor.

Yizkor is not about honoring death or remembering the past. It is about celebrating life. True life – the life of the immortal soul.

Indeed, remembering the departed souls of our loved ones – ironically – reminds us of the true value of our own lives.

In *Yizkor* we also remember the Jews throughout history who were slaughtered *al kiddush Hashem* (may their blood be avenged).

One of the most heart-rending stories of the Holocaust that I have heard tells of a sadistic Nazi who forced a Jewish mother to choose which of her two children should be killed immediately, or have them both die. What should she have done?

What did she do?

She refused to choose.

No one should ever, ever be tested, and may the blood of our brothers and sisters be avenged. But the mother refusing to choose a child demonstrates the deep love and the unquantifiable value of every soul – in stark contrast to the Nazi beasts who lost all value for life...

As terrible as our losses may be, as terrible as our scars may be, through them we have learned to value life like never before.

7. Yizkor after the Holocaust (Inspirational Story)

Let me tell you about *Yizkor* after the Holocaust:

It was September 17, 1945, the first Yom Kippur after liberation, at the DP Camp Föhrenwald near Munich. The leading rabbi housed there was the Klausenberger Rebbe (Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam), who had lost his wife, his 11 children and most of his followers in the Holocaust.⁴

All the people of the DP camp – several thousand of them – came to hear the Klausenberger Rebbe speak on that Yom Kippur, and this is what he said:

“Why do we wear white on Yom Kippur? What is the significance of white? In the Jewish tradition, the groom wears a white robe (called a *kittel* in Yiddish) on his wedding day and his bride wears a white dress to show they are starting fresh, that they are pure. Also when people die, they are buried in white shrouds for the same reason. And on Yom Kippur, we want to show that we are pure, that our souls are without the stain of sin, as white as snow because we have atoned for all our wrongdoings. Also on Yom Kippur we remember the dead when we say *Yizkor*, the prayer of remembrance. We remind ourselves of the white shrouds that our deceased parents and grandparents wore when they were buried.”

And then he paused, and his voice cracked:

“Except that our parents were not buried in white shrouds ... Our parents, our grandparents, our brothers and sisters were buried in rags, their bodies mangled in mass graves. So why do we wear white?! They did not go to their judgment in white! If this is meant to remind us of our deceased loved ones, let’s look like them!”

And with that, he tore off his white *kittel*.

⁴ As related in I Believe by Leibel Zisman, pp. 144-146.

And everybody started to sob. The Rebbe could not control the crowd. Not too many of the people had *kittels* – after all where could you get one in a DP camp – but all were crying their eyes out. He said that they should not cry; anyone who had survived the war was holy, was pure, and did not need to put on white. But the people kept on sobbing. He had opened the floodgates, and nobody could stop the outpouring of pain that day.

The Rebbe's words rang in the ears of the bereaved. Everyone had lost close relatives, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts. Everyone was indelibly scarred by loss.

8. The Empty Chair

We, who have come together today to observe *Yizkor*, are also indelibly scarred. For it is the nature of loss that it is immeasurable.

Experiencing the death of a loved one is always devastating. Anyone who has suffered through it can identify with sadness that the sight of the empty chair brings – the realization that the loved one will never again fill it.

And, it is also sad but true that many of us feel, after the passing of loved ones, that we did not appreciate them when they were with us. Perhaps we had intentionally hurt them. Perhaps they had hurt us. Perhaps there were issues that were never dealt with or resolved, and now that the person is gone, we are filled with guilt, remorse, regret and many other feelings in between. And we feel that we have nowhere to put these feelings.

For those of you here who have no such unresolved issues, who have only good memories. I ask you to think of those you know who were not so lucky ... and unfortunately, we all know more than a few, for the dysfunctional family is a symptom of this wounded generation.

But all of us who have suffered loss, even if we had closure, sense the deep void of the life that was once here inside of a body, but is here no more ... and now there is only an empty chair.

Such finality can be a source of terrible grief and hopelessness.

9. The Comfort of *Yizkor*

Comes *Yizkor* to comfort us and make us appreciate life. For by recognizing the empty space – the empty chair – we learn to value life like never before.

In the Book of Samuel, we read Jonathan's words to David: "Tomorrow will be the new moon; and you will be missed when your seat remains vacant."⁵ Ironically, when a seat is vacant we remember and appreciate the person who filled that seat.

This may explain why the traditional consolation at a *shiva* call – *HaMakom Yinachem Etchem* – literally means "May the Place comfort you." For the name of God used here, *HaMakom*, literally means "place" or "space." We are asking God to fill the unique and irreplaceable *makom* that was left vacant.

When the people we love are filling their seat, we may take them for granted. We can get distracted by the superficial and even deceive ourselves into thinking: ahh, the person's value is based on his physical presence – his stature, his wealth, his qualities, or his – net value and credit score.

But when the seat is empty and we remember the soul by saying *Yizkor* and we then appreciate their true value – not their physical presence and commercial value, but their true value.

And even if we feel that we did not achieve closure, and have "unfinished" matters with our loved one, *Yizkor* provides us the opportunity – the platform – to express and address those feelings. Because the soul of our loved ones lives on, and even if we cannot see the soul, it sees and hears us!

Indeed, the *Zohar* says⁶ that honoring our parents is the only mitzvah we can do even after a soul has departed. We can honor our parents even after they have left this plane.

And honoring parents is yet another way of honoring life – the life that God gave us through our parents.

⁵ 1 Samuel 20:18.

⁶ End of Parshat Bechukotei (Zohar III 115b).

10. Honoring Difficult Parents (Optional)

Those saying *Yizkor* today honor their parents and discover the deeper meaning of life in the process.

This may be a particularly sensitive issue when it comes to honoring deceased parents, whom we did not honor in life because we felt they did not deserve it, who were abusive perhaps or neglectful of us.

And, of course, by participating in *Yizkor*, we are honoring them now. But even so, we are troubled.

Indeed, we are not the only ones. Even Jewish philosophers have asked: How can we honor anyone other than God? Is God not our Father in Heaven? Is God not accessible to us directly? We do not believe in intermediaries, right? So why are we commanded to honor our parents?

Note that the Torah does not command us to “love your mother and father,” although we are commanded to “love your neighbor as yourself,” and to “love the stranger,” and to “love the Lord, Your God,” but we are not commanded to love our parents. Just to honor them.

And the Torah implies that this might be a hard thing to do, because it offers huge incentives to those who fulfill this commandment. It promises them a long life, and not just a long life, but a good life, and not just a good life, but a life of peace.

All that for honoring our parents. Why? Because by honoring them, we are in fact honoring God.

11. Talmudic View

The Talmud says that there are three partners in the birth of a child: the mother, father and God.⁷ The parents provide the stuff of which the body is made. God provides the soul. God is the third partner – and the real creator of life.

⁷ Kiddushin 31a.

So, when we are honoring our parents, we are honoring God who gave us life through our parents. But there is more to it than that because God is the source of our soul – of our innermost essence – so we are also honoring ourselves.

And if we dishonor the life that God gave us through our parents, then it's not just that we are dishonoring our parents. Then, we are dishonoring ourselves; we're dishonoring our own personal life.

This is critical to understand.

The Torah's injunction to honor our parents is really a challenge to us. It's telling *us* to honor the life that was given to us, *even* if our parents did not.

So honoring our parents is ultimately about reverence for life. Honoring our parents is an absolute commandment without conditions, because they are part of the chain of life. They are part of the chain that brought us where we are, that gives us the resources and allows us to make our contribution in this world.

12. Kabbalistic Insight (Optional)

On a more mystical note, honoring our parents is reflective of a deep Kabbalistic concept. I'll try to capture it in a nutshell.

The four-letter name of God, which we are forbidden to pronounce, is composed of the Hebrew letters: the *yud*, the *hei*, the *vav*, and the *hei*. It is an acronym for "is, was and will be" and as such it captures all of existence. Now, let's look at the *yud*. The letter *yud* is like a dot, a point: the point of conception, the point of departure, the beginning. Then comes the *hei*, which spreads out and develops that point into a more developed idea. Then comes the *vav* which is a vertical line that draws the energy downward, and then the final *hei* where the energy is expanded in the recipient.

And this captures the essence of life. For any flow of energy, any type of transmission of communication from teacher to student, begins with a point of departure, expands, is transmitted, and then expands again in the recipient.

So these letters *yud, hei, vav, hei* represent the building blocks of all of existence.

The Kabbalah explains that the *yud, hei*, the first two letters, are compared to father and mother, and the last two are compared to son and daughter. On a mystical level then, honoring our parents is also an internal, personal experience, and it represents the union between the parent within our psyche and the child within our psyche. Or put another way, the union between our intellect and our emotions, where the intellect is compared to the father and mother, while the emotions are compared to the children.

Dishonoring our parents, or being unable to honor them, does not allow our inner circle to be complete. So we see here that it's not just a question of honoring human beings – for internally, personally, psychologically, there's a certain circle that needs to be completed. And that circle includes a point of departure, the expansion which is compared to father and mother, and the results or products which are compared to the children.

This idea is mystical, but it captures how honoring parents is really an opportunity and a challenge to us to look at our own lives, to create flow between our own inner parent and child. Indeed, all the fruits of our labor are, in essence, the product of the parent-child relationship in our personal lives.

Honoring the root, the source, of where the fruits of our activities come from is not just the right thing to do, it also creates the connection to the past, when our life was first created. And it shows us how a commandment of honoring parents really is a very all-encompassing idea that affects all of existence, both personal and interpersonal, and on many, many different levels.

13. Beyond the Grave

Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor at the *New Republic*, a self-proclaimed agnostic, wrote a fascinating study called *Kaddish*, where he talks about his catharsis during the year he dedicated himself to saying the mourning prayer for his father. In this book he discusses what it did for *him* and for *his* personal growth, and how it forced him to face his own doubts and questions.

This underscores the point made earlier that honoring our parents is a command that we fulfill during their life and even after their passing. We are obliged to say *Kaddish* for them and also *Yizkor* – which is why many of us are here today.

It's really a very moving rite – to see a child, no matter what age, even a child who's now a grandfather, go into a synagogue and remember his or her parents, because memory is one of the most powerful forces that we have.

Let us hope that what we all remember is wonderful. But even it is not, this is a wonderful way we have of expressing honor – in a synagogue, through prayer – when we can no longer express it face to face. We can pray for the soul of our parent or parents.

For the soul always remains intact. Our soul and the soul of our parents. It is holy, it is pure, it endures forever, and if nothing else, it is this pure part of our deceased loved ones that we honor today.

Let us begin...