

Sukkot/Shemini Atzeret Yitzkor (Memorial) Sermon

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In my 9th grade class I asked my students what Jews do that make them Jewish. Celebrating the holidays was on the top of their lists. We got into a discussion on the importance of tradition. They learn about their Judaism through the shared customs and rituals that take place in their households. They remember apples and honey, Passover seders, sitting in the sukkah, eating latkes on Hanukkah and coming to temple on Shabbat.

Holidays are the time when we reflect on the customs celebrated and observed in our own families. We remember what celebrations were like in our homes growing up. Our parents help shape us into the people we become and teach us the customs and values to pass on to the next generation. In turn, children strive to make their parent's proud. When our children read Torah on the High Holy Days, we could see the joy in parent's faces. At Bar and Bat Mitzvah we celebrate the passing of the Torah, of this chain of tradition from one, sometimes two or even three generations to the next. We remember the holidays that our ancestors kept. We recreate the customs our parents taught us as we strive to combine these with new rituals for our children. Our lives are another link in the chain.

We do not stand alone. We are connected with both the past and with the future. This week's Haftorah portion shows us that multigenerational connection. Solomon takes the yoke of leadership from his father, King David. One of King Solomon's projects is to build the Temple. He fulfills this task in a remarkable short amount of time.

Perhaps he works quickly, excited with the knowledge that he is a link in this chain and aware that the responsibility now rests in his hands. Upon completing building the temple, Solomon declares, "May the Eternal our God be with us as with our ancestors, and never leave us or forsake us."

Each time we pray we invoke the name of our ancestors. We call upon the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. We bless our children wishing them to be like Menasheh and Ephraim and our matriarchs. We name our children after loved ones no longer with us as a way of remembering. Through the new generations the names of the past generations live on.

Our wall in our sanctuary is filled with memorial plaques, lit up today and honoring the names of those who are no longer physically present. But today we feel their presence.

Like Solomon we are the builders—working to make sure the temple stands strong. We come here this morning in keeping with that joy over our Temple. We love our temple and our Judaism and feel a responsibility to our ancestors, our parents and ourselves to hold on to our traditions and customs. Joining together in worship and remembering we keep the legacy of those who have come before alive.

Today is a bittersweet day. It is a chag—a happy occasion. Sukkot is a joyous celebration and tomorrow night we will dance and celebrate with our *sifrei* Torah yet it is also a time when we feel a sense of loss and a yearning to be with those who are no longer physically in this world. In our most joyous times, we acknowledge that life's sweetness always comes with life's challenges.

We are proud of the way we have maintained our Jewish heritage. Yet we feel something is missing. Members of our families are no longer with us. Holidays are often when we miss them most. We see an empty place at our table. We feel a sense of loss when we suddenly realize we do not have them to call to wish a holiday's greeting. We long to embrace those who are no longer present.

Recently, Rabbi Bloom and I have been discussing the challenges of presenting the new Reform prayerbook, the *Miskan Tefillah*. One of the challenges is the liturgical change- the bringing back of a phrase previously removed from our prayerbooks, *Me-chaii; ha metem:*. Who brings back to life the deceased. Many of us have trouble with such a concept.

Perhaps this is not to be taken literally. Perhaps we can bring back to life those who are no longer present in another way. Perhaps those who are physically gone can return to us by sharing stories of who they were. We can live our lives in ways that bring honor and meaning to their lives. We can teach our children and grandchildren as our parents and grandparents taught us.

They are not gone. Rather they are within us. They are with us as we make decisions, as we celebrate our holidays, as we overcome difficulties and experience moments of greatness. They are the voice in the back of our head and the spirit that surrounds our own lives.

We do not have to let go of our past. *Yizkor* commands us to remember, to not forget our roots. To reflect and remember who we were so we can know who we are and where we are going.

Today we celebrate *Shemini Atzeret* and tomorrow we will celebrate *Simchat Torah*. According to our Torah, *shemini regel bifnei atzmo*, the 8th day is a holiday unto itself. We gather for an extra day. A day called *Shemini Atzeret* which is a day to reflect and remember and increase our celebration.

In the Talmud, the rabbis suggest that this final day of *Sukkot*, this holiday unto itself, is likened to a king who has invited his children to a feast for a number of days. When their time came to leave, he said to them: "My children, I beg of you, stay on for an additional day—the prospect of separation from you is hard for me."

We can relate. It is hard for us to separate from our past. *Yizkor* reminds us that we do not have to separate. Our loved ones are within us. *Yizkor* is our moment to say, as God does, "Stay with me one more day—the prospect of separation is too difficult."

As long as we live, our loved ones live. We remember them.

From our past we find the strength to go forward and to create memories for the generations to come.

Yhi zichronam livrachah. May they be remembered as a blessing.