

Sermon for Yizkor (9.28.09 = 5770)

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You may know of a traditional Yiddish expression, when hearing a person's age, one replies "biz hunnert und tzvanzig," may the person live "to a hundred and twenty years" (the ideal age, in the Bible). I am told that someone once asked Reb Moshe: now that people are living longer, what should one say if meeting someone who IS 120 years old? He replied, "Have a nice day."

"Have a nice day" is, indeed, a wonderful wish. One of my favorite biblical verses is from Koheleth, who as an old man urged on his young students not to miss out on the simple pleasures of life: וּמְתוֹק הָאֵוֶר וְטוֹב לְעֵינַיִם לְרִאֲוֹת אֶת-הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, "How sweet is the light, what a delight for the eyes to behold the sun!" When people used to complain about the weather, or some such mundanity, my grandmother would reply, "Did you wake up this morning? Now, that's a beautiful day!" While that's a wonderful philosophy, I'm sure we can all agree, it can probably get annoying at times (!). But in any case, we are gathered together at this time to call to mind the ones who came before us, who no longer "get up in the morning" and have no more wonderful days "under the sun" to enjoy. Many of us recall parents; some, brothers or sisters, husbands or wives, and other family members and loved ones; some, most wretchedly, remember children, cut off all too young.

What can we say about our loved ones that can evoke their lives for us? What can we say to them? Judaism does have a tradition that deals specifically with this second question; it is called “*kever avot*,” literally, “the graves of the ancestors.” The traditional liturgy associated with *kever avot* is closely related to the original sense of the kaddish; we recite prayers to help speed the departed along their journey to *gan eden*, Heaven. Now, to be sure, most of us relate to the kaddish in a different way — we recite the prayer as a way of recalling the lives of our loved ones, and to bring comfort to us. To the extent that we visit graves to “pay our respects” or to say prayers such kaddish or *el malei rahamim*, or simply to cry — particularly during the Season of Awe, when it is traditional to visit family graves — is all “well and good,” and appropriate. However, many ceremonies of visiting the graves of our ancestors have gone far beyond these very human customs and have moved into the realm of entreating the departed to intercede on our behalf. While to be sure, there are talmudic traditions that condone such practices, they do fly in the face of direct Torah tradition that instructs us to do no such thing and, indeed, equates such practices with idolatry; Deuteronomy (18:11) includes as practitioners of idolatry any who **וְדָרַשׁ אֶל-הַמֵּתִים**, literally, “inquires of the dead” or “practices necromancy.” And yet that does not seem to cause any hesitation in the increasingly popular practice of bringing Jews to cemeteries (whether in the Land of Israel, Ukraine or Brooklyn) to do this very thing, to entreat the dead to intercede on our behalf.

The reason for this, it seems to me, is the increasingly popular reliance on what are regarded as “alternative” and Kabbalistically-rooted approaches to Judaism. Some voices of the Kabbalah, for example, claim that the נֶפֶשׁ, one of the words in Biblical Hebrew for “soul,” is really only one-third of a human soul, and it remains by the grave for a period of time, after death. In this view, then, the נֶפֶשׁ functions as a kind of “portal” to God, or intermediary; prayers are then addressed to the departed, who then “carry them” more directly to God. One rabbi, recently and in a public forum, said, “There is a separation of the body and soul [after death] and the soul remains here attached to this world to gather requests from others. The reason [we visit graves] is because the soul is still there waiting to take our requests to God.”

Of course, there is no way to prove or disprove any of this; what strikes one person as “morbid” may be for another the source of comfort s/he needs to carry on. But it seems to me to be on a certain level completely egocentric to take this approach to thinking about our loved ones who have passed away. To the parent who gave us life, it’s as though we’re saying, “here’s more that you can do for me” or “I need this special favor.” Or to other departed loved ones, “here’s something I need from you.” This unseemliness is in addition to the practice being forbidden by the Torah.

But I do understand and participate in the wish to “say something” to our loved ones who are no longer here for us. A rabbinic colleague of mine recently suffered the death of his mother.

At the shiva, he shared a letter he had written to his mother that his father managed to read to her before she died. The letter began with four statements (after “Dear Mom”), “Thank you. I’m sorry. I forgive you. I love you.” It seems to me that these four statements can provide for us a rubric through which we can really remember our loved ones, and not only remain bereft at their loss. Let us take a closer look.

“Thank you.” That’s almost a no-brainer (!). Almost anyone, even a total stranger on the street who holds a door for you, deserves a “thank you” every now and then; how much the more so is this true of our family and loved ones?! As we recall our dead, I urge everyone to think of things that they have done for us, things that now can never be repaid, and to summon up feelings of gratitude for them. “I’m sorry.” It is the nature of relationships that we hurt and otherwise let down the people we love. We all know that feeling when we have fought with a loved one, and walk away from that encounter feeling that, well, we really were right! It was the other one’s fault! And then to have that person come up to us and essentially agree with us, and say “I’m sorry.” When that statement is heartfelt there is almost nothing better for renewing and restoring a relationship. So, go ahead, think as clearly as you can about what went down between you and your loved one... and say you’re sorry! Along the same lines, given what we know about human relationships, few better statements can be heard from a partner than the words “I forgive you.” How restorative does THAT sound, especially when you know that you were primarily at fault?! So do the same thing that feels

good — say it now, to them.

The final statement is really the one that we all crave the most... “I love you.” Perhaps a bit overused in pop songs, but hardly ever out of place in a family or other loving relationship. And it sounds all the better when it comes after the other three expressions of sentiment. “I love you — in spite of the fact that you have hurt me; forgiveness have cleared the path for renewal, and I really do love you.”

I think you can all guess what I am going to say now... but I’m going to say it anyway. As we rise to recite our Yizkor prayers, I do want us to include these statements, along with the traditional Hebrew liturgy. They are, in a way, a true triumph over death, and show us a way we can maintain our relationships — from our end — with those of our loved ones who have died. But all four of these statements belong most of all among the living. We can say them now, to our beloved dead, in a compensatory, one-sided way, and there is value in this. But how much the more so ought we say it to the people still around us, with whom we are still engaged in an active, loving, living relationship. In *Shir Ha-shirim*, the Song of Songs (8:6), the lovers vow, *עזה כמוות אהבה* “love is as fierce as death.” Let us rise now, our four-statement love letter in mind, to recite the Yizkor prayers.