

Sermon For Yom Kippur
October 8-9, 2008 – 10 Tishri, 5769
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

A shiva candle is supposed to burn for seven days. Traditionally, when you return home from the gravesite, you gather together as a family and light the tall, thick candle, which burns in the house during the seven days of mourning that follow the loss of a loved one. Over the course of the seven days, the candle slowly burns down, and eventually gutters.

Our shiva candle was different. In the aftermath of my father's passing last April, we spent part of shiva with my mother in my parents' home, and then returned to Boca for the remainder of the seven days. When we arrived home, we lit a new shiva candle, which would burn during the remainder of our period of mourning.

On the morning of the last day of shiva, we gathered to "get up" from sitting, and took the traditional walk around the neighborhood. We returned to the house, and to the shiva candle, still burning, with much more fuel to spend.

In so many ways, that candle reminded me of my father. It was to be extinguished with what seemed like so much fuel remaining. The thought of blowing out that candle was, for me, the most frightening event I've ever confronted.

On Rosh HaShanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass on? How many shall come to be? Who shall live, and who shall die? Who shall see ripe age, and who shall not?

I must admit that last year, when I recited those words, it didn't dawn on me that they were talking about my father. Yes I knew he had cancer, and yes I knew it was more aggressive than before. But he seemed to be tolerating the chemotherapy so well, the doctors were so optimistic about the surgery, he seemed to be in such good spirits. And initially there was so much cause for hope. The surgery was longer than expected, the disease had progressed a little more than they initially thought, but the first reports were good.

Over the last year, I feel like I've joined a club. It's a club of which I've been an adjunct member my whole career, but one which I've only recently joined. I can't count how many people I've joined along the road through illness and loss, and while I've tried my best to be empathetic and comforting, there is a difference when it's your father they're talking about, your father whom you're bouncing back and forth to see in the hospital, your father they're telling you is declining, your father that needs to register with hospice care, your father there in the sanctuary, your father ...

It's an experience I have shared with you from along side. And now it's one that I share from the inside.

This year has been a journey – a journey through illness, through highs of anticipation and expectation, through lows of despair and disbelief. And through it all a strong measure of denial. Months of "did I hear that right?" What should I do? How can I help? Where should I be? It's a journey familiar to so many of us.

It has been a journey of loss – watching helplessly as my father lost his strength, his faculties, and ultimately his life – watching my mother lose the love of her life, her best friend, the one who fixed what was broken, who built and nurtured their nest egg, who held her hand in the darkened theater.

It's taken a very long time for me to even think about what I've lost. I'm not sure I yet appreciate or understand the scope. It has been a year of embarking on a search to discover my father, and myself, through the journey of kaddish.

Yitgadal, V'Yitkadash Sh'mei Raba. The words flow, rhythmically and instinctively. They are powerful in their familiarity and in their purpose.

Magnified and sanctified may G-d's great name be in the world that G-d created according to G-d's will, and may G-d's reign come in your lives and in your days, and in the lives of all the House of Israel, swiftly and soon, and we all say Amen.

May G-d's great name be blessed always and forever.

Blessed, and praised, and glorified, and raised, and exalted, and honored, and uplifted, and lauded be the name of the Holy One, may G-d be blessed, above all blessings and hymns and praises and consolations that are uttered in the world, and we all say, Amen.

May a great peace from heaven – and life – be upon us and upon all Israel, and we all say, Amen.

May the One who makes peace in the high heavens, grant peace to us and to all Israel, and we all say, Amen.

It says nothing of loss, nothing of death, but acknowledges G-d's greatness in the world and our hope for G-d's dominion. It offers a prayer for a time when death itself will be overcome, when the world will be repaired, perfected, and redeemed.

In traditional congregations, only the mourners recite these words at the conclusion of the service. The mourners are those who are observing a yahrtzeit on the anniversary of a loved-one's death, or those who are in the first eleven months following the loss of an immediate member of the family. In Reform congregations, it became the custom for the entire congregation to recite these words at the conclusion of each service, to honor the memories of those for whom there is no one to say kaddish, whose entire family was blotted out, who have no kaddish remaining.

Special emphasis was placed in our tradition on the duty of a child to say kaddish for a parent. Rabbi Akiva taught that a son can rescue a soul from punishment by reciting the hallowed words, Yitgadal, V'Yitkadash. In fact, there came to be a custom in eastern Europe to refer to a man's son as his Kaddish.

A year of kaddish is a journey. I have recited kaddish in my parents' home, my home, our synagogue, and many other synagogues here, around the country, and in Israel, including at the Western Wall. I have joined in minyanim held in public parks and in airport concourses. Each opportunity for kaddish invites me to spend a few minutes of meditation, a few minutes searching for my father.

Because most of the time the daily services I join use a traditional liturgy, there is a passage different from the Reform liturgy that catches my eye each day. In the Tefilah, in the second blessing, called the Gevurot, the words of the traditional liturgy are a little different. It begins, Ata Gibor L'Olam Adonai, M'Chayei Metim Ata, Rav L'Hoshia. You are mighty forever, Adonai, You revive the dead; great is Your power to save.

This passage reflects a long-standing traditional belief that when G-d redeems the world, the righteous will participate in a bodily resurrection. This is why traditional Jews make sure they are laid to rest with the body intact – so that in the world to come, when they rise from their graves, they will have all their parts. There was actually a famous case of a cemetery who was entrusted with a man's amputated leg for reposit until his demise. Then when he passed away, the cemetery could not locate the missing leg, and they were sued for millions.

The tradition has evolved over thousands of years. Maimonides in the 12th century understood that the reward for a righteous life was not physical joys but spiritual fulfillment. He understood that a person has two parts – the physical element and the spiritual element. When we die, the body returns to the dust from which it is drawn, the spirit, created in G-d's image, remains eternal.

The Reform movement, who could not accept the notion of physical resurrection, more than 100 years ago, changed the words of this blessing from M'Chayei Metim – bringing life to the dead; to M'Chayei HaKol – bringing life to all. The miracle of G-d's power was not that G-d could revive the departed, but that G-d could infuse life into the world.

But even though I don't believe in physical resurrection, I have spent a part of each day trying to understand how G-d can bring life to the dead. I have spent a part of each day trying to understand how G-d can bring life to the world. For when we lose someone we love, there is a part of us that dies with them.

I think of all the ways in which my father's life has inspired me, taught me, helped me to become the person I am. We all do this when we mourn. We think about what we have lost in terms of what we were given. We think of what we were taught, of the values that were imparted, of the virtues an example inspired.

My parents bought their home in suburban Washington in 1966 – a small ranch house on which they built additions, twice. The house is half-way up a hill leading to cul-de-sac, and as you descend the hill, you can see most of the house from above. I once was walking with my father and pointed out the house to him. "Dad," I said, "look at your house. Look what you have. Look what you've built. What do you think?"

"It's been a good house," he said. And that was all. For him, material possessions meant very little. He was a man of ideas, quiet and reserved, who loved to learn everything he could about the world. He was the smartest man I've ever known, educated on so many different subjects. He was extraordinarily generous, always cared for the little guy who needed an extra advantage to compete. He believed in hard work, but he believed in helping people. He was selfless and devoted. He coached my soccer team when no one else would, even though he knew nothing about soccer.

Love is a holy enterprise. It fuses our souls and spirits with that of someone else. And that fusion, that creation of one-ness, is the essence of spirituality.

When we read the creation story, we see that G-d creates swarms of living creatures, but only one human being. This is to teach, we learn in the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5) that "if anyone has caused a single soul to perish ... Scripture imputes to him as though he had caused a whole world to perish; and if any person saves a single soul ... it is as though he had saved an entire world."

Each of us is a whole world unto ourselves, but the fusion of worlds is powerful, sacred, and holy. And that fusion makes us part of those we love. We become them. They are us, in some fashion. Each of us is separate, distinct, unique, but at the same time, we are a holy amalgamation of everyone we have ever loved. So it is natural that, when we lose someone we love, we lose a piece of ourselves.

I've spent the last several months trying to understand what I've lost, and yet, as I reflect on the enormity of the loss, I think about how much I haven't lost. Don't you find that you hear the voice of those you love ringing out in your head. My father's voice still rings out in my head, his example and lessons are part of the foundation of my very being. Not a day goes by when I don't think of him in some way, a time we spent together where we laughed or learned, or even fought a little.

I find myself doing things he did, or saying things he would say. He loved teaching me about business and the stock market when I was very little, and I in turn love to teach my children about the stock market or current events in the car on the way to school. I remember nearly fifteen years ago, when I would try to encourage him to take more risks in the market, he would lament the growing national debt that would enslave us, he said, to China and others who might one day not want to loan us money anymore. This week, he seems absolutely prophetic.

I had the privilege of being with my father in his last moments. They say when someone passes you can see the light go out of their eyes, and you can. Light is not simply the foundation of life, but is the essence of G-d in the world.

The kabbalists who followed Rabbi Isaac Luria in Tsfat taught that before the creation of the world, the universe was filled, end-to-end, with G-d's light. And then in order to bring the world into being, G-d had to contract to make room. In Hebrew this process is called *Tzimtzum*, self-contraction. And this rendered a vacuum, dark and chaotic. And then as G-d created the

world, G-d began to pour that Divine Light back into the void. G-d created vessels like knowledge and wisdom, justice and compassion, the desire to be awesome and the desire to be awestruck, and filled those vessels with that light. But the power of that light was more than those vessels could bear, and they shattered, shards of holiness scattering around the world.

It is our mission to uncover those shards and to put them back together as we partner with G-d in restoring wholeness and holiness to the world. And I have to tell you, there was a glimmer of that Divine light that twinkled in my father's eyes.

And when he died, I wondered where that light had gone. Did it return to G-d, as the dust had returned to the earth? Was it lost forever? And then, one night, during shiva, as I sat in my living room surrounded by my family and so many of you, I looked up at the shiva candle, and watched the flame dance behind the glass. And as I stared at the twinkling flame, I realized that was where the light had gone. It was there, in that candle, still lighting my way in the dark, still shining in my house as it would when my father would come to visit.

But then, there we were, gathered around that candle, knowing we had to extinguish it, at the close of shiva. And I was terrified. If I extinguished the candle, was I also snuffing out the light of my father? A lump of fear and dread formed in my throat and in my heart.

But then I looked into the eyes of my children, who were sharing stories of times with Zayda, when he would teach them chess or when we were together in Israel, and I saw, reflected in their eyes, was that glimmering light. And I understood that no matter what we did to that candle, my father's light would shine in their eyes, in my eyes. His flame would burn in me, his light would shine in me.

On this Yom Kippur, we read from the book of Deuteronomy the famous words: "I set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, that you and your children may live."

Each of us, as we recover from our losses, has to face this choice. Not simply will we live or die, but how much living will we choose. Will we simply go through the motions of life, just trying to get through the day in order to lay awake in bed, anxious, fearful, sad, and forlorn? Or will we embrace life and seek to fill it with love, with fulfilling work and activity, with meaning and purpose?

And more than that, how will we choose what living means? How will we determine the future course of our lives without the pilot or guide that once helped us along the way? As we look in the mirror on this Yom Kippur, and we consider the choices we have for how we may choose to live, who stares back at us from inside of our eyes? It is us, for certain, but we are more than just a single pair of eyes. From inside our eyes we see the light of so many who kindled our spark, who passed on their torch to us. We are living not just for ourselves. We must live in a way that honors those who gave us the light in our eyes. We must live in a way that infuses light into the eyes of our children. For our losses have taught us that life is precious, each day a gift, and we need to use that gift as wisely and with as much sacred deliberation as we can muster.

G-d is mighty indeed, for G-d does bring life to those who have passed. G-d has given us the gift of memory, and has taught us to draw on the spirits whose light shines from within us, who live in us, in seeking inspiration in how to live. I pray that my ongoing search for my father will bring me closer to him, closer to the G-d to which his spirit returned, to the G-d who has returned my father's spirit to me. I pray that I may pick up the shard of God's broken dream that shone in my father's eyes and find its place in a world redeemed, that his light will teach me how to choose life as I move forward with him, without him, guided by the light of his soul that shines in those whom he loved and in me who is so richly blessed that he chose life for me.

May the one who makes peace in the high heavens, grant peace to us, to all Israel, and let us say, Amen.