

YIZKOR SERMON: PASSOVER APRIL 7, 2018
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A few weeks ago, I called a congregant who was out of town preparing for a parent's funeral. After extending my condolences I said to him, "I know this is not what anyone would have preferred but funerals- almost mysteriously- superimpose invaluable moments of time upon the family unit. We re-connect with distant family members and realize the bonds of family are so rich and powerful." I added, "may your time, together with each other- in spite of the difficult circumstances- be significant and memorable, reminding you of the enduring value lessons that continue to define your family."

Similarly, when we take the time to gather with family for Yom Tov our bank of memories is often re-opened. We find ourselves overwhelmed with emotions, stimulated by a comment, a melody, a picture, or simply by seeing a loved one in a particular context.

This past week the same happened to me. I took Jordana and Adina to my sister's home in Michigan for the beginning of Pesah. We weren't quite ready to resume our regular practice of hosting dear friends and congregants at our house for the two sederim.

The day before we departed, my brother-in-law called me and said, "the Detroit Tigers' opening game, today has been postponed due to rain and cold weather. Would you like to go to Opening Game tomorrow- early Friday afternoon? It took me about three seconds to say, "Of

course. Let me determine whom else would like to attend.” We had a wonderful afternoon- not exactly what I had anticipated as preparation for the seder!

My father had always taken us to one Detroit Tigers baseball game each summer, and we would sit in Al Kaline’s Corner, the set of boxes in the first balcony of the right field corner- overlooking Kaline’s position as the right fielder. It was a very special treat- our yearly visit to the big city! Even though this was my first visit to the new Tiger Stadium, I was immediately transported to another world- my childhood- suffused with memories of game day, attending with my grandparents, the excitement, the smells, and anticipation of seeing childhood idols.... In fact, I was reminded that each of us is a composite of memories.

A few hours later we were seated at our beautiful seder table- just short of 25 people each night. The table was set exquisitely- my sister is a wonderful hostess- as it had been in Dallas for many years, and as I had remembered as a child. My sister set the table with my parents’ dishes, with silver from my grandparents and great grandparents; the recipes were another documentation of the history we shared, as family members were recalled through their attachment to various foods. The songs we sang seemed to carry with them another set of memories- the look I always received from Wende when she knew I created a closing melody, and the set of Haggadot that bore her name. Again, I said to myself, what are we without our memories?

I received an email from a friend shortly before Yom Tov that underlined this sense of memory in a very special way. In light of the craziness associated with March Madness, the annual college basketball three-week-journey toward the final championship game in which Michigan lost this year- but, amazingly made it that far- I share with you a summary of a very special moment that occurred on the basketball court.

In 1993, a promising young man- Chris Street- died when his car collided with a snow plow in Iowa City. He was a member of the University of Iowa basketball team. He was an outstanding basketball player but a greater human being. He was identified as a leader, the kind of person for whom it was an honor to play against. Recognized as the kind of guy to lead you into battle, he was the leader others followed not only because of courage but because of intelligence. He engendered respect and admiration from all whom he encountered.

When he died, he had completed a school record 34 straight free throws for the University of Iowa. This past year, as another young man representing the Iowa Hawkeyes stood at the free throw line ready to surpass the record of 34 straight free throws, he intentionally missed his shot attempt. The young player responded when questioned, "That's not my record to have. This record deserves to stay in Chris Street's name."

That simple gesture- the act of humility, of selflessness- left an enduring impression on everyone in attendance at that game. All associated with the story will remember not only Chris Street but Jordan Bohannon, and the lesson he taught about the art of living. It has been

stated, "Humility is not timidity or weakness. It is confidence, wisdom, and grace combined with a knowledge that we are all imperfect."

It is that awareness of imperfection that defines this moment for each of us. The memories we retain of those we have loved and lost remind us of a world that was. Periodically, we return to that world- a world, seemingly full of smiles, joy, and laughter. We want to remember it as a world free of so much pain that invades our life today.

As we stated in the seder- Yachatz, step number four known as 'brokenness-' is part of life. We are all broken to some extent. We are all hurting. We all cherish memories of a world that was, of a relationship that brought us so much comfort, love and fulfillment. We strive to hold onto every kernel of yesterday, in an attempt to regain some traction, to find a way to move forward, to reset our bearings so as to be productive and satisfied, again with our lot in life.

The story of Jordan Bohanon would have meant nothing had he not known the story of Chris Street. The grace that defined Jordan Bohanon would have been lost by everyone had the story of Chris Street remained unknown and unchronicled.

The Yizkor hour reminds us that we are part of an extraordinary tapestry that has enriched our lives for generations. We all belong to the family of the Jewish people. We all own a history- some of us are more familiar with it than others. That history is replete with our people's DNA- it is the composite of who we have been, to what we have aspired, and why we are the way we

are today. That history is our ticket to understanding our journey through life. The greatest tribute we can give to our departed is to understand their legacy in terms of their role in the story of the Jewish people.

As we strive to appreciate the gravity of this moment of Yizkor let us grapple with the meaning of memory. Let us never forget that without an appreciation for our past we cannot begin to understand the present; we cannot begin to appreciate the dreams that will distinguish our future. Let us do our loved ones the greatest honor of all- deepen our understanding of our people's past so as to place our loved one's legacy in the light of our people's extraordinary gift to mankind.

Without memory we remain orphans in history. Without reflection we remain rudderless. We find ourselves adrift in a world, lacking direction and constantly threatened by the forces of our world. May this holiday of Pesah, and this hour of Yizkor serve as an inspiration to each of us, to rediscover our people's glorious past, our people's extraordinary set of contributions to the world, and our personal role in that journey.

Hag Sameah