

Sermon for Yizkor, Yom Kippur 5765 (2004)

Note: Much of the information on which this Derasha (sermon) is based is from Destination Torah by my teacher *Chacham Yitschak Sassoon* (Ktav Publishing, Hoboken NJ 2001) p. 226.

... וְיִזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים נְשָׁמַת . . . (*yizkor E'ohim nishmat . . .*) *May God remember the soul of . . .*
Does God forget? Do we need to remind God about our mother or our father? Do we for a moment think that God has forgotten our spouse or our child? Why *yizkor*? Why would we ever think that we need to remind God of anything?

In the book of Numbers, we are told the story of Moses' sister מִרְיָם (*Miriam*), who was struck with leprosy. At that point מֹשֶׁה (*Moshe = Moses*) springs into action to implore God to heal Miriam. Moses approaches God with a simple five word prayer: "יְיָ הַלֵּא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ" (*God, please heal her.*" (Num 12:13). Not only is Moshe's prayer brief, but Moshe does not even mention the name of his sick sister, for whom he is praying! Based on this, Rabbi Ya'akov says in the name of Rabbi Chisda (Babylonian Talmud 34a) "כל המבקש רחמים על חבירו אין צריך שמו להזכיר שמו" *one who asks for mercy upon his fellow need not mention the person's name.*"

In ancient times, people believed that incantations would not work unless you mentioned the name of the person. And in fact we know of an incantation to cure a snake bite from Egypt nearly 3,500 years ago in which one had to mention the person's name and their mother's name. Moshe realized that when talking with God, names are not necessary. Therefore, he says "God, please heal her." Those of you who were here when I was installed as Rabbi had the chance to meet one of my teachers, *Chacham Yitschak Sassoon*. His Bible commentary titled Destination Torah addresses the theological importance of not needing to mention a person's name. He writes:

It is only when standing in the presence of the One who said "Before they call to Me I will answer" (Isaiah 65:24), that mouthing of words loses the preeminence and subsides to the level of an aid to concentration.

So, as believers in a God who is all knowing, we understand that every word we pray is designed as much for our own benefit as it is for God's. The words we say are designed to focus our thoughts, our feelings.

In fact, the very word for prayer, תְּפִלָּה (*tefillah*) tells us this. The root of the word *tefillah* is פָּלַל (*pallal*), which means to judge. *Tefillah* means to judge oneself. When we pray, the words we say are meant to be used for self reflection - to help us realize how we can do better.

When we ask God "Heal us, Oh Lord, and we shall be healed," we should ask ourselves: What have we done to help heal others? Have we visited the sick? Have we supported scientific research that might find the cure for major illnesses? When we ask God "Forgive us for we have sinned," we must consider - have we forgiven those who have wronged us in the past? Have we been as understanding of the shortcomings of others as we would have God be understanding of shortcomings? The word *tefillah* reminds us that each word of our prayer should be used as much to reflect upon ourselves as it is used to ask God for help.

So, what about Yizkor? "*Remember, God, the Souls of*" our fathers, our mothers, our spouses, our children. What do these words mean to us? And why do we need to mention each person by name?

I think the words of Yizkor remind us that each person's effect on the world goes far beyond that individual. In Yizkor we affirm that our thoughts, our words, can effect others even across the span of time.

Yizkor is not the only time that we acknowledge on the ימים נוראים (*yamim nora'im*), the Days of Awe, that a person's effect on the world goes beyond his or her lifetime. For instance, we constantly ask God to remember the righteousness of our forefathers and to consider those deeds as a merit for us. When we say those words, we are not simply asking God to give us a pass because Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were good people. Instead, we are saying that who they were has something to say about who we are.

In שמות (*shemot*), Exodus, when God tells Moshe that God wants to destroy the Children of Israel for making the Golden Calf, Moshe pleads "זָכוֹר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלִיִּשְׂרָאֵל" *Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel*" (Ex. 32:13). Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch explains this plea:

. . . by mentioning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, remembrance is asked for the noble germ from which this . . . people sprung. This original germ must have been so potent with nobility that Abraham was followed by an equally noble Isaac, and Isaac by an equally noble Jacob, and this would surely not have disappeared without leaving a trace in the nation which descended from them."

So, according to Hirsch, when we ask God to remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we are doing so because who they are provides a small window into the world of our potential. We all come from the line of these noble men. Each one of us has the perhaps untapped potential to be another Abraham, Isaac or Jacob.

This is true also about those of our loved ones whom we no longer have with us. As we mention each of their names, we can reflect on the many good deeds that they did. The qualities that they had that we so admired. And when we realize how close these people were to us and how much of an impact they had on our lives, we can try to take a little something about how they lived their lives, and turn it into an influence on how we live our lives.

And so we ask God - Remember our forefathers. Remember the soles of our loved ones. At the same time, we should remember those people and realize that some of their greatest qualities are a reflection of who we can become.

Now, I say that our loved ones whom we have lost reflect our potential. At the same time, we should realize that who we are is also a reflection of who they were. For we are their greatest legacy.

The Talmud talks about how the religious acts of a child can be an indication of the worthiness of the parent. For instance, the Rabbis talked about how a child's saying *Kaddish* would bring merit to the parent in the world to come. Is this simply because these words have magical power? I don't think so. The the actions of the child are important because they reflects on the parent. And this is true not only about saying Kaddish. Every good deed we do, every *mitzvah*, in some ways says something about our parents and all those who influenced our lives.

Bill Cosby tells the story of a certain day in shop class that a kid in the class rigged a certain explosion. The teacher, asked "Who did that," and not surprisingly received no answer. So, the teacher went on. "Y'know, when you do something like that, it reflects on your parents. . . . I mean, to do something like that. Man, you had to have some really bad upbringing. Your mom must be a horrible person. Bringing you up to do things like that. Wow, that's one bad mother." Until, Johnny, sitting in the back row exclaimed "Listen, I didn't do it, and stop talking about my mom like that."

What we do reflects on our parents. But not only on our parents, but on all those who have touched our lives. Who we are, the good things we do in life reflects the influence of those friends and loved ones who have touched our lives.

As we stand together to say the *Yizkor* service to remember the past, we should also think about our place in history. Can those we lost teach us a little something about our potential? How have our loved one's influenced us? How can we use their example to make ourselves better people? What were the things that we admired most about them, that perhaps we can make a bigger part of our lives?

And what about our legacy? Because our actions say something not only about our past, but about the future. The choices we make, the things that we do, help shape the minds of our children and all those around us. So, what will we teach our children? How will their actions reflect on us? Will they show that we were dedicated to תורה (*Torah*) and מצוות (*Mitzvot*)?

Will yours be an example of how to be a mensch . . . how to treat people fairly, how to perform acts of charity and how to dedicate oneself to service the service of God both inside and outside of the synagogue?

יְזַכֵּנוּ אֱלֹהִים נְשָׁמָתָא *God, remember the souls* of our loved ones. Teach us to remember who they were, and what they say about who we can be. Help us to come closer to your teachings and your commandments, so that we can bring credit to those loved ones that have left us. And when we ourselves are long since passed from the world, may our dedication to Torah and our acts of kindness be our greatest legacy.