

"THE PATH OF LIFE"

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5771 – Saturday, September 19, 2010

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

Other than Kol Nidre, perhaps no moment during the High Holiday period holds such power over us as does this hour of Yizkor. For at this time, we recall the essence of our very beings, by bringing forward from our memories loved ones no longer with us. Our hearts stir at remembered scenes of loving, laughing, teaching, and crying. The pain of separation is renewed, as we recall the moments when the trusted hand held us steady and unafraid.

Yizkor is a moment pregnant with emotion, coming as it does in the waning hours of this Yom Kippur Day. And while seemingly unrelated, there is a primal connection between the two, between Yizkor and Yom Kippur, between remembrance and repentance. Both speak of growth and decay. Both call on us to remember the past and look towards the future. Both pull us along a journey into our self, stripping away the layers of insulation and isolation with which we have surrounded ourselves. We reach deep to discover who we are and what we yet hope to become.

The quest begins at Kol Nidre, as its haunting call urges us to search our souls. Throughout this day, we probe in earnest, working through days and months of behavior unbecoming of beings created in God's image.

For those of us who fast, the hours pass slowly. Our stomachs grumble with a yearning to satisfy our basest needs. Yet, we struggle beyond our physical selves. Despite our hunger - perhaps because of our hunger - we ask ourselves: "Who are we? What are we? How have we come to be as we are today?" These questions - and their elusive answers - float in and out of our words and thoughts throughout the day.

Eventually, we arrive at this moment of Yizkor. It is the place and time we confront the very core of our existence. In recalling those who made us

what we are, we find ourselves staring face-to-face with our real selves. Who we have become is a reflection of who they were. Thus in remembering our loved ones, we can discover our own strengths, as well as our weaknesses. It is not an easy task, for the grief of remembrance only intensifies the pain of repentance.

But that is our goal of this day, to remember **and** to repent. Having reached the heart of our beings, we are ready on this Yom Kippur afternoon to repair and restore ourselves. How better to accomplish that task than to recall loving family and friends and their lessons of life given to us as precious legacies? Yizkor acts as a catalyst for renewal. Those gifts given along the way by others no longer with us—the values demonstrated, the words spoken, the emotions shared—we can use them to help shape our lives into ones filled with wholeness and holiness.

I liken the events of this hour to a scene I witnessed many summers ago, while attending a concert at the Tanglewood Music Festival, in western Massachusetts. I had looked forward to watching and listening as Leonard Bernstein (z'l) conducted the Boston Symphony, which was to perform a piece composed by Bernstein himself. An added attract was the appearance that evening by Midori, then a 14-year-old violin prodigy, the concert's guest soloist. With the imminent threat of rain, Leslie and I gave up our favorite spot on the lawn and settled ourselves instead on the porch of a nearby building in order to enjoy the evening in dry comfort.

The concert began. Bernstein's music was magnificent, made even sweeter by the beauty of Midori's performance. Suddenly, the skies opened up and rain began to fall. It was a strange sight—to see an entire orchestra play their instruments as though without any sound, for the beat of rain on the tin roof above us drowned out the music. Within a few moments, though, the strains of Midori's violin came through the noise

its magical song breaking through the rumble of the rain.

So, too, it is with us. There are moments, such as Yizkor, when we are able to hear the melody above the storm. Today, we have been preoccupied with our weaknesses. We have confessed our shortcomings. Now, like magic, the melody of those who walked with us—their laughter, their advice—rises above the storms of living, breaking through the clamor and bringing calm and resolve to the tasks ahead.

Thus, this hour of Yizkor is one more of beginnings, than of endings. Having heard our loved ones' precious melodies once more, we receive inspiration and are able to start back along the path of life. We restore ourselves to wholeness, using as a guide the gifts and lessons passed on to us by those we now remember. A beautiful parable serves as illustration:

The young woman set her foot on the path of life.

"Is the way long?" she asked.

And her guide said, "Yes. And the way is hard. But the end will be better than the beginning."

But the young woman was happy, and she would not believe that anything could be better than these years. So she played with her children, and gathered flowers for them along the way, and bathed with them in the clear streams; and the sun shone on them and life was good, and the young woman cried, "Nothing will ever be lovelier than this."

Then night came, and storm, and the path was dark, and the children shook with fear and cold, and the woman drew them close and covered them with her mantle, and the children said, "We are not afraid, for you are near, and no harm can come." And the woman said, "This is better than the brightness of day, for I have taught my children courage."

Then the morning came, and the path was difficult, and the children climbed and grew weary, and the woman was weary, but she said to the children, "A little patience and we are there." So the children climbed and struggled, and when they reached the top, they said, "We could not have done it without you." And the woman,

when she lay down that night, looked at the stars and said, "This is a better day than the last, for my children have learned fortitude in the face of hardship. Yesterday, I gave them courage. Today, I have given them strength."

...And the days went on, and the weeks and the months and the years, and the woman grew old and bent. But her children were tall and strong. At last they came to a hill, but beyond the hill they could not see.

And the woman said, "I have reached the end of my journey. And now I know that the end is better than the beginning, for my children can continue their journey, and their children after them."

And the children said, "You will always walk with us, even when you have gone beyond our view." And they stood and watched her as she went on alone. And they said, "We cannot see her but she is with us still. She is more than a memory. She is a living presence."

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For each of us, there is someone who is that living, shining presence. They have taught us well. They have instilled in us courage, strength, faith—all the wondrous gifts we receive when loved. Though no longer in our sight, they walk with us still, guiding us as they did in years past. Today, they serve as our inspiration, urging us on to the best we might become.

As we contemplate the end of Yom Kippur - concluding in just a few short minutes - we recognize that the process we have steeped ourselves in this day - just like the journey we traveled with our loved ones who are no more - does not end. Rather, it continues tomorrow and the next day, and the day after. Each day of our lives is an opportunity...to hearken back to what those who touched our souls hoped for us; and we, strengthened by those memories, go forth and fashion ourselves in those images. In loving devotion for those who fashioned us and in gratitude for their visions, we take this moment of Yizkor and remember them now.