

Neal Schuster  
Yizkor Talk  
5769 (at B'nai Jehudah)

(Please note: the following is a transcript of what was delivered as an oral text. Because of this, it reflects patterns of speech and does not comport to all rules of grammar and structure that would apply to a written composition.)

---

The first person I knew whose death I remember, was Morrie Shenkar. Morrie and Phyllis were my Grandma and Grandpa Shuster's best friends. They were always at every family event, every party, every celebration. And Morrie, who had done more than alright for himself in real estate, insisted that he could not go to Vegas without his personal physician – my grandpa. They had a lot of fun together.

And Morrie was a real pied-piper. We kids absolutely adored him. He had this fun, bubbling-over personality, and at parties, we would gather around him and he would do magic tricks, and pull coins out of our ears, and tell jokes and give us riddles and puzzles that would keep us busy all night long.

And I think I was about 9 years old when Morrie died of a heart attack. I remember exactly where I was when I found out. It was a Saturday morning, and I was eating a bowl of cereal while sitting at the head of the dining room table. It was unusual, because we usually ate breakfast in the kitchen. But there I was, sitting in what we called "the daddy chair" in the dining room, looking out at the early morning sunlight, when my Mom got a phone call with the news. And she told me that Morrie had died. And I remember it feeling like such a non-sequitur, so completely out of left field. I just had no idea where to even put it in my brain. I remember feeling a kind of emptiness, like something was suddenly missing inside of me. I remember wondering what we were supposed to do. Was it ok to just go back to eating my cereal? I remember images from the funeral, and the cemetery, and I remember how it felt to be with Morrie when he was alive. I can remember all of those things, but what I can't remember, I've realized; I can't remember what Morrie looked like. I can't remember his face in anything more than a very vague and indeterminate way.

And that is the first person I knew, whose death I remember.

I've known quite a few more since then. And I've learned a lot about death since I was nine years old. In the last handful of months, I've learned a lot more about death than I would have liked to.

In March, I lost my father to a rare form of lymphoma. He was a young and vibrant 70, and when death came, it came much more quickly than any of us expected. And just a few weeks ago, first my Uncle, Harold Schwartz, and then, a week and a half later, my last surviving grandmother, Dorothy Schuster.

Death has taken on a new role for me and my family. And here is some of what I have learned about it:

Death... death is exhausting. It all just takes so much – the funeral, the arrangements, the shivah, the emotion, the intensity of the all the people and family: it's physically, spiritually, psychically and emotionally draining. It's exhausting.

Death – death rips a big hole out of us. It leaves this big gaping wound that every once in a while something touches it, and it just aches. And it can happen at the most random times: driving past a certain place, seeing a date on a calendar, a song, an expression, a smell. All it takes is one little thing to send us to that place where we gasp... and wonder where that came from, and maybe try to hold back our tears.

I have learned, pretty much as I expected, that Judaism helps. That the Jewish observances connected to death and mourning are somewhere where it really gets it right. I knew that, but what has surprised me is the way in which these observances have had such a powerful impact on me.

For example, I always thought that the reason for the custom of not shaving or cutting one's hair during shloshim, the 30 days following the burial of a loved one, a first degree relative, is because we shouldn't be concerned with matters of personal appearance during this time. We don't engage in vanities during this intense period of mourning. And while I still think this is true, what I discovered... is that if I don't shave for thirty days, it itches; a lot. And that itchiness, that waking up every day and not shaving; it served as a reminder during those first thirty days after putting my father in the ground, that it was not just another ordinary day.

Shiva – having people come over to your house for shivah services, it makes you get up and get out of bed. It makes you make yourself and your home presentable because otherwise it would just be too easy not to.

I have discovered that saying kaddish, saying kaddish every day for eleven months, it forces us to adjust our life to the act of marking our loss; it forces us to remain a

mourner, not to let it pass too soon. It makes us part of a fellowship, it binds us together with other mourners, with others who have suffered a loss and with whom we stand for kaddish during our overlapping time of mourning – it is a powerful bond of connection. And it gives us the gift of doing just a little bit of mourning every day, so that the further along we go, the further along we are. So that when we finish climbing, one step at a time, one day, one kaddish at a time, out of the depths of mourning, we can be ready to cherish the gift of memory.

And that is why we are here today, at this memorial service, this Yizkor. For memory. For me, another lesson about death.

It's true that death rips a hole out of us and that when something touches that wound, and it aches. It hurts and it is raw and we realize that no matter what we do to make everything around that wound feel better, that the wound itself... it still hurts.

But what hurts at least as much as that pain, what hurts at least as much as the pain of remembering... is how much we forget. How much we forget that that person was in our life and now they're gone. How much we forget what it felt like for them to be there. As much as it hurts to hold on to our loved ones who have died, how can we let the tangible memories of them go so easily? So unwittingly? Without even realizing that they are leaving us?

My Dad died right at the beginning of March. And the days that I spent there before and after his death were some of the most intense days I've ever experienced. Six weeks later, we were all back there again; for Pesach this time; Passover. And I'm not sure what was more palpable: my Dad's absence? Or his presence? Every time that I couldn't find something where it was supposed to be, or I had a question about something, I kept feeling like: can't I just call him, or something. Shouldn't there be some sort of special phone, like: "Dad, I'm sorry to bother you, I've just got a quick question...." And then at the Seder, which he always led, having my oldest brother lead it instead... that was hard. And when we would sit around having drinks and talking late at night, it was so strange for him not to be there, but not just because he wasn't there, but also because we could still feel what it felt like for him to be there.

Like an echo. Or like a chair that's still warm.

This last time I went to Seattle, just a few weeks ago for my Grandmother's funeral, it didn't feel quite so strange.

**Neal Schuster**

I didn't find myself wondering whether or not I could reach my Dad on the phone for one quick question. Not even a year and the echo is already fading.

At the end of our Passover trip, our oldest, Eliana, was just a wreck when we were getting ready to leave. She said that she felt like she had forgotten to do something, like something important was missing. A few nights later, at home, at bedtime, she burst into tears, sobbing, and she said that she realized what was missing in Seattle – it was Grandpa Joe. It was Grandpa Joe that was missing from our trip.

It's strange to say, but I am so grateful that she got to experience that pain. I am so glad that she was old enough, and that my Dad was enough a part of her life that it hurt and that she wept – not just at his absence, but because she remembered what it was supposed to feel like with him there.

Death rips a big hole out of us, and we want it to stop hurting, but we don't want to forget the feeling of what we're missing; of who we're missing.

And that is what I've learned about Yizkor. We remember, because if we don't, then we'll forget, and even worse than an emptiness that aches, is an emptiness that we don't feel at all.

I have learned a lot about death since I was nine years old and Morrie Shenkar died. And now, I have learned something about memory. I have learned that along with all of the other profound and insightful practices that Judaism lays out for us, it gives us a gift: the making and taking time, four times every year, for yizkor, for remembering. And if we take this gift, then we can keep alive in ourselves that sense of what it was like to have that person in our lives. What they looked like. What they sounded like. What they felt like, smelled like... how we felt when we were with them..., the odd consolation of keeping an emptiness in our hearts in the place that belonged to them.

It seems like the most simple thing in the world, utterly lacking in profound insight, but, as we prepare ourselves to take time, right now, for silent Yizkor, silent remembering, I have learned that the reason why we remember, is so that we won't forget.