

Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story – Yizkor Pesach 5777

On the mantle of the fireplace in my brother and sister-in-law's living room, there is a large collection of family photographs in which my young niece, Kendall, has recently become quite interested. She loves to run her little finger over each face, identifying as she goes – this is Mommy, this is Daddy, this is cousin Emma, this is Uncle Steve. For our side of the family, too, Kendall easily picks out Aunt Annie and Gammy and, standing at my mother's side, Pop-Pop, my father, the grandfather that Kendall never met but for whom she is named. She is learning about professions in pre-school these days and she will tell you that Pop-Pop was a doctor and that he fixed hearts. I imagine that, as she grows older, we'll teach Kendall more significant things about my Dad – like how he was the only father in our elementary school to ever chaperone school fieldtrips or how he would patiently spend all of Kiddush lunch talking to an elderly congregant about her cardiovascular disease or how he ended every out-of-town visit with me and my brother by saying "Who am I going to hug tomorrow?" And I imagine we'll tell her some of the less significant things about my Dad too – like how he hated wearing socks but loved hot-dogs and chocolate, how he delighted children of all ages with Dr. Seuss songs on the piano, how he kept his calendar in a tiny black book from the Harvard Coop with notes written in impeccable fountain pen calligraphy. My niece may only be two and may never have had the privilege of meeting my father, but I am confident that she will grow up to know a great deal about the extraordinary man that he was. It will be incumbent upon all of us to tell his story.

Like many here, over the last months I have become enamored with the musical phenomenon *Hamilton* which, of course, tells the tale of our nation's Founding Father and first Secretary of the Treasurer, Alexander Hamilton, who died too young in a duel with longtime nemesis Aaron Burr. In the show's final song, which takes place after Hamilton has passed, cast members sing:

Let me tell you what I wish I'd known

When I was young and dreamed of glory

You have no control

Who lives

Who dies

Who tells your story

There are so many big things in life over which we ultimately have no agency; not only the time and circumstances of our eventual passing but even the legacy that we will in the end offer forward are largely determined not by ourselves but by others. And while there is perhaps something fatalistic about this truth, at least from the point of view of the individual him or herself, there is also much opportunity in this idea for those still here today who have loved and lost someone dear to us. A person's life may end with death, but that does not stop her influence, or mark on history, or significance in the life of her family, or bequest to the future. Rather, it is upon all of us to tell the story.

Indeed, the idea of telling stories is the essential theme of the Passover holiday concluding today. The Exodus from Egypt is perhaps our grandest meta-narrative as a people – the episode which forms the cornerstone of our identity, our sense of community and justice, our connection to God –and we commemorate this event in the most Jewish way possible: by talking about it with our children. The central commandment of Pesach is *higadita l'bincha* – you should tell your child, a command which gives way to the *haggadah* (the instrument of telling) with its particular emphasis on *maggid* or recounting of the Passover tale. At Pesach we recite *b'chol dor vador hayav adam lirot et atzmo c'ilu hu yatza miMitzrayim* – in each and every generation we must see ourselves as if we personally escaped

from Egypt. One might ask if it is reasonable to assume that contemporary Jews living 3300 years after the Exodus should be able to see ourselves as personally redeemed from slavery. After all, we couldn't possibly remember the feel of the task-master's breath on our neck as he scrupulously inspected our brick work or recall the pounding of our hearts as we hastily grabbed unleavened rounds of dough on that last terrifying night. Still, affirms the *haggadah*, we must view ourselves as if we personally came out of Egypt. How are we able to do that? We know the story so very well.

In just a few moments we will begin together the Yizkor service, Judaism's hour of reflection and memory. Yizkor is a time to honor and mourn those whom we have loved and lost, to bring their stories to mind and to recommit ourselves to the values they held dear in order to help give them a lasting legacy. At the same time, Yizkor is also a sobering reminder of human mortality – not just that of our loved ones now departed but of our own as well. We have no control who lives, who dies, who tells our story. So the sacred hour of Yizkor inspires us to think about whether we're living life as we most wish to be living it and what we need to do in order to best ensure that we will one day be remembered in the right way and for the right things.

As we enter into Yizkor this morning, I invite you to bring to mind a story, something specific that you remember and cherish about the person for whom you recite prayers of memory here today. Perhaps it is a special time you spent together, something this individual taught you that you'll never forget, a time when he made you laugh or supported you through a situation you thought you'd never otherwise weather, a time she surprised you or changed you in some small but permanent way or demonstrated the depths of her humanity. Perhaps this story is iconic, one of the old family tales trotted out over Thanksgiving dinner each year, or perhaps it is something much more deeply personal, a private

moment that the two of you shared together. Perhaps it is something that you think about all the time or perhaps it is something that you'd almost forgotten until just this very moment.

We may have no control who lives, who dies, who tells OUR story.

But the stories of our loved ones now departed are very much in our own hands. Let us pass them on with pride!

Zichronam Livracha –May the memories of those whom we have loved and lost always be for a blessing.

Please rise for the Yizkor service on page ____.