

Yizkor Lullaby
Yom Kippur, Yizkor 5778/2017
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Ritual is important. Especially at night.

When evening comes, and it's time to put my son to sleep, we have a ritual to help us get there. Here's the ritual: We say goodnight to the fish. Then we read a book. I tell a story. I sing a song. And then Shema.

He needs the ritual— he never wants us to leave. Sometimes I tell him what he needs to hear. I say, “you're just one dream away from seeing me in the morning.” Now, I know it's not technically true. In fact, studies say that people probably have 4-6 dreams per night. But for some reason I'm okay telling my child this little white lie--because it brings him comfort. And maybe it brings me some comfort too.

The song he usually picks is “Lullabye,” by Billy Joel. I start:
*“Good night my angel time to close your eyes,
and save these questions for another day.”*

Those words, for some reason, are exactly what he needs to hear. And they're exactly what I need to say.

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Saying goodbye at night is hard. Our tradition is quite anxious about nighttime. Our prayer, *Hashkiveinu*, reflects an age-old anxiety about what happens in the night, and the recognition that we might not wake up. Why else would we pray, “*hashkiveinu Adonai Eloheinu l'shalom V'haamideinu malkeinu l'chayyim*”— yes, “let us lie down peacefully at night” *v'haamideinu* “but also, God, make sure we get up” *l'chayyim*, “alive in the morning.” Were that a given, we wouldn't be praying these words every single evening we pray. We even find these words in the bedtime Shema. Ritual is important, especially at night.

The Rabbis also feared that sleep was a taste of the end of life-- they said it was 1/60th death; that every time we fall asleep we experience a tiny but real death. And, by the way, by extension that suggests every morning is 1/60th resurrection. In their worldview, the boundaries between life and death are not absolutely impermeable. That life and death can touch, somehow. Ritual is important, especially at night. And no evening ritual is more devoted to ensuring we live with the stark reality of our own mortality than last night, Kol Nidre.

On Kol Nidre, we stood and opened the *Aron Kodesh*— *Aron Kodesh* means holy ark. We removed every Torah from the *Aron Kodesh*, making it just an *Aron*. The simple word *aron* without *kodesh* is not just “ark,” it’s Hebrew for “coffin.” And when we sing *Kol Nidre*, it’s the only time we completely remove the from the ark and keep the ark doors open— with our arms embracing Torah, the Tree of Life, we literally confront our open coffin. This is not accidental; it’s part of the staging of the sacred drama of this day.

And we’ve spent the rest of Yom Kippur within this sacred drama, blurring the lines of life and death. With no food, no drink, no washing, no intimacy, we distance ourselves from the world of the living to come even closer to death than sleep. We dwell in the liminality of this Day of Awe. And when we reach this point on Yom Kippur, we feel it. We move, as a community, arm in arm, as close as we can to that line. And at this moment, just before N’ilah, we have this ritual. *Yizkor*. Remembrance.

As we live, there are two ways of transcending time: children and memory. Through children, and that includes, for those who don’t have children, investing somehow in their future-- we can live beyond our own life. And through memory, *Yizkor*, we can enable those who have died to live in the present, somehow.

The purely human experience of being able to carry something from the past into the present; something that does not have molecules but has energy; something that matters so much more than matter: the souls of those we love. The more love they poured into our lives, the stronger the echo is within our minds and hearts.

Yizkor— remembrance.... the completely mysterious truth that we can close our eyes and see the face of someone we love, see their smile. We can quiet our mind and hear their voice, their laugh, their cry. However painful it is to then let it go.

Yom Kippur, more than any other day, is our great reminder of mortality. We remember that one day we will be remembered. The Rabbis urged to live each day as if it is our last, to see every hello as a beginning and every goodbye as an end. But most of us don’t live our lives like this. We come a bit closer to it when we say “good morning,” and when we say, “goodnight.” But to live each moment in full reckoning of our vulnerability-- for this, we rely on ritual.

Ritual is important, especially at night.

Yizkor reminds us, on the Day of Atonement to live more fully, to love more fiercely. As Bachya ibn Pekuda wrote a millennium ago: “Days are like scrolls. Write in them only what you want to be remembered by.” *Yizkor* reminds us that living a good life, a life of mitzvah after mitzvah after mitzvah: this is how we honor those who have died.

We let memory inspire mitzvot, and we honor their souls.
We let memory inspire mitzvot, and we sanctify their lives.
We let memory inspire mitzvot, so our loved ones become blessings, as they
sleep in Eternity.

This is why when they enter Eternal rest, we do not say “goodbye,” we say
“Zichronam livracha,” may their memories become blessings.

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Usually, by the time I am done singing Lullaby, my son is asleep. He rarely
hears the last verse. But I do. And one day he will too.

*“One day we’ll all be gone,
but lullabies go on and on.
They never die,
that’s how you and I will be.”*

Amen.