

“ P H O T O G R A P H S ”

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5779 – Wednesday, September 19, 2018

Congregation B’nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

Over the course of my rabbinate, I have often taken this particular moment of Yizkor to share words written or spoken by others. Many whom I have quoted have been mourners, just like you and me. In the profundity of their losses, they have expressed words that speak deeply to my soul...and I hope to yours, as well.

On this Yom Kippur, I share thoughts written by Esor Ben-Sorek. He is an Israeli and a retired professor of Hebrew, Biblical literature and history of Israel. And in 2016, shortly before Rosh Hashanah, he lost his wife of 56 years to pancreatic cancer.

He speaks of that tension we all face when one whom we have loved dearly – and who has loved us – is no more. We want only to see them one more time. These are Ben-Sorek’s words:

“I [fear I] am still unable to face the reality of death. It is a permanent separation from beloved ones never to be seen again.

I do not accept the naïveté of well-meaning people who assure me that I will be reunited with [my loved ones] in a heaven that none of the living have seen. For some, it may be a reassuring belief and comfort that death is not a finality, but only a temporary separation.

If, at some future unknown date, my soul were to ascend into the heavens, would I rejoin my 8-week-old sister who died in 1935, or my 3-week-old brother, who followed her in 1936? Would they be clothed in diapers, unable to crawl, sit or babble? Would I rejoin my very beloved grandfather...and would he embrace me, kiss me many times, and sing to me the Yiddish melodies that he sang to me in his life on earth?

Would I be chastised by my mother for not scrubbing behind my ears and for biting my fingernails, or by my father, who would again remind me to recite the Shema at the proper time?

And closest to my heart, would I be able to embrace and kiss my darling wife, who, in her last days on earth, repeatedly told me, “Thank you for all that you do for me; thank you for taking such good care of me”?

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Deep down, don’t we all wish this future to be real? What would we give to hear our loved ones’ voices, to feel their caresses, to receive their advice? The idea of a heaven where life somehow continues for us with those whom we have lost can be comforting.

And within traditional Judaism, there exists the idea of *tehiyat ha-maitim*... resurrection of the dead. And while I recognize its presence in our tradition, it is an idea based upon no reality. Rather, I agree with Esor Ben-Sorek, who concludes:

“Glory to those who think that [the idea of a heaven is] possible. I admire their steadfast clinging to myths passed down through the ages. But it is time [for me] to realize that death is death. It is the end of life as we know it, and all that remains are the multitude of memories that we cherish.”

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Each of us has our own notions regarding death. And today is not a time to argue for or against a particular held belief. However, there is one thought upon which all of us can agree...and that is that memories are real. Memories are powerful. Memories comfort

us. And memories inspire us to live lives with meaning because our loved ones would want it to be so.

It is how we preserve those memories that Esor Ben-Sorek shared that touched me so deeply. It is simple. It is profoundly true. And it caught me off guard for – as we live in the times that we do – the nature of this particular method has changed. It is simply through photographs...pictures we have of those who are gone. Pictures of them throughout their lives. Pictures of them with us and with others whom they loved.

Yet, it is more than just looking at the photographs. Listen to how Ben-Sorek explains:

“Talking to pictures helps to preserve my sanity, especially the pictures of my grandfather and my wife, the two most endearing people in my life.

Opposite one wall, on which hangs...the genealogy of my maternal family from 1727, surrounded by paintings and gigantic family portraits, is a table covered from one end to another with framed family photos. I take them in hand, one by one, and I talk to each one.

To my grandfather’s picture, I talk in Yiddish. To my wife’s pictures, I talk in Hebrew. They cannot hear me. They do not hear my sobs nor see my tears flowing down my cheeks. But as I kiss them through the glass of the frame, I pour out my heart, my aching and broken heart, and repeat the words of love that I had spoken when they were in the land of the living.

I know full well that we will never meet again, that the only heaven we knew and know is the joyous heaven in which we spent many years together on earth. But talking to their pictures is an important part of my self-therapy, of my realization that their memories will be cherished for eternity as long as there is breath within my body. Even greater is my realization that they will live on in the memories of my children and grandchildren,

memories which are locked away and safely preserved in their hearts.

I cannot pass on to them memories of Bialystok and Grodno Guberniya, places I have never known with my eyes, but [I can pass on] ...the stories and oft-repeated tales by family [that I heard] in my childhood.

My two older children are pragmatists. Realists active in the medical world. They do not talk to pictures. But my youngest daughter, a scholar of the law, shares my sentimentality. Particularly on Erev Shabbat, when she kindles the candles and recites the blessings, her eyes gaze upon her mother’s photo on the table and her tears, mingled with my own, begin to flow. She too takes the photo in her hands and kisses it lovingly. And she too finds some comfort in talking to pictures of her late mother.

We [may] never meet in some unknown paradise reserved for the saints, the *tzadikim*, who once lived.

But we can look and hold in tight embrace the faces of those whom we loved in life and continue to love in their deaths.”³

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Today, we live in a digital world. For so many of us, our photos and our videos are on our phones, our tablets, our computers. There is a deep satisfaction and deep aching as we look at those pictures and watch those videos. For several years, I held onto a voicemail I received from a favorite uncle. Whenever I missed him, I would play the recording. It just said, “Hi, Arthur, its Uncle Henry. I just called to see how you are doing in your new congregation. Call me when you have a moment.” While it always brought back the pain of his passing, it also brought forth a flood of memories...of experiences shared and of lessons learned from being in his presence.

All that said, for all the thousands of digital images and sounds we can preserve, there is still something so precious about a physical photograph, one that we can hold and kiss

and cradle to our chest. I am sure you have a table, a wall, or bookshelf, or a bedstand with that picture or those pictures of loved ones no longer with us. We have them there to remind us, to help us get through the vicissitudes of life. They become our method of mourning. And our path to healing.

And that is our lesson on this Yom Kippur Yizkor. We acknowledge our losses. And we recognize that healing does come, especially when we look and hold in tight embrace –

whether physically with a photograph, whether digitally with images and sounds, or even as we just close our eyes and bring forth those memories etched into our souls – the faces of those whom we loved in life and continue to love in their deaths¹

As we hold tightly to those images and those memories, we praise God's name and ask the Holy One for comfort and inspiration, as we turn in our prayerbooks to page 492, for Kaddish. Please rise.

¹ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/talking-to-pictures/>

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*