

Yom Kippur Yizkor – 5787 (Rabbi Sam Zwarenstein)

There is a unique silence that falls over the sanctuary right before Yizkor.

This kind of silence is not the same as the awe we experienced when hearing the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, nor is it the quiet that comes after a day of fasting. On the contrary, it is the deep and moving silence of memory. Soon we will return to the pages of our Machzorim and recall the names of parents, spouses, children, siblings, close friends, family members, and perhaps even pets. These are the names of those who used to sit by us, whose voices once filled our homes, and whose presence we now only keep in the sanctuary of our hearts.

The act of reciting Yizkor is one of the oldest and most sacred that humans can engage in, and by doing so we are making it clear that love does not cease when the heart has stopped beating.

It is not simply an act of looking back with sorrow to carry out Yizkor, it is an act of spiritual endurance. In order to grasp what it means to preserve one's humanity in the face of devastation, one may consider the case of Bergen-Belsen.

In northern Germany the British army entered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945, and what they discovered goes beyond the power of human language.

Belsen was not set up as an extermination camp with gas chambers like a great many of the other camps. Initially, it was an exchange camp for a small number of prisoners. However, in the last months of the Second World War, as the Nazi front collapsed, tens of thousands of prisoners were made to take part in cruel death marches and packed into Belsen.

The camp became so overcrowded that it was utterly unsuitable as a place for humans to live, even more so than the concentration and death camps. Barracks which had been built to accommodate hundreds ended up housing thousands. There was no running water, no facilities for sanitation, and no medical treatment available. Typhus and dysentery quickly spread throughout the dirty and freezing quarters. Because there was no room and no infrastructure to deal with the huge number of deaths, the bodies stayed piled up in heaps. This situation was a genuine living hell, deliberately designed to cause systematic starvation, disease, and the destruction of the human spirit.

Yet history documents a remarkable thing that took place at that horrible site during the week of Pesach, shortly before the camp was liberated.

Some rabbis and prisoners met in one of the dark, dirty barracks. There was no matzah, no wine, and instead there was only a thin layer of stale, mouldy bread, the small daily allowance which kept them agonisingly close to death.

In accordance with Jewish law, one is permitted to eat bread if it is necessary to save one's life, even during Pesach. Self-starvation would therefore constitute a violation of the commandment concerning the preservation of life, Pikuach Nefesh.

In those overcrowded barracks, the rabbis prepared a prayer for the prisoners to recite before eating their daily ration of bread on the night of Pesach. It was written on a small piece of paper.

"Heavenly Father, it is manifest and known to You that we desire to carry out Your will in regard to the commandment of eating matzah, and strictly refraining from chametz on the Festival of Pesach. But we are sick at heart at being prevented in this by reason of the oppression and mortal danger in which we find ourselves. We stand ready to perform Your commandments of which it is said, "You shall do them and live by them," (Vayikra 18:5) that is to say, you shall live by them and not die by them. And accordingly we heed Your warning, as it is written: "Take heed to thyself and keep thy soul alive." (Devarim 4:9)

Therefore we beseech You that You will keep us in life and establish us and redeem us speedily from our servitude so that we may in time come to perform Your statutes and carry out Your will with a perfect heart. Amen".

One should think about the behaviour of those men and women in a place completely unsuitable for human existence. Their physical surroundings were characterised by chaos and dirt. The Nazis had taken from them their homes, their families, their health, and their dignity. Nevertheless, even in a place where human life was considered to have no value, they would not give up their inner spirit.

Even when compelled to eat bread on Pesach, they transformed this act of survival into a sacred declaration. **We ... choose ... life.**

Today, we gather in a warm, clean, and beautiful sanctuary, separated by great distance and many decades from the mud and crowded barracks of Bergen-Belsen. Yet, many of us enter this Yizkor service bearing our own forms of internal chaos and brokenness.

For some among us, the loss we remember today is recent, and the pain is overwhelming. The empty chair at the Shabbat table feels unbearably heavy. For others, the world beyond these doors, marked by division, uncertainty, and grief, appears overwhelming and inhospitable to peace.

The lessons that Bergen-Belsen gives us regarding memory and grief as we approach Yizkor are two important ones.

In the first place, memory is not simply a matter of passive nostalgia; it is a deliberate effort to carry on the light of those we have lost, no matter how chaotic or painful the circumstances in the world may be. The prisoners at Belsen showed that even if the physical world is ruined, the spiritual aspect still remains under one's own control. When we recite the Yizkor prayer, we are making it clear to our loved ones that the values you lived by, the kindness you showed, and the laughter you shared did not vanish with you. We have retained them within ourselves.

Secondly, Yizkor allows us to be only partially whole. The Torah teaches that in the Ancient Temple, within the Ark of the Covenant, the Israelites carried with them both the second, unbroken set of the Ten Commandments and the shattered fragments of the first set, which Moses broke after seeing the Golden Calf.

The broken pieces were carried together with the whole ones in the most holy place on earth.

Grief breaks a part of our hearts. Yizkor does not ask us to ignore these broken parts or to hide them by putting on false cheerfulness. On the contrary, it shows that our brokenness is also holy. In the same way that the prayer was composed over a stale crust of bread in Belsen, Yizkor reminds us that even though our hearts are burdened by sorrow we still have the ability to love, to discover holiness, and to be renewed.

We are about to recite the Yizkor prayers. When you mention the names of your loved ones, don't concentrate only on their passing, but think about how they lived, remembering the things that gave them joy and the lessons they gave you, whether these were stated directly or conveyed through their quiet example.

If they could speak to us in this moment of Yizkor, what would they say?

They would not wish for us to remain confined by sorrow. Instead, they would encourage us to live fully. They would urge us to embrace our family members more closely, to forgive more readily, to speak with greater gentleness, and to bring light into a fractured world.

The survivors of Bergen-Belsen emerged from overcrowded barracks and piles of ash, entered a world marked by darkness, and went on to build families, synagogues, communities, and they helped to build a Jewish homeland. They demonstrated that regardless of how inhospitable the world may appear, the human spirit possesses the capacity to rebuild.

It is not merely our duty to say Kaddish for our dear ones. We are also required to show what Kaddish means by the way we live.

We honour our loved ones when we become their living legacy, perpetuating their memory and telling their stories. This, in turn, gives us support and comfort.

May the memories of all our departed be a blessing, an inspiration, and an enduring flame within our souls.

Shana Tovah and G'mar Chatimah Tovah.