

Rabbi Ken Chasen
“Grief Doing”
Leo Baeck Temple
October 5, 2022
Yom Kippur Yizkor 5783

This hour of Yizkor returns at its appointed time, each and every year, with a predictability that both comforts and shatters us.

The comfort comes from this great gift of being surrounded by fellow journeyers in remembrance. We so missed feeling each other, holding each other in this precious manner inside this home of our souls over the past two years. It is profoundly uplifting to feel that again.

But so, too, does this regularly scheduled return break our hearts, for the loving presences that have brought us here, presences that are now absences, become too familiar in this space as the years pass. If you’ve done this for a long time, you are well acquainted with the enduring ache that does not go away, that can at times feel truly paralyzing, as if your own living story has been derailed or even paused by their deaths.

What’s interesting is that this ritual, even in its regularity and familiarity, is designed to awaken us to the reality that the opposite is true – that our departed loved ones, even the ones we miss so much we can sometimes barely breathe from the anguish, have already become a vivid part of our forward, not just some wistful reminder of a paused past.

We know this because we Jews are experts in the art and the science of remembering. Believe it or not, there is actually such a thing as the U.S.A. Memory Championship – a competition to determine who is best at remembering. In 2006, a 24-year-old Jewish man named Joshua Foer was this country’s champion rememberer. His last name may ring a bell for you; he is the younger brother of renowned novelist Jonathan Safran Foer and of former *New Republic* editor, Franklin Foer, who spoke in this very room several years ago. But as accomplished as his brothers are, brother Joshua is the American memory champion, and as a Jew, he feels he is uniquely qualified for such a title. After all, he has taught the following: “In Judaism, observance and remembering are interchangeable concepts, two words that are really one... For Jews, remembering is not merely a cognitive process, but one that is necessarily active. Other people remember by thinking,” asserts Foer. “Jews remember by doing.”

Yes, we spend a lot of our grieving time thinking. Thinking about what his hand felt like. Thinking about the way she could love just with her eyes. Thinking about

every little crease in their smile, every little habit in their speech. Thinking about these holidays and how she made them taste and sound and feel. Thinking about what he would say about your latest triumph or your latest quandary. Thinking about how much we miss them, and about our fear of them becoming so distant – the crippling fear that they might ever slip away from us.

When we are deep in the well of our “grief thinking,” we can fall victim to the illusion that all that thinking *is* our memory. But Jews remember by doing – and it is the doing that keeps our cherished ones present in the choices we make, the story we write, and enables them to show up again and again in this world in all sorts of unanticipated ways.

Joshua Foer puts it this way: “Memories are not static,” he writes. “Somehow, as memories age, their complexion changes. Each time we think about a memory, we integrate it more deeply into our web of other memories, and therefore make it more stable and less likely to be dislodged. But in the process, we also transform the memory, and reshape it.” And meanwhile, while all of this is going on inside us, we are going about our daily lives, bringing our transformed, non-static memories into our very non-paused lives. And as we do this with our lives, they, in a very tangible and profound way, are alive.

A notable case in point: back in 1993, surgeon and professor at the Yale School of Medicine Sherwin Nuland literally wrote the book on how we die – in fact, he called it, *How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter*, and it became a celebrated national bestseller, and veritably required reading for clergy people. The volume is filled with wise, plain-spoken insights that humanely aim to “demythologize the process of dying,” but what I find most soulfully arresting is his integration of his own personal story as a mourner into his most celebrated professional work. That is to say, Nuland has experienced much more dying in his life as a clinician than practically any of us will ever experience, but as opposed to seeing those experiences as the ones which inform his own living and dying, and that of his loved ones, Nuland acknowledges that it’s actually quite the other way around. He writes: “My mother died of colon cancer one week after my eleventh birthday, and that fact has shaped my life. All that I have become and much that I have not become, I trace directly or indirectly to her death.”

The “grief doing” that emerges from all of the “grief thinking.” Dr. Nuland’s mother did not disappear when she died in his childhood. She became entrenched in those solitary moments of “grief thinking” – moments like this one right now – and she also showed up throughout her son’s lived world... and all *over* the world, in his writings and teachings... through his “grief doing.”

So here we sit at Yizkor, entrenched in our solitary moments of “grief thinking.” But we know Jews remember by doing. And so we can trust that these moments of memorial in the waning hours of this Yom Kippur will not leave us in a paralyzed pause. The memories power packing this air will send us back, as the fast breaks, to live our departed loved ones forward. To manifest the virtues they modeled for us. To demonstrate our learning from the mistakes they made and might never have been able to own. To keep alive all the ways they shaped us, directly or indirectly, so that long after we are gone, their influence will be a stalwart survivor in this world, reaching into lives and loves in ways that might not even be known to be connected to them, but which were catalyzed by the wonder of what they and we created together.

And it will be as the legendary medieval poet Rumi once wrote:

Your grief for what you’ve lost lifts a mirror
up to where you are bravely working.

Expecting the worst, you look, and instead,
here’s the joyful face you’ve been wanting to see,

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.
If it were always a fist or always stretched open,
you would be paralyzed.

Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding,
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated
as birdwings.

May you, in this new year, filled to overflowing with all your agonizing, blessed memories, soar upon birdwings.