



**Rabbi Ken Chasen**  
**“Brave Enough to Remember”**  
**Leo Baeck Temple**  
**September 25, 2023**  
**Yom Kippur Yizkor 5784**

Just a few years ago, Motown Records released a treasure trove of previously unheard songs that its stable of groundbreaking artists had recorded in the 1960s. Included was a song I instantly loved, performed by the legendary Temptations in 1966. The melody was a big part of what grabbed me, as was the arrangement which immediately took me back in time. But it was the lyrics that felt so arrestingly true – a treatise about love and loss and the hunger to hide from the agony that Eddie Kendricks brought to life with his soaring tenor. He sang:

Just in case you see me passing by, and I don't stop to speak  
Don't think that I don't want to, my heart is just too weak  
Much too weak to stand the strain  
Of remembering the tears and heartache and the pain...  
And I'd rather forget, I'd rather forget

We who have opened ourselves to this hour of Yizkor have plenty of experience with preferring to forget. There are times when the absence of the cherished ones who brought us here today is simply too much to bear. Often in moments that are fully private, even from those we love the most, we are haunted – by the touch of his hand that we know we'll never feel again on our fingers... by the way she looked into our eyes, and we just knew she understood... by the sound of their voice, even when it was intoned in exasperation with us, and certainly when it expressed affection or compassion or trust. Even the laughter we recall now catalyzes a visceral inner sadness we never knew before, the sadness of having had and treasured and now having to live without.

This is why, at times, we'd rather forget. We know what it's like to seek refuge from the overwhelm by deadening the heart. When we'd rather forget, we cleave to our grief with a tight grip, hoping and praying that staying in its thrall will somehow keep us more proximate to those last moments when our departed ones were still with us. When we'd rather forget, we opt for distraction. Instead of trudging through our bereavement one emotionally frightful but honest day at a time, we vainly attempt to walk around the pain. We choose to flee. Sometimes, we

flee addictively to our workplaces. Sometimes, it's to food or substances or other comforts that provide temporary relief but become dangers in excess. Wherever we go to distract ourselves, the grief just waits patiently, while we weather its destructive powers.

We are called to Yizkor four times a year on our ritual calendar – not only today, but also at the end of the fall harvest festival of Sukkot, at the end of Pesach in the springtime, and on the holiday of Shavuot as summer beckons. Our tradition was clearly built with an understanding that we mourners would rather forget – that we need frequent seasonal reminders to return to the hard, scary, courageous, and yet affirming path of remembering.

It is the only path we Jews know. Our very survival as a tiny, resilient people, against all odds in a world that has rarely welcomed us has been predicated upon the magic of memory. Remembering is the secret to our collective sustenance.

We chant *zecher litziat Mitzrayim* every Shabbat when we lift the cup for Kiddush, invoking our celebration each week as yet another reliving of our journey from Egypt to freedom. We sit at our Passover seders and remember not only Pharaoh and the plagues and Moses and the miracles – we remember also the loved ones, now long gone from this Earth, who used to lead the seder or prepare the meal, and our recreating what we learned from them pays forward those memories to young people who never even knew the souls whose legacies are coming to thrive in them. We hear the sound of the Shofar, as we did on Rosh Hashanah and will again very soon, and it startles our souls awake, just as it did for our ancestors centuries ago. Their quaking reverberates in us.

We might prefer to forget in our most crippling moments of loss, but our tradition is entirely about returning to remembrance – not only to keep those who are gone near, but to give their legacies a tomorrow. It is no coincidence that our names in Hebrew are expressed in the language of memory. I am HaRav Levi Hillel, son of Zussel Avraham and Leah. My children bear Hebrew names of loved ones I knew but they did not, and someday, my parents' names, as well as my own, will belong to descendants who didn't know us – but who did. The names wrap around again, ensuring our timelessness through memory... or to say it as the great Jewish theologian, Franz Rosenzweig, once did: "The fact of our everlastingness renders all the phases of our history simultaneous."

If we know this to be true in the collective, then we know that our agonizing battle to be brave enough to remember has a holy context, a grand purpose. We choose to commune with our grief, to feel it all – the pain, yes, but also the enduring pleasure... to revel again and out loud in everything about them that brought us love and meaning and beauty, in order to ensure that neither we nor our beloved departed ones will slip through the hold of our everlastingness.

It will hurt at times to do this, but it is a hurt that possesses great sanctity – and when we find ourselves doubting our capacity to bear that hurt, when we’d rather just forget, we will once again be called together as we are today, a community of grieving and remembering, finding in one another the strength that comes simply from our being human. As our guest artist who helped us to open this High Holydays season, Noah Aronson, reminded us, the dead lack the capacity to scar. It is our capacity to scar when wounded – to develop the emotional and spiritual thickness needed to survive and to heal – that designates us as living beings. This is how we know we are alive.

Last October, a story ran in the Forward about the Bar Mitzvah service of Simon Freudenheim, who wore a tallit that was the most astonishing one the author had ever seen. The Bar Mitzvah’s grandfather Tom, who is an art historian of considerable accomplishment, had it created from a handwritten letter penned by the Bar Mitzvah boy’s great-great-great-grandfather in a mixture of Yiddish and German in 1879. It is the lone document of its kind that the family still has. The great-great-great-grandfather’s name is Simon Freudenheim, the name of the Bar Mitzvah.

Said his grandfather Tom, who hired an artist to create a pattern out of the letter and commit it as a large-scale print to fabric, “It’s not about ‘Jewish’ and ‘art,’ but very much about how ‘things’ can have ‘souls’ and how — for better or worse — I live surrounded by those souls, and I want to pass some of that feeling on.”

You and me, we live surrounded by those souls. They are the tallit wrapped around us at all times, connecting us in everlastingness to those who beckoned us here, who escorted us here, today. At your most pained moments of grieving, when you’d really rather forget, they are there, their souls cloaking you in love. In their embrace, let us walk with one another, brave enough again to remember.