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Yizkor sermon, 1983.

Memorial Sermon
Daniel Jeremy Silver
September 17, 1983

Each of us is part of a chain of being. The genes of our ancestors shape our physical and emotional structure and we owe civilization to their talents and achievements. We live in a society of law because others believed in justice and democracy. We read what others have written. We respond to the music and the art others created. Our worship expresses their wisdom and is consecrated by their devotion.

John Donne wrote the famous line, "No man is an island - sufficient unto himself." He might well have added, no man is self-made. We are, to a large degree, what the thoughtfulness of others allows us to become; and so an hour such as this is not simply a remembrance of our intimates but a memorial of all whose interests, labors and sacrifices deeded civilization to us.

Yizkor is a time to remind ourselves of those to whom we are indebted. Our greatest debt is to God. "For each morning with its light, Father we thank Thee/ For rest and shelter of the night/For health and food, for love and friends/For everything Thy goodness sends/Father, in Heaven, we thank Thee" (Emerson). In the beginning God. God created the glories of nature, the opportunity which is life, and the human being's special gift of conscience. God doesn't need our thanks, but we need to say thanks. To be self-proud is to be an ingrate, and to be a taker, not a giver. The self-proud acknowledge no obligation to others and so they live apart in a world of permanent and increasing dissatisfaction. Enough is never enough. The grateful do not need to be told that we must not only think of our needs but be responsive to the needs and concerns of others.

Next to God, our debt is to our parents. They brought us into life and with rare exceptions provided us the necessary security, shelter and support which allowed us to grow into confident maturity. We love because we were loved. Parents provided us not only shelter but emotional support and our first lessons in virtue and character. They established for us a place of encouragement, intimacy

and love - a home where we took our first steps, thought our first thoughts, and fought our first fight for attention, confident that even when we were impossible they would be patient with us. Even when we broke with their ways it was their standards against which we measured ourselves.

The gifts did not stop with childhood. Throughout life friends encouraged us when we were confused, comforted us when we were hurt, shared with us life's pleasures, and introduced us to new experiences and broader vistas. When another gave us the full confidence of their love and celebrated with us the sacrament of sharing, they helped us unlock sensitivities and feelings which had until then lay dormant. They helped us understand the joys of intimacy and true partnership. In time our children filled our lives with noisy joy and ceaseless responsibility, forced us to listen to fresh ideas, and gave us the privilege of providing for others without thought of return.

Over the years most of what we know was taught to us by others. People we barely knew went out of their way to help us - took time to listen to us - opened doors for us. One of my favorite passages in our prayer book uses rather old-fashioned images, but is nonetheless to the point: "How much we owe to the labors of our brothers! Day by day they dig far away from the sun that we may be warm, enlist in outposts of peril that we may be secure and brave the terrors of the unknown for truths that shed light on our way. Numberless gifts and blessings have been laid in our cradles as our birthright."

No one likes to feel that he takes without return. To remember is to feel obligated - indebted. It would please us to give, but they can no longer receive. We would like to say thank you, but they cannot hear. This service represents an attempt by our tradition to help us meet our need to return good for good, love for love.

Jews began to observe Yizkor perhaps a thousand years ago. If you had attended one of those medieval services you would have found that the liturgy centered on this paragraph. "May God remember the soul of my mother/father/husband/wife who has gone to their eternal home. In their memory I pledge charity for the mention of their name. May their soul be bound up in the bonds of eternal life. May their rest be honorable." This formula was called hazkarat neshamot, the mention of the dead. Medieval Jews, like medieval Christians, believed that each person would be judged immediately upon death to determine whether he/she deserved admission into Heaven. Since no one is a saint - perfect, they assumed that this judgement would take some time and that there was a waiting period between application and the final judgement while each case was taken under advisement and character witnesses were called. The hazkarat neshamot process was their way of supporting the cause of their dead. If our dead deserve our prayers, if we thought enough of them to give charity in their name, surely they deserve Heaven. Yizkor allowed worshippers to feel that they had, to a degree, repaid their debt of love.

Some of the more theologically-minded rabbis strongly opposed hazkarat neshamot on the uncontestable grounds that it brought God's judgement into question, and even suggested that God could be influenced, but in matters religious emotion almost always outweighs theological logic. Yizkor became immensely popular because it met a basic emotional need. Yizkor became a well-loved part of the Yom Kippur ritual because worshippers felt they were actually helping their dead even as they had so often been helped by them.

The need to say thanks is one we have all felt - and often feel, and though originally limited to Yom Kippur, the practice of hazkarat neshamot soon was added to the liturgy of the major festivals. When someone close dies we seek desperately to do something, anything, to prove our love and devotion. Families continue to tell their children of grandparents they hardly knew. We have all seen the widow who devotes her energies to make sure that her husband's compositions or writings are

published and that a street or fund is dedicated in his name so that his civic duties remain visible.

Most of us, I'm sure, no longer believe that an angel checks credentials at Heaven's gate, but all of us know we are in debt ^{to our dead} and so yizkor and hazkarat neshamot remain beloved parts of our ritual, but the central text has been significantly changed. "May I always remember my loved ones who have died and honour their memory by living uprightly and showing kindness to my fellow human beings. May their memory inspire me so to conduct myself that they may live in me, and that, through my life, their highest ideals and noblest hopes may be brought nearer to fulfillment. Rather than murmuring because precious ones have been taken from me, may I be grateful for the time they were with me. May I recount the past days not as loss, but as gain. I have had them, and now that they are ended, may I turn that loss to gain - the gain that comes with new courage, with nobler tasks and with a renewed awareness of life."

~~During Yizkor~~ Our purpose is no longer to assure that our loved ones enter Heaven. They are with God and we trust God implicitly. ^{What} We have recognized ^{is} that we can repay our debt to the past in measure as we put the future in debt to us. They cared for us. We will care for our children. They stood for fine values. We will stand firm. The next paragraph of the prayer I quoted earlier fleshes out the Yizkor theme: "Let us then, O Lord, be just and great-hearted in our dealings with our fellowmen, sharing with them the fruit of our common labor, acknowledging before Thee that we are but stewards of whatever we possess. Help us to be among those who are willing to sacrifice that others may not hunger, who dare to be bearers of light in the dark loneliness of stricken lives, who struggle and even bleed for the triumph of righteousness among men. So may we be co-workers with Thee in the building of Thy kingdom which has been our vision and goal through the ages."

We cannot be indifferent to the ties of family and friendship for which our dead sacrificed and prayed. We must not be careless in our citizenship when

they worked so diligently to secure our rights. We will not treat Judaism cavalierly when they sacrificed, and even died, for the sanctification of God's name.

On a more personal note, some among us ^{A23} were fortunate in that our loved ones told us what was important to them, how we could repay our debt. Many of us can still hear a parent saying to us, "You'll have to go your own way, but I hope you will appreciate that our family has always been proud of its good name and felt a responsibility for the institutions of our community and our faith." A teacher, long since dead, once said to me: "I have done my research, you will do yours. I don't ask you to agree with all I've taught you, but I want you to believe that I spoke with integrity and after careful thought. When you write thoughtfully and with integrity, you will honor me."

This sense of indebtedness is so powerful and universal an emotion that I still find it surprising when otherwise sensible people do not take the time to make clear to their intimates what is truly important in their lives - how their memory should be honored. Deeds speak louder than words, but deeds are not always self-explanatory, and a few carefully chosen phrases would clear away many confusions. When a friend died recently, I remembered his saying to me when we were together at another's funeral, "Money is wasted in stone. Money should help people." Apparently, he never mentioned these feelings to his wife and when he died she built in his memory a marble mausoleum.

Of course, circumstances sometimes make such talk difficult, but in most cases there was time. The fault was ours. Unfortunately, some of us are superstitious - we are afraid that if we talk about death we will invite death into our lives. Others are simply not in the habit of talking about their deepest feelings. More is the pity. What we feel deeply we ought to share.

During Yizkor my first thoughts are to my dead and to my grief, but during this half hour I sense my thoughts moving from memory to duty, from what has been to what must be. During Yizkor I learn again that I can best repay my debt of

love as I love those about me and support all those enterprises which enhance faith, community, justice, peace and civilization.

If I should die and leave you here a while,
Be not like others, sore undone, who keep
Long vigil by the silent dust and weep.
For my sake turn again to life and smile,
Nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do
That which will comfort other souls than thine;
Complete these dear unfinished tasks of mine,
And I, perchance, may therein comfort you.

(Mary Lee Hall)



Your loneliness the while.
I would not have you sorrowful and sad,
But joyfully recall
The glorious companionship we've had,
And thank God for it all.
Don't let your face grow tear-streaked, pale
and wan:

Have heart for mirth and song—
Rejoice, though for a little while I've gone,
That I was here so long.
For if I thought your faith would fail you so,
And leave you so distressed,
That sobbing to my body's grave you'd go,
My spirit could not rest.

Author unknown

1899. TURN AGAIN TO LIFE

If I should die and leave you here a while,
Be not like others, sore undone, who keep
Long vigil by the silent dust and weep.
For my sake turn again to life and smile,
Nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do
That which will comfort other souls than
thine;
Complete these dear unfinished tasks of mine,
And I, perchance, may therein comfort you.

Mary Lee Hall

1900. NO FUNERAL GLOOM

No funeral gloom, my dears, when I am gone,
Corpse-gazings, tears, black raiment, grave-
yard grimness.
Think of me as withdrawn into the dimness,
Yours still, you mine.
Remember all the best of our past moments
and forget the rest,
And so to where I wait come gently on.

Ellen Terry, 1847-1928

1901. REMEMBER

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the
hand,

It will be late to counsel then or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be
sad.

Christina G. Rossetti, 1830-1894

1902. RESIGNATION

There is no death! What seems so is
transition.

This life of mortal breath
Is but a suburb of the life elysian,
Whose portal we call Death.

She is not dead,—the child of our affection,
But gone unto that school
Where she no longer needs our poor
protection,
And Christ himself doth rule.

In that great cloister's stillness and seclusion,
By guardian angels led,
Safe from temptation, safe from sin's
pollution,
She lives, whom we call dead.

Day after day we think what she is doing
In those bright realms of air;
Year after year her tender steps pursuing,
Behold her grown more fair.

Thus do we walk with her; and keep unbroken
The bond which nature gives,
Thinking that our remembrance, though
unspoken,
May reach her where she lives.

Not as a child shall we again behold her;
For when with raptures wild
In our embraces we again enfold her,
She will not be a child;

But a fair maiden, in her Father's mansion,
Clothed with celestial grace;
And beautiful with all the soul's expansion
Shall we behold her face.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807-1882