

SERMON YOM KIPPUR 5783/2022 YIZKOR/NI'EELAH

Two weeks ago, I went to two funerals on two consecutive days. The first I watched on television and chances are you did too along with about 29 million other people in the UK alone. It was, of course, for Queen Elizabeth the Second. It was a very public spectacle – beautifully produced with some wonderful music. We said goodbye to a figure that managed to bridge the divide of an increasingly fractured society. I watched members of the royal family whom I have never met, but who have been household names since their birth, at their mother's and grandmother's funeral. We said goodbye to an era of national history but also to a 96-year-old great-grandmother who had come to the end of her natural life and passed away in her own home with her family around her.

The next day I attended a friend's funeral at Cheshunt, our Reform cemetery. My friend died in her 60's after years of fighting cancer and coming back from the brink so often, we had begun to think she would never die. But she did, leaving two children in their early 20's. She was buried alongside her husband, their father, who also died 20 years ago, also from cancer. It was a very different kind of funeral. Jewish of course, so deliberately more bleak, more visceral, the hall was full but this was a private affair for family and friends, a personal goodbye. Her daughter spoke beautifully and powerfully about her mum. We all helped fill in the grave and we tossed pieces of lavender in with the earth, because she would have wanted something beautiful in there. Every funeral is sad if the person who dies is loved. But when someone dies before their time, it is also a tragedy.

Both deaths should not have been unexpected. The BBC had been rehearsing the announcement of the Queen's death for years. We had been wondering for years if my friend would survive her secondary cancer, her tertiary cancer, the time it re-occurred after that. But there was always another treatment, and the gap between life and death is so huge that when someone is there, talking and laughing, even if they don't look very well, it is impossible to imagine that in a couple of months they won't be alive anymore. Deaths are always shocking, they always take us by surprise. Even when we are crowded around the bedside, one never knows when the moment will happen and it is always profound.

We have had some big losses in our Kol Chai community this year. Of course many us here this evening have lost the most important person in their world this year – fathers, mothers, husbands, brothers. One of our members lost her son this year. More than one of those we have lost this year also died tragically early, leaving young widows and children still in the first flush of adulthood. But we have also lost some of **our** queens and kings, those who were instrumental in the establishment of our community, those who taught us when we were children, and who also taught our parents, those who, like the Queen, provided us with a link to the Second World War and to the Shoah.

Every funeral I go to, whether I am officiating, attending as a mourner, or watching on TV, reminds me of the power of ritual. The rhythms of mourning, the burial, the funeral, the gathering of family and friends, the memorial prayers, help us make sense of something that is so hard for the human mind to grapple with.

It was an inspired move by the early leaders of the Movement for Reform Judaism to move Yizkor from the morning service, where it is located in a traditional service, to late afternoon, just before Ni'eelah, our closing service. While I think the original motive was probably to make sure people came back to shul for the end of the day, it also makes us think about what's the most important thing in our lives, before we get to the metaphorical last chance saloon. What really matters? Who really matters? Who do we need to forgive because life is just too short? Who do we need to say sorry to? On Yom Kippur, we say the Vidui, confessional prayers, but we also, by tradition, say them on our deathbed. We acknowledge, in the act of confessing, that we don't know how long our life is going to be, or the lives of those we love. So let's be honest now. Let's speak our truth now, today, because tomorrow is only ever a promise, never a certainty. And that truth for most of us, is that it is the people in our lives, those we love, that make our lives worth living.

There's a story about the great Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, * who once put God on trial for failing to protect the Jews, and found God guilty on all charges. One year, at Ne'ilah, the closing service of Yom Kippur, he declared war on God. He was determined to get a promise from God to give his people one year of blessing and happiness. First he tried asking – God couldn't you just behave like a normal person and help us? He saw his words rise to heaven and the gates of heaven which begin closing at the beginning of Ni'eelah, stopped closing and opened again, just a fraction. Then he threw all his energy into the Vidui, the confessional prayer. He wept, he cried out how the people had lied and cheated through the year but how today on Yom Kippur, they had confessed the truth. The cry opened the gates of heaven just a little bit wider, but not wide enough. So then finally Levi Yitzhak raised his head and declared war on God. But as weapons, instead of swords and guns, he invoked the members of his congregation. The widow who paid her son's teacher instead of buying herself a new dress. The student who shared his soup with his classmates even though he was starving. He listed all the simple acts of kindness that the members of his community had done in the past year. And the gates of heaven opened completely.

We come here this evening, at the end of a day confessing and fasting, and all we have to offer is our open hearts; our losses, our failures, our anxieties, our depression, our financial concerns, our health issues, the people we love, the people we lose, the people we care for, the work we do, the children we raise, the community we support by just showing up. Each of us has done their best this year to live a decent life, to keep our families going, to help our friends, to understand ourselves, and every person in this community is extraordinary.

May we all have one more year of life. One more year of sun and rain and wind, one more year to work, to love, and to live on this earth. We remember our dead because we know just how precious life is.

Today is the holiest day of the year because it's the birthday of the single most important ingredient in life – hope. The hope that there is healing after loss, that there is rebirth after destruction. That we can always rebuild what was broken and make it stronger than ever before. Hashiveinu Adonai Elecha venashuva. Turn us back to you and we will return.

Footnote.

- *This is real and you are completely unprepared: The Days of Awe as a journey of transformation, Alan Lew (2003) Little, Brown and Company*