

## **Yizkor/Nieelah –**

The eighth part (at least) of everything is death. Its weight is not great. How lightly and with what casual grace we carry it with us everywhere we go. On fresh awakenings, on journeys, or in lovers' talk - though seemingly left behind in some dark corner – it is always with us. Weighing hardly anything at all.

This poem by Leah Goldberg is on page 513 of our machzor, and it's also in our funeral books. I love it because it reflects what we all know to be true - that life is fragile, and that death is a part of it. We don't think about it most of the time, but it's there in the background. It's our mortality that gives meaning to our lives, the fact that we will not last forever so we need to make the most of this short time we have on earth.

I think most of us would agree that immortality, the actual physical kind, would be a kind of curse. Of course it's miraculous and wonderful that many of us live much longer lives now than a century ago. Of course we need to prolong life wherever possible – but not forever. Nobody really wants to live forever. And so we live with the knowledge of our own mortality and as we live, we begin to lose people.

There's an animated TV series on Netflix at the moment that does something interesting with this. Long Story Short, which I highly recommend is about an American Jewish family, but it jumps back and forth in time. So in Episode 3, the mother

appears as a dominating and forceful presence, arguing with the father about their wayward young adult son. In Episode 4 the mother has died and her daughter, Shira, is trying to bake knishes like her mother made. It's only when Shira finds her mother's handwritten recipe, that she realised her mother put in a ton of extra garlic because that's what Shira liked as a child. That her mother showed her love through her cooking. And of course, what Shira is really doing is not cooking knishes. She's grieving her mum.

Two things about this rang true for me. Firstly the sense that everything changes so fast it's disorienting. One minute you're trying to break free from your parents, the next they're no longer there. And that memory and grief operate in mysterious ways and that often what we really remember is the love, or the lack of it, the care, or the lack of attention that we received when we were young, rather than specific events.

Those of us who grew up in traditional communities will remember that Yizkor, which means Remembrance, takes place in the morning of Yom Kippur. It was moved to late afternoon by early Reformers, probably to encourage people to come back for Ni'eelah, the closing service. It was a good strategy, I think it works. But it also focusses our minds, at the end of this very long day, about exactly what is most important in our lives. Life and death. Will I live another year? Will my loved ones? And what is my life all about? Yizkor makes us

remember the love that makes our lives worth living. But this whole day forces us to really think about what truly matters to us, what the driving force of our life truly is.

The Kotzker Rebbe said: There is nothing as whole as a broken heart. Many of our texts talk about a broken heart being closer to God. I think that's because being broken is the most fully human that we can be. We live in a broken world, there is so much that is wrong in the outside world, so we need to be able to hold both heartache and happiness. We need to grieve deeply for those we have loved and lost but also leave some room for light to get in. We need to celebrate wholeheartedly when we can, but always with humble awareness of where there is pain – either in ourselves or with someone else. We grieve and we live. We live and we grieve. Because if we're paying attention, every moment is full of potential pain and possibility. In our afternoon Torah reading, God offers us life and death, blessing and curse, and we are told to choose life - because the potential for life or death, blessing or curse, is baked into every moment.

At Kol Chai we understand about weaving together grief and life. We have an amazing bereavement support team, all trained volunteers who visit those who have lost a loved one. And next month we are launching a bereavement café, a place

to come on the first Tuesday of every month, to have a coffee or tea and meet others who have lost someone. There'll be more information after Yom Tov and I encourage you to join us for an hour.

And now we are about to enter Yizkor and then our closing service, Ni'eelah. Ni'eelah is a bridge between Yom Kippur and the outside world. It's a threshold moment as we pause before re-entering the rest of our life. Both boundaries and thresholds are exciting places to be. Anything can happen.

I spoke last night about all the symbolism of death and mortality that are threaded through Yom Kippur. But Ni'eelah is the time of rebirth. By the end of the service, as we hear the sound of Tekiah Gedolah, we know that we have made it through. We have been forgiven. We asked God to hear our voice and God heard. We're going to get a second chance at life, another year to live and love and be the people we are meant to be.

The ark is open for most of the last service but unlike Kol Nidrei when we take the scrolls out of the ark, leaving it empty and bereft, the ark is full of scrolls, full of life, full of the wisdom and tradition that brings us all together. The music changes and gets more upbeat as we get towards the end of the day.

We have survived another year. We have about an hour and a half left in which to focus on what we really want to do, what we get out of the next twelve months. The gates are closing, but

there's still time to squeeze through and say - this. If I have to ask for one thing this year, this is it. This is the time. This is the moment. We walk together through our past, through our memories and then out, through the closing gates, into our future. I look forward to another year at Kol Chai, the celebrations and the commemorations, the sharing of life in all its many shades and colours. May we all be sealed in the Book of Life for a good, happy and healthy year ahead. Ken yehi ratzon.