

Passover and Yizkor: Bringing the Past into our Present

(Sermon written for speaking delivered by Rabbi Michael Schwab on Shabbat Pesach before Yizkor 5778)

Last year at this exact time, before the *Yizkor* of *Pesach*, I essentially began my sermon with the following. I said, “Rabbi David Wolpe told a sweet story that at a family *seder*, one of his nephews asked why there was a cup for Elijah at the seder. His father’s response was that the cup was there to invite Elijah, who dwells on high in heaven, to join us at the *seder* and perhaps even bring the messiah with him. His nephew listened, smiled and then innocently replied, “*Zaide* is also in heaven, he just went there last year. Shouldn’t we also have a cup for him and invite him too?”

A sense of intense emotion suddenly gripped the *seder* participants as the presence of their beloved *Zaide* began to permeate the room. With that one comment the significance of Elijah’s cup took on a whole new meaning. A loved one who had passed was now tangibly present.

And that in essence is what *Yizkor* does for us, it is our invitation to our deceased loved ones to traverse the barrier between this life and

the next, to travel from heaven to earth, to join us for a few meaningful and sacred moments that our tradition has provided for us, so that our loved ones can dwell with us even when we know they can no longer physically stand by our side.

Little did I know then, that this year, like the nephew in the story, I would be sitting at *my* seder table looking at Elijah's cup thinking similarly, that *my* grandfather and grandmother went to heaven just this past year, and would that I could invite them to be with *me* at this years' *seders*. Many of us peer around the seder table, or experience other important events, and miss the presence of a loved one who used to play such a large role. You see, for me personally, my earliest childhood memories of Passover revolve around my grandparents. It was to their house in Pittsburgh we went when I was small and other than a few years spent at my Uncle Joel's in between, it was with them I celebrated every Passover until I moved here, whether at my aunt's house or mostly at our family home in New Jersey.

I fondly recall that they would drive up in their white Ford Taurus on the day before Pesach, my grandfather accompanied by his books, cigars and newspapers and my grandmother by her garment bag. They followed the classic gender stereotypes: My grandmother helped my mother as they worked tirelessly in the kitchen to prepare the huge seder meals. I still recall, though, that my grandmother would take breaks, find us grandchildren around the house just to check in on us and get hugs and to tell us how wonderful we were. I always knew what I would get in each interaction with my grandmother -- pure unadulterated love. (Ironically what made this even more special is that I knew she was *definitely* capable of levying criticism as well, for it became a joke in our family how loudly she would call my grandfather's name when she wasn't happy about what *he* was doing – “Morris, stop smoking that cigar!” “Morris, don't say that to the kids!” “Morris don't leave your newspapers lying around!” And on and on.) But with us -- pure sweetness!

And my grandfather, wow did he love *seder*. He was a rabbi but (and I always appreciated the fact I am about to share with you and have taken notes for myself one day) when seder was at my parent's house my grandfather insisted my *father* lead the seder because he was the master of the house, even though the role was of course offered to him. Yet he sat right *next* to my dad, adding commentary, jokes and most importantly belted out all of the tunes in full *hazzanishah* voice. Thankfully he had a very nice voice, but it was **loud** and while singing he made funny faces. As you can imagine his performances created many a giggle from the grandchild crowd. As we got older we embraced the singing and belted them out alongside him, which I am sure to those listening did not improve the sound but it certainly made it more fun for us and for him. It was sad for me to know that he and my grandmother were not at my parent's seder this year and I can tell you that I definitely thought of him in particular each seder night and even sang a bit grandpa-style to help him feel a bit closer and to honor his memory.

For me, as for many of us, Passover and particularly the *seders* are tied so strongly to the power of memory. Biblically this holiday is “*Zecher Yitziat Mitzrayim*” – “a remembrance” – a *zecher*, a *Yizkor*, of the Exodus from Egypt. But at least for the rabbis, there is a specific type of remembering in which they ask us to engage. We do not simply *participate* in an act of reminding ourselves about “then”, rather as our *Haggadah* tell us, our remembrance must be a *re-enactment*, a mixing of present and past, so that we see ourselves as if *we* made Exodus from Egypt that very night. *This* type of memory is an active memory, it is less about traveling to the past to recall, and more about bringing the past to the present - making the past come alive for us and become a relevant source of wisdom, joy and meaning. We eat symbolic foods, for instance, to taste the experience of the past on our lips in real time and we use those experiences to sustain us. We tell stories of layered history bringing the past right up to the present so those narratives become intermixed with our own.

To illustrate this I will share that my amazing wife introduced something so simple and so brilliant to our *seder* this year, which embodies this type of remembering. We passed around a bag with slips of paper in it. Periodically we would ask someone to choose a slip and follow the instruction written there. The questions on those slips of paper were both accessible and meaningful, queries anyone at any age could answer and at the same time still invoked rich and deep responses. Questions like, can you share a meaningful childhood memory with a grandparent? Can you tell us about a favorite family vacation? Can you talk about a favorite food from your house growing up? Can you recall a special moment you shared with a sibling? Can you share a favorite holiday memory? As the seven year olds through my 94 year old Bubbee began to share, our family history came alive at the seder and became intertwined with both our present reality and the narrative of our people embedded in story of the holiday. The power of such shared memory was palpable. I know it, not only because I felt it personally but because one of my seven year old daughters, tapped me as we were doing a more classic part of the seder and said innocently, “when is someone going to

pick something out of the bag again, I like hearing those stories about people”. With a bit of emotion, I smiled at her and said, “So do I, sweetie, so do I” and promptly asked someone else to pick another slip of paper from the bag.

In a moment, essentially that is what we will all do today. We will create sacred space for picking out memories of people we love from our very own personal bag of memory. As we recite the prayers and connect ourselves to one another, our tradition and our history, we will simultaneously bring alive our most meaningful memories with those we have lost – childhood memories, holiday memories, happy times, troubled times, images, impressions of sound and touch. For a few moments we will put out, so to speak, our own personal Elijah’s cup and invite the people from our past to intermingle with us in the present. And after we will hopefully say to one another what my daughter said to me: I liked experiencing the stories of the people I have loved. I liked feeling their presence. And maybe we can even tell each other a bit about those loved ones at kiddush today, making those memories come

alive for both narrator and listener. For today, on the holiday of remembrance, during the moment of remembrance – memory comes alive in a special way to imbue our own existence with sacred context, personal meaning and a greater sense of connection. *Hag Smaeah* to all. As we now turn to page for the Yizkor service may we use our active memory to bring our loved ones near. Amen.