

***“Painting the Picture of Those We Love” - Yom Kippur 5781***

*(Draft written for speaking by Rabbi Michael Schwab)*

In her book, “Useless Information”, Barbara Courtland relates a story that is anything but. Namely, that when the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre in 1911 and was subsequently missing for two years, more people went to stare at the *blank space* where the painting *had* been, than had gone to admire the *masterpiece itself* in the previous **12** years! In other words, during those two years thousands of people made the effort to stare at an empty space: to see the place where the Mona Lisa *once was* but was no longer.

How are we to understand this phenomenon? For starters, it seems clear that it was not until the painting was gone that its significance to the public was truly felt. As is *often* the case in life we are not able to comprehend the importance of certain things until we no longer have them. Therefore, the first lesson we can learn from this is that we

humans frequently go through life unconsciously taking our blessings for granted, until misfortune or tragedy occurs denying us the things we value most.

Perhaps, the most universal example of this phenomenon is our health. We often only *truly* appreciate our health, *after* we, or a loved one, have been seriously ill or injured. The memory of the time period in our lives when we were well, contrasted with the memory of the time when we were sick or injured, allows us to *personally* appreciate the blessing of what was once ours but is no longer.

However, the message to be thankful for the blessings one has now, because we do not know how long they will last, is not the *only* lesson which the phenomenon of the Mona Lisa imparts. The fact that so many people gathered to stare at the space where the Mona Lisa had hung, also illustrates for us the obvious but profound fact that once *something*, or *somebody*, is gone, most of what is left is the *memory* of their existence - the imprint of their lives left on ours, contained in our

hearts and in our minds. I can only imagine that for a French patriot, or for a true art enthusiast, looking at the blank wall where once stood such a masterpiece must have been a heart wrenching experience; where previously something beloved and vibrant existed, now only a bare wall remained.

However, I would also like to imagine that after their initial shock at seeing the blankness of the wall, upon looking again, they actually began to see much more than the empty space before them. In fact, this is what likely drew them to that space. As they stared straight ahead where the Mona Lisa had stood, searching the emptiness, they inevitably must have pictured the Mona Lisa back in its place recreating every detail they could remember in their mind's eye: the mysterious smile, the distant landscape, the folded hands, and the searching eyes. Using the power of memory they looked at the place where the Mona Lisa had once animated the room and repainted it with their minds and hearts allowing it to come alive once again. Through this act of remembrance

and re-creation, the Mona Lisa, even though *physically* absent, remained a meaningful force in the lives of the people who recalled its beauty and power.

When *someone we* love dies, and they are physically no longer able to be by our side, what we *too* are left with is our *memories* of them: memories of time spent together, memories of their laugh and their smile, memories of their scent and their touch and memories of the things that they taught us, passed down to us and instilled in our very identity. Like the people who flocked to the Louvre to see the space which the Mona Lisa had once occupied, when a loved one dies, we, too, often find ourselves staring, both literally and metaphorically, at the spaces they once filled, helping us to revive their presence and to reconnect with their essence. For example, in any other year, we may come to synagogue and look longingly at the seat which used to contain the presence of a loved one but which now stands empty, or perhaps even has a new occupant. Or we may go to the cemetery, to our place of

connection with the physical presence of someone we cared about.

There, we imagine them alive as we talk to them and share what is in our heart. Or maybe we will return home and take notice for the first, or the thousandth, time that our loved one is not present to do whatever it is that they *always* did. Like Dad, who always sat at the head of the table, did Kiddush, and made bad jokes, but will no longer. Or mom who used to hover over us at dinner making sure everyone had their fill and who loved to listen to us talk about our day, but who now can no longer do so. Or maybe it was any number of people who used to be in *that* certain place and make *that* special comment or tell *that* particular story. And we feel sad that whatever space once contained the vibrant body of someone whose presence we cherished, now stands empty.

I for one, lost my Bubbee, this April to COVID. I picture her in so many ways at different phases of my life. But most recently I picture her shuffling around my house, big smile and arms waving, telling a story or commenting on what everyone around her was doing, which was one of

her favorite things to do. Or, as she was thankfully wont to do, I picture her telling us all that she was so *proud* of us that her “buttons were bursting”. Those spaces in my house sometimes seem emptier after her death but more often, thank God, they bring her back so vividly it's as if she is with me again.

And what I also remember is that she taught me an important lesson of *how* we keep the memory of a loved one alive. At every significant moment, even if it was just sitting around the Shabbat dinner table, she would never fail to mention how happy my *zaide* would have been to be there as well -- even though he died when I was 14, 30 years ago. At these moments, I could tell, she saw him, she felt him -- he was a real presence to her for all those years after his death, right up until her own. Unknowingly, just by being herself, she gave me a precious gift by modeling for me the critical skill of how to keep the memory of a loved one alive in a healthy and meaningful way.

The time period following the loss of someone we love *is* often full of confusion, sadness, anger and despair. We return to that empty space in our lives over and over, staring at the absence and feeling the loss. For some time, when we think of our loved one, all we can see is that blank wall where once the masterpiece of who they were was displayed in vibrant colors.

Yet, with time, and with opportunity, perhaps we will also be able to see something else as well. Like those who came to gaze upon the space in which the Mona Lisa was hung, eventually we too will begin to move beyond the absence alone and affectionately picture our loved one in that space in a way that can be comforting and meaningful, even if sometimes still very painful. As with my Bubbee, gazing upon the empty space our loved ones used to occupy, will hopefully lead to the rekindling of our memory, conjuring up the essence of the person that we love and miss. Our act of remembering serves as a revival of their spirit as we picture them again alive, in our minds and in our hearts.

After a loss, we appropriately return to our memory of their life with great energy, attempting to re-paint the blank spaces on the wall that reflect back to us our memories of who they were and what they still mean to us today.

And this is precisely what the Yizkor service gives us the opportunity to do. Like so many Jewish rituals, it gives us a moment in time to make meaning out of life's events. And it gives us a sacred and safe space to do it. And thus we take time out of one of our most important holidays, to revive the spirit of those that we love and bring their memory to the forefront of our minds. Yizkor allows their memories to live amongst us for a time, in a tangible, spiritual and sacred way. To let what they stood for shine forth so that their lives can be imbued with continuous meaning.

This act of Yizkor, which is not simply an act of remembering, but of actively connecting with, and giving honor to, the legacy of those we love, is something that nothing less than the entirety of rabbinic Judaism



has taught us. When the Jews of the Second Temple period returned to the site of the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Temple, after its destruction, our tradition tells us that at first there was bitter weeping and cries of despair - their religious life had been upended. As it is written in the book of *Eicha*, the book of Lamentations, (quote) “My eyes flow with tears. Far from me is any comforter. . . My heart is in tumult. My being melts away over the ruin of my poor people. . . Gone is the joy of our hearts”. They stared at the rubble and the empty space that once was filled with the glory of their beloved temple and they mourned its absence and the hole that its destruction left in their lives.

But then the rabbis underwent a transformation. They stared at the same empty space again and instead of seeing rubble they envisioned the Temple in its glory. They remembered what the Temple represented, what it had meant to the Jewish people, and they created a Judaism, the Judaism we practice today, that paid homage to those values even in the absence of its physical presence. Traditionally, we note this transition in

our history every morning when we read the quote from *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* during the *Birchot Hashachar* section of the service, which says: “Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai was once walking with his disciple *near Jerusalem after the Destruction of the Temple*. Rabbi Joshua looked at *the ruins* of the Temple and said, ‘Woe is us! The place that atoned for the sins of the Jewish people by bringing sacrifices lies in ruins’. But, then Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: ‘Be *not* grieved my son. There is *another* way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through deeds of loving kindness’”. Knowing that life and Judaism would never be *exactly* the same without the Temple, led by Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, the rabbis created a Jewish way of life that would at least invoke the *spirit of its memory*. The Temple was a place that symbolized the importance of making atonement and saying we are sorry to God, so the rabbis sought out a way to carry on that legacy even

without the Temple, which we are living out this very day. In that way, the memory of the Temple was honored, kept alive and lived on.

We can, and often do, the very same with the *people* we love. Like when we engage in the Jewish tradition and we pledge *tzedakah* in the memory of a loved one to a cause *they* cared about. Or when we recall something a loved one said and make a decision based on a value *they* taught us. Or when we remember the deeds of someone we lost and it inspires us to act in *similarly* righteous ways. As my colleague Rabbi Lisa Gruscow wrote, “That same spirit is here, today. Every time we remember those we love; every time we open our ears and our hearts to their voices, trying to discern what they might have said or done; every time we tell their stories; every time we learn from what they did wrong or what they did right, we write them back into the book of life. We carry them forward in the books of *our* lives.”

Yizkor is an opportunity to do the very same for *our* loved ones: to honor their memory and let them live through our act of recollection. So

I will conclude with an old Jewish parable which is told about a King and his son who embarked on a journey from their kingdom to a faraway place. Somewhere deep in the arid wilderness the travelers ran out of water and the King's young son became very thirsty. He began to cry. Upon hearing the distress of the Prince, the head of the King's cavalry said, 'I can send my fastest horses to the closest village and return with water in a few hours so that your son can drink'. The head of the King's Engineers also spoke up and said, "If you would like I can drill a hole in the ground right here and in about *eight* hours I will have created a well so that your son can drink'. The king thought over both proposals and chose the *Engineer's* plan. Once the Prince had taken a drink from the newly-dug well, he said to his father, 'Why did you choose the *engineer's* solution? The Cavalry could have brought back water much sooner.'" The King said, "Yes, but perhaps you may come this way again, my son, and now you will always have a well to drink from'. The boy innocently looked at his father and laughed and said, "Father, in a

few days the sand will cover the mouth of the well and I will never be able to find it again'. "A good point, my son" said the king and he ordered that a marker and a proper cover be erected for the well. And so the King did at every encampment: he ordered a well to be dug and *marked* clearly so that any traveler could find it and use that spot to pause and receive sustenance.

So it is with Judaism, the parable continues. *Judaism* provides us with markers in time to give us the needed opportunities to stop, reflect, remember and to look for meaning under and beyond the surface -- to be able to access the lessons of our past and those we loved who came before us. The Yizkor service we are about to perform is indeed one of those markers. It provides an oasis in time to recall those we have lost. But even more it gives us an opportunity to drink from the well of memory and allow the legacy of our loved ones to flow through us by recalling how they lived and what they stood for. In turn we can aspire to make sure that our *own* deeds, as we live our lives, reflect the best of

those who have gone before us; that our actions in life truly carry on their living legacy. In this way when we stare at the space in our lives which was formerly filled by a special someone, we will not see only emptiness. Instead we will be able to picture our beautiful memories of the person whose spirit continues to live within us even today. When we do so, like the thousands of people who came to view the space where the Mona Lisa once resided, we too will be able to experience, and perhaps even more powerfully, *internalize*, the beauty and legacy of the lives of our loved ones that will allow them to continue to be with us, to love us and to guide us, for the rest of our lives. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*, May it be God's will. Amen.