

Shmini Atzeret (Yizkor) - 5783 - Last Words  
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Chag Sameach.

When you think of your loved one today, what were their last words to you? Of everything they ever said to you, what stays with you? Of all the words they uttered, which of those are blessings?

Each of us has a distinct experience from other people in this room when we recall our loved ones who no longer live. Some of us knew the final moment was here, and were able to say everything we wanted to. Others of us did not know when that final moment would come and so were not able to have that final conversation. Some of us had loved ones who were able to talk with us at the end. Others of us spoke but our loved ones were not able to answer back. Some of us heard positive messages - "I love you" - in those last moments. Others of us heard negative messages. Whatever those final words were to you, most likely you remember them. Most likely you will for the rest of your life.

The Torah begins with words and concludes with words. It begins with the words of Genesis, when G-d uses words to create the universe. And it concludes with words when Moses, at the very end of his life, blesses all the tribes individually. Indeed, these final words to the 12 tribes of Israel are the core of Parashat Vzot Habracha, which means "this is the blessing." He finds something unique about each and every tribe, except Simeon, which is left out for some reason. Moses identifies the distinct potential and destiny of each and every tribe. I can only imagine how powerful it must have been to be an Israelite listening to this and feeling blessed by their national leader and spiritual father.

Centuries earlier, the namesakes of the 12 tribes gathered around their father Jacob's bed. Father and 12 sons and one daughter knew this was the final moment of the patriarch's life. There too, Jacob gives each of the 12 sons a unique message. These are captured in Parashat Vayechi - "he lived." Many of those are positive messages, but some are critical, reflective of the tension between father and some sons in their lifetimes.

Fortunately, many times a person's final words to loved ones are encouraging - a blessing to those who hear it. Other times the final words are rather ordinary. But I'm sure that during the course of our loved ones' lives, they uttered words of blessing and encouragement to us.

I believe that each of us can "hear" the voices of our departed relatives. I'm not talking about actually hearing the dead, of course. I speak about recalling how their voice sounded when they said certain words that made an impact.

My friend David says it pains him that he could not be at his grandfather's side before he passed. He does not remember the last thing his Grandpa said to him. But he does recall with clarity a refrain, something his grandfather would say again and again: Keep being you. Keep

being you. And David can picture his grandfather's face and smile and imagine what it sounds like to hear those very same words. Those words continue to inspire and uplift him. Those words remain an eternal blessing.

The Etz Hayim Humash has a beautiful note in its commentary about Vzot Habracha: "Moses blesses the tribes before his death, prompting the Midrash to put these words into his mouth: 'All my life, I have scolded this people. At the end of my life, let me leave them with a blessing.' As Genesis concluded with Jacob on his deathbed blessing his 12 sons, Deuteronomy concludes with Moses on the eve of his death, blessing the 12 tribes. What was once a single family with a vision of G-d's plan for them has now become a nation, poised to enter the promised Land and processing a blueprint for becoming a special people, a model of how G-d wants humanity to live."

I would add for us: For many of us, our loved one entered our world when we were a child. We have now become an adult, perhaps a parent or grandparent ourselves, poised to lead people and raise our own families, becoming an enduring model for how our loved one lived his or her life.

May we recall words of blessing from our own loved ones, like David did. May these words ring in our ears for the rest of our own lives, not just during Yizkor but on ordinary days too. In this way, their memories will indeed continue to be a blessing.

Chag Sameach.