

## Remember Us Unto Like, Yom Kippur 5777

What is our ultimate hope as we gather on this Sabbath of Sabbaths;  
our innermost wish on this most holy day?

It fills this sacred space as it does our hearts.

We sing it at our services over and over.

It echoes inside; it reverberates, we pray, on High:

*ZOCHREYNU L'CHAYIM—Remember us unto life...*

The timeless phrase resounds...as the echo speaks within and beyond.

We call on God's remembrance to renew us,

even as we expose our memory banks to a past that lies open before us.

Spiritual guru Arthur Waskow understands Yom Kippur  
as a sort of "Tallis in time."

As some Jews donning the tallit first cover their heads  
to spiritually center themselves, Waskow intuits this entire 24-hour Atonement  
Taking place under the Holy One's prayer-shawl, a "Tallis in time"  
which enables us to stand face to face with God and, so too, with ourselves...

[Seasons of Our Joy, Waskow, pgs 27-28]

Timeless as it is transformative, this day's observance  
builds a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow;  
a spiritual span bound by the power of our plea—*Zochreynu L'Chayim...*  
But much as we are beseeching the Holy One we are likewise talking to ourselves.  
For the magic of memory somehow connects God's remembrance  
and our remembering in a potentially redemptive partnering.  
As the Ba'al Shem's teaching reminds:  
"Forgetting leads to exile; remembrance is the secret of redemption."

And SO the fulfillment of our hope this sacred day lies in understanding  
the secret that we are seeking: *Zochreynu L'Chayim*,  
What is the Remembrance that will renew us unto life?

Great Conservative Rabbi, writer and preacher of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century,  
Sidney Greenberg, speaks of the significance of memory:  
"Every day we see about us evidence of human pettiness, greed, self-  
centeredness. But we also see human nobility, generosity, self-surrender...The  
cynic remembers only man's faults and failings...The wise man remembers his  
brother's virtues."

[Say Yes to Life, pg. 67, Greenberg]

Makes perfect sense...

Why bring to mind the suffering and the heartache?

Why, after all, remember the pain?

Yet the Medieval penitential poet, capturing the unique nature of our prayer this Holy Day beseeches the Holy One:

*“Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel your servants...Remember the Covenant you made with us...and [above all] Remember the Binding of Isaac.”*

We pray that God recall the relationship which links the generations...  
but why of all things *the Binding of Isaac*?

Will that recollection of the knife to the neck of our future, somehow,  
eons later, jar the Creator to compassion?

Why insist our people’s pain remain at the forefront of God’s remembrance?

Unless, perhaps, because we know its impact is indelible...

Just as we sense there is some greater intent

to the Holy One’s holding onto suffering

which serves as a signal for us,

linking the redemptive power of our remembering to God’s...

and therein, renewing us unto life?....

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, the world lost its *Ba’al Zikaron—its Master of Memory*...

A man whose worldwide renown, never sought, was an accident of Auschwitz...

A man whose reluctant first words published became the most powerful  
renunciation possible of the Final Solution...

and who himself became a spokesman for the voiceless;

a moral compass for the conscience of our world.

As longtime friend, child of Survivors, author and advocate Thane Rosenbaum wrote:

*“Memory became his stock and trade in a world suffering from amnesia.”*

Indeed, with pen in hand and humility of heart,

he taught us what it meant to truly remember...

I am fortunate to have learned that lesson from him firsthand.

As I transferred from a semester at Mass College of Art to attend Boston  
University, winter of ’77, to major in Judaic Studies,

I was greeted with a teacher who’d just himself arrived,

Indeed, the most transformational teacher I have ever experienced in my life.

Jetting in on the shuttle from New York but one day a week,

his time with us was a treasure...

The first class Professor Elie Wiesel offered, Literature of Memory, was a template of every one that followed.

I know. Finishing my M.A. in Theology over the next 4 years, I took them all. Still, the very first chance to be in his classroom remains etched in my memory. Each week one of the 14 students in the 3-hour seminar would take one of his [at the time] 13 novels to read and review.

The first hour and ½ was for student presentation; the next hour plus was Prof Wiesel helping us understand the literary themes textual references, the nuances of imagery—the weaving of words... In retrospect I realized, what he was really teaching us was far greater: The redemptive power of remembrance....

As the first student finished her review of his first novel, Night, Prof Wiesel began his remarks with a statement whose impact I only, years later, came to appreciate:

“Whatever I write—every essay, every novel—it bears the stamp and carries the signature of these first words.”

Working as a journalist in Paris after the War,

In the face of the horror beyond words he had experienced, for nearly a decade later, Wiesel himself remained silent.

Until, urged on by French Nobel Laureate Francois Mauriac,

He summoned the strength to write...[1954]

And the words overflowed into an 800 page plus manuscript,

Written in Yiddish, originally titled:

*Un Di Velt Hot Geshvign—And the World Remained Silent.*

Published in the U.S. after many rejections, carved down by the editor,

The 100-page memoir which sold barely 2,000 copies in its first two years

Has gone on to sell, ironically, just over 6million copies worldwide.

In its re-issue a decade ago, with a new translation by his wife Marion, Wiesel included a short Preface, pointing to the heart of his message:

The preeminent power of memory.

“In retrospect...I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer, my life, period, would not have become what it is: that of a witness...[And he concludes] “For the survivor who chooses to testify it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead *and* for the living...”

[Night, E. Wiesel, preface pg xv, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2006]

My Senior thesis for Wiesel was in culling from all his writings his life philosophy as a Jew. It wasn't hard to hear. The paper was titled: "To Be a Jew is to Bear Witness."

Memory makes us witnesses,  
to the compassion and the cruelty...  
To the nobility of the human spirit as to its depravity.  
Witnesses, for the living...and so too, the dead...  
And in testifying to life's suffering alongside its sweetness,  
In bearing witness, we find memory's redemptive-purpose  
as we discover how it is we hold that ultimate hope  
in our very own hands...

"Zochreynu L'Chayim," you see, is not a plea to God alone  
For a remembrance that will be life-renewing tomorrow,  
But likewise an imperative intended for us today, and everyday hereafter,  
to transform memory's meaning, and through it, bear witness for life.

Poet/Philosopher David Whyte understands

the imperative which converts memory into a present-tense verb.

[as he writes in Consolations, his book on the inner meaning of everyday words from last year]

*"MEMORY is not just a then, recalled in a now...the past is never just past.  
Memory is a pulse passing through all created life—a waveform; a then  
continually becoming other thens, all the while creating a continual but almost  
untouchable now. BUT the gurus who urge us to live only in the now  
misunderstand the multilayered inheritance of existence.....Memory is an  
invitation to the source of life, to a fuller participation in the now, to a future  
about to happen, but ultimately to a frontier that holds them all at once...We  
actually inhabit memory as a living threshold, as a place of choice and  
imagination, a crossroads where our future diverges according to how we  
interpret, or more accurately, how we live the story we have inherited..."*

[Consolations, pgs 143-144, D. Whyte, Many Rivers Press]

Just THIS is memory's secret:

we don't recall it, we inherit it,

And so, ultimately, inhabit it...

Consider three tributes to the power of memory,

tales of life on the border of death,

and the legacy they leave—the inspiration they bequeath,

empowering us to bear witness for life...

*ZOCHREYNU L'CHAYIM I...*

About Paul Kalanithi's end of life tale, chronicling his transformation from a 36 year-old, brilliant Stanford neurosurgeon to a dying lung cancer patient Atul Gawande rightly wrote:

"Dr Kalanithi's memoir is proof that the dying are the ones who have the most to teach us about life."

When Breath Becomes Air, an unthinkable year plus reflection about a man dedicated through his profession to saving life while losing his teaches us so much more about living than dying.

Falling back on his first love, having earned an M.A. in English Lit at Stanford along with a Masters in Bio, vacillating back then between professional paths, Once diagnosed, Kalanithi recorded not simply his last year of living, But the struggles, questions, life concerns of what made for a life of meaning...

Responding to the news, midway through the book, of the suicide of a close colleague completing his surgical fellowship, Dr. Kalanithi mused:

*"Death comes for us all...Most of our lives are lived with passivity toward death—it's something that happens to you and those around you. But Jeff [his colleague who took his own life] and I trained for years to actively engage with death, to grapple with it, like Jacob with the angel, and in so doing, confront the meaning of a life...Our patients' lives may be in our hands, yet death always wins...The secret is to know—the deck is stacked against you, that you will lose, your judgement or hand will slip, and yet still struggle to win for your patients."* [When Breath Becomes Air, P.Kalanithi, pgs 114-115]

A life worth living means reaching for heights you know you will never be able to climb...

The ultimate life-struggle for Kalanithi came, of course, in refusing to allow his cancer to stop him from living...

And so, balancing seeing doctors and treatment and scans, In the midst of it all—because of it all, Paul and his wife Lucy, [likewise a doc at Stanford] decide to have a child...

"We would carry on living, instead of dying." [When Breath Becomes Air, P.Kalanithi, pg 144]

IVF is successful...

One life grows strong in utero as the one who seeded it weakens over time.

Nine months later, with Paul too frail to stand,

“I lay down on a cot in Lucy’s delivery room, heat packs and blankets keeping my skeletal body from shivering.”

And in that surreal scene, life emerges, early morning on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, as Lucy and Paul welcome their baby daughter Cady into this world...

Blessed to share in her first 8 months of life,

Kalanithi closed his book, or at least as much as he would write,

With a message to his infant daughter meant for years down the road.

*“When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an accounting of yourself...of what you’ve meant to the world, do not, I pray, Discount that you filled a dying man’s days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger or ask for more...”* [pg 199.]

In the Epilogue, which his wife Lucy wrote in the wake of his death, committed to doing all she could to share his words with the world, she affirms the great challenge of standing at Memory’s threshold...

*“Although the last few years have been wrenching, sometimes almost impossible—they have also been the most beautiful and profound of my life, Requiring the daily act of holding life and death, joy and pain in balance while exploring new depths of gratitude and love.”* [pg 219.]

...Bearing Witness for life

means embracing that struggle—creating the balance

by living in the face of dying,

knowing, there is no purpose without pain,

no sweetness without sorrow, no light without darkness...

And so, recognizing, what the mind may forget the heart ever remembers;

memory lives on when it is forged through love...

### ZOCHREYNU L’CHAYIM II...

Among the most heart-wrenching moments of Night ,

bound up in the relationship of father and son

is Wiesel’s witnessing his sick, frail, dying father’s last days and breaths...

Delirious with fever, the SS beating his father for calling “Eliezer,” his son’s name.

And how, paralyzed by fear, young Elie had not responded.

No child should have to witness or experience such a torturous death of a parent.

In the original Yiddish version, Wiesel shares the weight of emotion he felt:

*“Never shall I forgive myself...Nor shall I forgive the world for having turned me into a stranger, for having pushed me against the wall...”*

In the face of that Hellish memory, after surviving the camps, Wiesel blames a world gone mad. Others just as easily blamed God. My friend Billy did neither...A survivor of a different sort, No parent should have to experience the death of his teenage child... Yet, when Jonah tragically died 7 years ago in March, just 19, second semester of his freshman year at SUNY Buffalo, Billy [aka Rabbi Billy Dreskin of WCT, my rabbinic school study-partner & dearest friend] responded to this impossible loss by trying to make memory live, sharing his recollections, working through it with the world....

In the months that followed Jonah's death, we'd go out to breakfast weekly for a check-in. Billy would share Jonah moments, then immediately write them down on a piece of graph paper...Looked just like the notes he used to take in rabbinic school, neat, perfectly aligned. When I asked him why he was writing it all down, his reply was a plea: "Jeffrey, because I need to remember..." Billy celebrates that memory regularly now in a blog, through the Jonah Maccabee Foundation he & Ellen established, helping advance the cause of kids in building whole & healthy lives.... In his posting from late July, recalling how Jonah, January of that same Freshman year, guest taught his father the Rabbi's Confirmation Class.... the struggle to make meaning of memory is vivid: *"Years later, kids who were present for that session are quick to tell me how cool you were and that it was one of their favorite classes ever. I get to keep that memory forever, something every parent hopes for. Except the part where you die. Nobody hopes for that. But I wasn't given a choice. Three months later, you were gone. You...had become a memory. All of my memories about you have become the many parts of an elusive, shadowy whole. And one of the great challenges in my life has become figuring out how to hold onto you, to your memory, and to all those parts."* Billy holds on through a life-perspective that transforms blame into blessing. *"It's really hard to let go of someone you love, really hard for me to let go of you. And finding some One to blame might help ease the pain."* Then, quoting Rabbi Morris Joseph, Billy gives us the key: *"It's not God's part to spare us suffering...but to help us bear it... Something precious is taken from us and we think of it as something we have lost, instead of something we have had. We remember how empty our lives are now,*

*and tend to forget how full they were before...We thank God for our treasures when we have them, but cease giving thanks when they are fled."*

...Bearing Witness for life

means making memory live by celebrating it every day:

telling their jokes...singing their songs...calling to mind their craziness,

embracing the gift of all they gave rather than all that their deaths denied

Holding on to memory by building with it a legacy that honors their love,

Perpetuates their life-purpose,

and says "thank you" for all the time they were here.

*ZOCHREYNU L'CHAYIM III...*

James Barrie, author of Peter Pan fame, once wrote:

"God gave us memory that we might have roses in December."

Of all the senses, the olfactory is most closely linked with memory.

"Smells," after all, "ring bells." And, as researchers of the limbic system are quick to point out, our emotional response to smell is largely governed by association.

The smell of *Tsimmes* on Passover...and I'm back in my Bobba's kitchen.

The smell of fresh cut grass in early springtime...and I'm in 7<sup>th</sup> grade

playing a pick-up game at 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue Park in Haverhill, Ma. where I grew up...

Still, one smell transcends time and place,

linking my life-story and the meaning memory brings...

Every Friday, like clockwork,

for as long as Susan and I made a home somewhere,

I brought a bouquet of flowers.

Shabbat flowers to be sure, yet they meant so much more.

...I remember our first year of rabbinic school, 1982 in Jerusalem,

buying purple Freesia on the street for 6 shekel [about \$1.50 a bunch]

Susan adored the fragrance...

...Living in Park Slope during HUC days, I could hardly afford a dozen roses,

But God forbid you bring my wife carnations!

So Tulips became the bouquet of choice...

...When we moved to Mamaroneck over 29 years ago, living just above Florence

Ave Park, the flower shop on the Post Road caddy-corner to the Ground Round

used to save me a white bouquet for a quick pick up on my way home from temple

Of course, aroma was always the key...

...Never was there a Friday without flowers, not always white,

But always fragrant enough to bring Susan a smile of inhaled satisfaction,

and a grace to our Shabbat table...

With the years passing and the kids growing up, decades of sharing highlights of the week with a regular cast of the kids' friends gathered round Those flowers always sat at the center...

And even in more recent times, off and on a couple years ago, With chemo's debilitating effects, the vase would move to Susan's bedside, As we shifted where we shared family blessings....

Two summers back,

When Susan was trying to rally for Gabe & Chelsea's wedding in late August, Treatment had knocked her flat...

We spent Thursday at MSK, so Friday sort of crept up on us...

Finding a challah in the freezer to defrost,

I filled a Kiddush cup and brought up the candles...

"Dolly, you want to do blessings...I'll call Soph...Its Shabbat."

From a deep sleep she woke and still bleary eyed,

Half squinting at me blurted out:

"Where are my flowers?"

"Oh....I think I may have left them downstairs..."

Running up the street like an Olympic sprinter,

I did the round trip in about 10 minutes....

"Here we go Dolly..."

Setting them down close by, she leaned over to check out the fragrance.

Inhaling with eyes still half-closed she whispered... "Beautiful..."

And as she sat up to light the candles, I'd swear,

Like a magic elixir, even if only lasting a few minutes,

the fragrance revived her spirit...

Of course, the flowers would fade in less than a week; the smell even sooner.

But I can still see My Dolly's smile....

And that is a beauty which time's passage can never erase.

In a Modern Love column from last November, [NY Times, Nov 15, 2015]

Remembering the pain at the death of her first teenage love,

An Oregon florist shared an insight shaped by the beauty of her craft.

*"Why do we give flowers?*

*To make up for what is intangible? Those feelings we can't hold in our hands and present as a gift to those we love...And like the bouquets we bring, precious moments are made all the more precious by the fact that they have come and gone...*

*How startlingly beautiful impermanence can be..."*

I most often stop by Trader Joe's on Fridays now.  
For \$20., I can be a big Shabbos spender, filling the dining room,  
living room and front hall vases with a fragrance that transcends time...  
A few weeks back, I asked the 20-something woman who works the flower dept  
if they had any more Freesia. I'd found three, but hoped for a few more bunches.  
"All we have is what's out sir...But with what you've got,  
Your wife will think she's a very lucky lady!"  
I smiled...Smelled the bouquets and said:  
"Thanks...We're the lucky ones."

...Bearing Witness for life  
Means appreciating the 'bountiful beauty' of impermanence:  
Flowers fade; life will sooner or later fail us.  
But the bonds we share, precarious as they are precious,  
Can be renewed, and return, in an instant...  
The blessings memory brings,  
The things we cannot hold but nevertheless hold us up,  
Like our love, remain ages after the fragrance is gone....

WHAT is the Remembrance that renews us unto life?

This awe-filled day, under that timeless *tallis*, face to Face...  
at the border of death & life-renewed,  
the bridge between yesterday and tomorrow,  
we understand the secret: Our pain has purpose.  
Our loss, life's suffering—calls on us with the very same plea  
with which we call upon God: ZOCHREYNU—Remember Us...

Our ultimate hope is not a prayer to the Holy One marked: Urgent Today  
But an invitation for our every tomorrow:  
To transform memory's meaning by inhabiting it as a living threshold...  
Integrating it, the heartache and the happiness, into the story of our lives;  
Fashioning with it a renewed sense of life's purpose,  
Building from it a living legacy...

"Zochreynu L'Chayim,"

SO this new year, filled with promise, purpose...pain,  
May our remembrance—like God's—be a testament of hope:  
As we bear witness for life! AMEN.

