

We Need Our Beloved Dead

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5783

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As we gather for *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur, we are acutely aware of loved ones who were once at our side but are no more. We are graced with the music of the finest violinist in the State of Arkansas today, inspiring us and comforting us—and, at the same time, making us even more aware than we were already of notes now silenced, loved ones who made and who appreciated beautiful music. Looking out at the congregation, I can imagine where beloved congregants would have been seated until only recently, or at least until the pandemic.

Those whose time of mourning is more remote, or whose family members lived farther away, also ache—still missing, never mind across how many years and miles, what the late Rabbi Stephen Weisberg poetically described as “the familiar glowing face; the warm, illuminated eye,...the beloved voice...the kiss that once evoked our deepest response...[or simply] sit[ting] side by side around the family table, in the home of a friend, or in worship.”ⁱ

Almost a year before his assassination, President James A. Garfield spoke evocative words that describe our needs at this hour: “There is nothing in all the earth that you and I can do for the dead. They are past our help and past our praise. We can add to them no glory...They do not need us, but forever and forever more we need them.”ⁱⁱ

Yes, we do need our beloved dead. We wish they were physically at our side. We want their advice and counsel. We yearn for that one conversation we wish we had when they were still living. Those, we will not get.

Still, there is much we can receive from loved ones who have passed from this life. We may yet be inspired by their example. We can fulfill their legacy. We may continue to be warmed by their love, so much stronger than death.

This summer, I came face to face with how much I still need my grandmother, even after she has been gone for more than eighteen years.

At a spirituality retreat in Israel’s Negev desert, I was tasked to write a letter to a deceased loved one. I chose my paternal grandmother. As I told her about the unconditional love she showered on me, and how I continue to be warmed by that love, my tears began to flow. She did live to see her son become a grandfather, but not to experience that fully. I wanted her to know that her son, my father, is a grandparent like she was, a constant presence in the grandchildren’s lives and a boundless source of love. In other words, I explained that she is very much present in the world, all these years after her death, in the person of her son. I suspect that

my sons and nephews would say that they **need** their Grampy like I needed my Yaya—like I still need her, and still have her, in a sense, through the legacy of her abiding love.

My grandmother would be one hundred fifteen now. I could not reasonably have expected her to be living when I reached age fifty-nine. Still, I miss her. And I know that I am not alone in this Sanctuary. Some grieve lives cut short. Others are mourning lives fully lived. Their deaths were not a tragedy, but we were still not ready to let them go. We continue to need them.

And so, we gather here for remembrance. We call them to heart and mind, for we will never forget. We can do still more today. Let us remind ourselves of the legacy they left for us to fulfill—the acts of kindness, of *tzedakah*, and of caring that they would have done and are now our sacred duty. Let us acknowledge that we need our beloved dead, and let us affirm that this need may be fulfilled. By God’s grace, we may yet be comforted by their love, love that we will always need, love that can never die.

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Stephen Weisberg, z”l, “At Graveside.”

ⁱⁱ Candice Millard, *Destiny of the Republic*, New York: Doubleday, 2011, quote at the beginning of the epilogue.