

YOM KIPPUR SERMON – 2005

Each year it becomes more difficult to prepare the remarks for this Yizkor service. Each year I look at the names on our Kaddish list and find more of my own past, my hopes.

My failures, my achievements bound up with them. And the truth comes upon me that our world dies off little by little. Now a loved one, a friend, a colleague, a cause, an institution; these go, as they must, in a world which is dynamic, ever changing, never at rest, and we but follow after.

There is no denying that as you get older, you begin to identify death with yourself, - with people your own age. And then when you reach what we can call old age, and I won't say when that begins, you know that it is real and inevitable, you may try to make yourself think that it isn't, but you know that behind all the masks of pretence and denial, it is.

Death is unavoidable, undeniable, inescapable fact.

Death is sad. Death is wrapped in grief, particularly when two lives that have been knit together through many years are torn apart. When one is taken the other one is left almost like the unraveled part of a garment.

And, occasionally, death comes as a relief and a release from suffering.

I have always felt that there is a special closeness about a Yizkor congregation. We are bound together by the awareness of our mortality. The secure and the insecure, the happy and the not so happy, the old and the not yet old. All of us are journeying to the same end. All of us remember loved ones who have completed the journey.

So we are also united by memory. Worlds that are no more suddenly seem vivid at Yizkor we turn the yellowed pages and our mind wanders through a world that we see again through the kind haze of memory.

That's why we are here as the hour of Yizkor, of memorial on this the holiest day of the year. We have all stood beside graves, perhaps many times and in one way or another, we have struggled to give voice to our sorrow and our anger, our loss and our pain. Some of us have done that fully, even to exhaustion and our tears no longer flow or at least do not flow as copiously as they once did. And others of us are still deep in mourning with wounds that have not yet healed.

Years or months may have passed since we entered the valley of the shadow, yet we come here to remember those we have lost and on this day dedicated to return and renewal, to find the courage to move onward into the new year that beckons us.

Another lesson for living from the experience of mourning is one that I can best express through a poem that I have read to you before, but I feel I would want to share it with you again for I continue to find it very meaningful. It says what I want to say.

“Why do we wait ‘till a person’s gone before we tell of his worth? Why do we wait, why not tell him now that he’s the finest man on earth?”

“Why do we wait ‘till a person’s gone to send him flowers galore, when a single rose would have meant so much if we’d taken it to his door?”

“Why do we wait ‘till he cannot hear the good things we might say?”

“Why put it off? Why not tell him now, and share in his joy today? Of course, we’re busy. That’s our excuse.”

“But why, or why do we wait to tell our person our love for him until it’s too late?”

So what can I say, what can anyone say at the time of Yizkor that will be of some help to those who have suffered a loss which is another way of saying, to all the people of the sanctuary?

I wish I knew.

I wish that I could wave a magic wand or say a secret formula that would bring healing to our spirits, but if there is such a wand, or if there is such a formula, I do not know what it is. I wish I did.

But let me offer you five words that I hope contain some guidance. Not only with regard to death but in other cases – the loss of a relationship – the loss of a job.

I think that the first thing we ought to do when our hearts break is weep, and let no one tell you that “*part nishit*” to cry, that it is unbecoming to weep. For we come from a tradition in which people cried at *simchas* and cried in times of sorrow, and no one thought it was unbecoming to do so.

The second thing that we ought to do in time of loss is wait. I mean that not only in the practical sense, that you shouldn’t make any big decisions while you are in turmoil. When life knocks you down, wait. When you receive a crushing blow, don’t expect to snap back quickly. It takes time.

The Jewish tradition understands that; that’s why we have *shivah*, and then *shloshim*, and then eleven months of *kaddish* and then *yartzeit*, for death is not a little thing. It is an amputation, when you lose someone you love, and, therefore,

give yourself time. Take time and wait, wait for God's healing to come, for it comes gently, gradually, almost imperceptibly. But it comes.

The thing to do, after you weep, and after you wait, is walk. No one expects you to be able to run, after a body blow, but after a while you should be able to walk again.

You don't have to run, you don't have to be able to do a marathon; sometimes, just putting one foot in front of the other is no small achievement. So, after you have wept, and after you've waited, walk; take a few small steps back into the world.

And the forth thing to do after a loss is work. Go back to work, both your job and even some volunteer work. For a funny thing happens when you do volunteer work. When you realize how many other people are in pain, when you realize that you have the power to make a difference in their lives; it somehow puts your own pain in perspective.

And the last thing we need to do is watch. We need to keep our ears and our minds and our hearts open, so that we can notice the ways in which God is sending us comfort and consolation. For God has not abandoned us. He sends us all kinds of messengers and all kinds of messages, if we would only notice them. The friends who flew in on a short notice from distant places in order to be with us at the funeral - those were messengers from God. The people who sent food plates in to nourish us during *shivah* – those were the messengers of God. The people who have taken the time to call us and visit us, not only during the first week (that's easy), but during the following weeks – they are the messengers of God.

God sends us messengers of good tidings every day. That doesn't mean that wonders occur every evening, every morning, and every afternoon. It means that the existence of evening, morning and afternoon are in and themselves wonders, not to be taken for granted, but to be appreciated. Evening, morning and afternoon are each messengers of God, but because we see them so often we don't really see them; because we experience them so often, we don't really experience them, because they are given to us so often, we don't really appreciate them.

It is the claim of the Jewish tradition that God sends wonders every day, that God sends us messages and lessons to learn from every day. We only have to watch for them, to look for them, when they come. If we really look, we will see them.

So these are the five words that I would offer you on this day of pain:

Weep,

Wait,

Walk,

Work,

And Watch.

I hope that these words will be a source of guidance to you, to me, and to all of us who come here this day, united by a source of guidance to you, to me, and to all of us who come here this day, united by a shared pain. They are simple words, I know. They are not fancy philosophical or theological or psychological words. They are not big words, the kind that are meant to impress you with the speaker's vocabulary. They are five simple words; words of one syllable each, but take them as my gift, and may they be of some help to you on this difficult day. May each one of us, who must walk through the valley of shadow of death at some time in our lives, hold on, and get to the other side. May we not become paralyzed by our grief and stay stuck in the valley. May we keep on moving, walking not running, for no one can run through the valley of the shadow. There is no way to run or skip through the valley, but may we be able to walk through the valley, with God at our side, for "Thou art with me, even there, even then." May we weep and wait and walk and work and watch, and may there come true for us the promise of the psalmist, *ba erev yalin bechi vilaboker rina*, "at the nighttimes of our lives, weeping lodges in us, with us." There is no denying weeping its' right to enter our lives. It comes in and it stays for the night, but *baboker rina*, in the morning, *bechi* eventually leaves us. Slowly, quietly, imperceptibly, gently, *bechi* slips out the door. Weeping gradually declines till the day we realize that it is no longer our companion, and we wonder, where did it go? When did it leave? And *baboker rina*, in the morning, there is joy. A different kind of joy than we had before our loss, not a glib or superficial joy, not a noisy, giddy joy, but a deeper kind of joy, a tempered joy, the kind of joy that comes after weeping, after waiting, after walking, after working, and after watching and comprehending the kindness of God, and the goodness of human beings.

May all of us who have gone through the nighttimes of our lives reaching this stage, the stage when mourning (*mour*), gives way to morning (*mor*), the stage when we can lift our heads again and remember those whom we have lost for we should never, never forget them; the stage when we can remember them for blessing and thank God that we had them, and when we can live by the light of their example.