

Yom Kippur Morning 5768
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Over the years, I have spent more time than the average person walking in the memorial parks of Los Angeles: Hillside, Mount Sinai, Edens. . . As I walk through the grass, my head is usually down, reading the names, epitaphs and ages on the memorial plaques that dot the serene rolling hills of the park. Of course, there are a few that stand out as colorful: Jack Lemmon's memorial plaque in Westwood reads "Jack Lemmon in." There is one person who was placed very high up on the wall of a mausoleum, much higher than a basketball hoop, that reads: "I always wanted to dunk." Cantor Kliger has told me about one that he's never seen again at Hillside which read, "I told you I was sick!" But most of them have three elements: name, dates of birth and death, and who they were in their family: daughter, wife, mother, grandmother. . .son, husband, father, grandfather – sometimes even great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather (that's when you look at the dates again). Many times it is accompanied by a comforting phrase. . .loving soul... remembered forever. . .in our hearts.

And I find myself looking at these memorial plaques, counting the years of their lives and saying to myself. . ."90 years, she lived full life." "Oh, he died young." "That person was born the same year as my father." "She was born the same year as me!"

It always brings up the intense reality that every one of us is destined for the same fate. And at the same time, I feel a sense of comfort that those descriptions of familial relationships means that there are still those here that are remembering the people represented by those plaques. For every memorial plaque that says, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother – there is a sister or brother who called her that, a husband or partner, children, grandchildren or even great-grandchildren that still hold that person in their hearts.

Being there in the first place, however, for me, means that I have just participated in one of the more daunting and beautiful experiences of being a rabbi: participating at a funeral and being responsible for the *hesped*, the eulogy at the memorial service. In this way I feel incredibly fortunate, and incredibly humbled. Fortunate, because it is always inspirational to hear real people's stories, to learn how someone navigated their life, to feel the love that was felt by those whom he or she touched. And how every life is different, and each story colors the world with a different hue. I am humbled, for two reasons: one, I recognize that my life is one tiny drop in an incredibly large sea of time and humanity, and two, I can't imagine how I, as a human being, can possibly begin to describe the incredible depth of a lifetime.

The *hesped*, in Jewish tradition, is really supposed to be about twenty minutes long. Can anyone sum up an entire lifetime in twenty minutes! It is an impossible task, even with the hours sitting in a family's home listening to laughing and crying about their mother's life, their shared experiences with their father, of stories with their sister, or brother, son

or daughter, of anecdotes and fables long forgotten about grandma or grandpa – people they loved deeply. Even then, can we sum up a life in twenty minutes, thirty, forty five – is an hour enough time to sum up 700,800 hours of life (if you live until 80 years old). And yet, in the end, the picture is painted by everyone coming together to paint it, and a life is lovingly remembered by those still here. I am always moved by the power of a life that goes on living within the hearts of others.

Over the last ten days, both Rabbi Geller and I have been using that Rava text from the Talmud that describes the questions that will be asked of us when we are no longer a part of this world. I must admit it has led me to think a lot about my life, death, whether I have lived up to those questions. And I started thinking, “I’m the only one that can truly answer these questions, because only I know the truth inside my soul.” And then I thought, “How ironic. My soul goes before the judge in the next world answering the six questions about the truth of my life, and my body is in the Hillside chapel (the big one), and my friends and family, the ones who experienced me the most, are the one’s who are creating the words spoken at my funeral.” And I realized that the true answers are found in the confluence of what’s inside my soul, and the way people have seen me.

Let me tell you a story: this story is dated as far back as the 16th century, and in three places the setting is in Krakow. The main character has the name Yossela, or Yankel. . . I prefer the name Shlomo. This is a story about Shlomo the miser. He was considered the richest Jew in the city, but his reputation was that he was an incorrigible miser. Every poor person who asked him for help was shunned. Every organization who asked for funds was rudely turned away. He was such a miser (“How much of a miser was he?”). Children threw rocks at him and laughed at him in the street. He was such a miser that the burial society refused to bury him because he would only pay 50 rubles instead of the 100 they asked him to pay, money they said would go to the poor and needy. He died on a Sunday. The Chevra Kadisha wouldn’t get him, and he was left in his home for three days. Finally on Wednesday evening, his neighbor had pity on him, and clandestinely buried him in the middle of the night just outside of the cemetery beside a tree.

The next afternoon, there was a knock on the door of the rabbi. "Rabbi, please give me money to buy food for Shabbat." The rabbi said, "I'll be glad to, but why tonight? I have never seen you before. How did you make out last Shabbat?" "Rabbi," he said, "for the past twenty years, I can't make a living, but every Thursday morning there were five rubles left in an envelope under my broken door for me and my family. But not this morning." Five minutes later another poor man knocked on his door and said, "Rabbi, please give me money to buy food for Shabbat." "I'll be glad to," answered the rabbi, "but where were you last week?" He said, "Rabbi, the truth is that for the last ten years, I can't make a living, but every Thursday morning, there were two rubles under my broken door, exactly what I needed. But not this morning." Within hours, all the poor people in the city came and told the same story.

It wasn't very long before the rabbi figured out that the miser wasn't a miser at all, but a righteous man who had been misunderstood. He called the entire community together in the synagogue and told them about Shlomo the Miser, and everyone wailed and begged

for mercy for the way they treated him. When it came time for the rabbi to die, his instructions were that he would be buried next to Shlomo the Miser, so that he could be buried close to a tzaddik.

On the one hand, I believe that the truth of a person's life is found only deep in the core of the person, the soul, the essence that contains every action and every thought... The miser knew who he was. . .he knew what he had done in his life. . .he knew what kind of person he was. He may have been a miser to the community at large, he may not have given tzedakah publicly, but no one could see inside of his soul, which was filled with goodness. . .no one knew the truth of his soul, and yet it was there that the truth resided.

On the other hand, the truth of the miser's life was also found in his interactions with others, the experiences he had with the people around him, and the feelings they had for him. The miser *was* a miser to those who experienced the miser *as* a miser. He *was* a man who received no respect from the poor, from children, or from his peers. The truth is how he was seen by others, how his actions affected others, his reputation *was* who he was in this world.

Ecclesiastes wrote: A good name is better than fine oil. That good name is not created by what we feel we are deep in our souls alone. The miser didn't understand that. He believed that if he was righteous on the inside, that would be all that mattered. The rabbi believed that, too, that's why he wanted to be buried next to the miser. But in his lifetime, the miser caused others pain, and in his death, he caused pain as well – the entire city asked forgiveness for the way they acted towards him. The whole city felt the pain of treating someone unfairly. But he didn't give them the opportunity to be any different. He treated people poorly on the outside – and part of his legacy was his overt actions towards others. He was ornery, he was cold, and he never gave anyone the chance to know who he really was. Upon his death, he had no good name, because in his life, his actions towards others on the outside didn't match his goodness on the inside.

Part of what we are doing today is to search within ourselves for the truth, to seek it, and bring it out, to own it, confront it, to try and get rid of all of the stuff that clouds the purity of our souls, and ultimately find the beauty in it. And part of what we are doing is making sure that we are acting towards others in a way that brings us a good name. Ultimately, we search ourselves for both truths. We try to align the inside with the outside, forming a kind of transparency to our souls by our actions with others.

So my initial understanding of the questions, that only the soul can answer them, isn't really so – it is only a part of it. And as I turn left onto Centinella, I can only hope that the eulogy spoken in the last hour told the truth about who that person was in *this* world, and maybe even how they might have answered Rava's questions in the *next* one.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah