

Shmini Atzeret Sermon 2008-5769

By Rabbi Michael Schwab (Written for speaking)

Just a Little Bit Longer . . .

A story is told in the Midrash about today – about the holiday of Shmini Atzeret. It begins, “The meaning of this holiday is comparable to a king whose children came to visit him. The first time they came the king asked, ‘When will you return to me again?’ They told him, ‘We will return in 50 days.’ He said, ‘Go in peace.’ The second time they visited he asked as they were leaving, ‘When will you return again?’ They said, ‘In four months we will return’. And he told them ‘go in peace.’ The third time they came he asked them once again when they would return. This time they told him, ‘We cannot return for six more months.’ The king said, ‘if that is the case, please, stay with me one more day so I can enjoy your company since you will be so delayed in returning.’ For this reason our tradition teaches that there is no Atzeret, no extra day of gathering, for the Jews on Passover, because they return on Shavuot. And there is no atzeret on Shavuot because they will return on Sukkot. But on Sukkot, when they will not return again until Passover, in six months time, God delays them one extra day to be with them a little longer”. As the Sages say, “it is like a king who made a huge feast for all of his subjects, and, then, when the festivities were over, he said to his children, ‘Please, stay behind with me for one more day, for it is hard for me to part from you.’”

I have always loved these midrashim, these parables. The image of a God, who loves being with us so much that he creates a holiday, today’s holiday of Shmini Atzeret, just in order to be with us one day longer, conjures up feelings of sweetness, spirituality and love. They create a great sense of mutual affection between God and us. In addition, the existence of these commentaries also reflects the mysterious nature of this holiday as presented in the Torah. There is little indication there as to what this holiday is, what its relationship is to Sukkot and what its deeper meaning is all about. Fittingly the rabbis have thus imbued this Biblical holiday with a beautiful spiritual message that teaches us about a God who yearns to be close to us, who needs us as we need God and who, at the end of this holiday season, just can’t stand to say good-bye -- not just yet.

Through the High Holiday season and Sukkot God has reveled in the intense presence of His children, us, and wants one more day to bask in our closeness. After all of the fond memories, God wants to keep us close, fearing the distance created by the anticipated separation post-holidays.

To me this theme is one of the reasons that I find it so appropriate to recite the Yizkor service on Shmini Atzeret. Just as our tradition communicates how God feels about us, so too do we feel about the loved ones we have lost. We don’t want to say goodbye; we don’t want to feel distant. We want to hold onto the memories and create time and space to bring those we love near to us again -- to linger with them a little bit longer.

In an essay entitled “Yizkor – The Unending Conversation,” Rabbi Barry Freundel – a congregational rabbi as well as a professor of law at Georgetown University – wrote: “Many of us who have lost loved ones continue our conversations with them even after they are dead... And far from being a symptom of sanity loss, this practice of ‘touching

base' is quite comforting and salutary. When someone has played a significant role in our lives – a source of advice, a shoulder to cry on, a role model – it is difficult to go on without that person. So, in a sense, why should we? It is perfectly natural to share with our departed loved ones the accomplishments of our day before going to sleep at night. It is perfectly normal to think about how our actions might make our departed loved ones proud. It is perfectly sensible to make moral decisions based upon the values, which shaped the lives of our departed loved ones. In short, we are still in dialogue with our loved ones, even if they no longer walk this earth. We imagine their responses to the events that shape our lives. We imagine how they would participate in those events. The rabbis who crafted our system of mourning and remembering understood this. They also understood that holidays are the most difficult times. Although these days are joyous and celebratory in nature, they bring our sense of loss front and center. Holidays revolve around family, and if a key member of our family is not here in person, then it makes it difficult to celebrate”.

So, the rabbis created Yizkor. It is a way for us to invite our departed loved ones to join us on our Festivals. It is a way for us to say that we wish that they were here with us.

In a stunning piece in the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent, my hometown Jewish newspaper, Rabbi Susan Schnur captures this feeling in a very powerful way. The writing is beautiful and I would like to read a substantial part of the essay to you now.

“Today many of the seats in this shul are filled but I know that there are many empty seats here. Seats that once belonged to the people you love. Each of us comes here cradling the memory of those people and remembering other sanctuaries, synagogues throughout this city and cities around the world. Synagogues whose seats are filled today. Synagogues that no longer exist. Synagogues dotted with all of our empty seats. . . .
“As a child I went to Adath Israel in Trenton, NJ. I went there for 30 years. I can tell you who sat where, a kind of emotional geography of that synagogue.

My grandfather and grandmother sat over against the wall, on the left. My parents sat behind them in aisle seats, then my aunt and uncle. . . .

In the balcony sat another aunt and uncle, and to the right all the way in the front- under the rabbi's nose, sat Nana. She always bought two seats- one for herself and one for Simon her husband, even when he'd been dead for 37 years.

Nana sat with her invisible person- her Simon-and we, the grandchildren, used this seat as our roving spot. From wherever we were-sitting with friends or family or out in the vestibule playing "Rock, Paper, Scissors"- we'd look through the crack in the swinging door to see if Nana was alone. If she was, we'd hurry to Simon's seat. . . .

We didn't know much about the people who sat in the seats around Nana, but we knew to expect them every year, and that was enough. Every few years or so, someone would be missing, and we knew that something had happened to that person during the year. . . .

We had the long view on these people. We knew nothing about them from day to day, not even their names, but we knew their lives from year to year. We kept track of them over the decades. That was enough. That was a different kind of knowing....

Everyone, not just Nana, came with their invisible person.

The man with the cauliflower ear, who had been married for forty years before his wife's death, had her as an invisible person.

The children of the woman two rows in front of us had moved away; they were her invisible people.

And the man who davened so fervently and never sat down? His invisible people were from a lost world, some little shtetl in Poland where the roofs leaked and the shul was falling down.

Nana died in April. She was 97. Its hard for me- this Yom Tov...-knowing that for the first time in 70 years her seats are empty.

I know that the people in the seats around hers feel the pull against her vacuum, the curious magnetism, the disturbance in the air around her seat. . .

Someone right at this moment... is whispering "What happened to Mrs. Shankman?" Or, "What happened to that beautiful, tiny old woman whose grandchildren used to swarm around her like bees?" . . .

That seems enough to know about a person, don't you think? Their devoutness. Their family. Their unwavering road. Their health. Their extra seat. . . .

[On these holy days we pray with the people] who were sacred to us from childhood; with the people we love who are no longer living; with the people whose values we adore and cherish, whose way of life we strive for; with the people who were to us what we hope to be for our children.

What I want to say is simple; that even as I stand here, there is an empty seat, full, beside me. There is one next to all of us. A presence that we miss, an absence from which we will never recover, a wound that will always feel fresh to the touch...

Isaac Bashevis Singer once wrote: 'When a person who was close to you dies, in the first few weeks after that person's death, he is as far from you, as far as a near person can ever be- only with the years does he become nearer, and then you can almost live with this person again.' -- You can almost sit next to their empty seat.

When we used to look around at Adath Israel- Nana and I- when we used to look around in the great big canyon of the synagogue, we would always turn around quickly from the newly vacant seats, as if they were mirrors.

Nana, right now someone is looking at your seat like that- as if it were a mirror. But they needn't turn away quickly. Because in that seat is my heart, and you sit in it. And in your heart sits Simon, and in Simon's heart sits someone I don't know... and on and on in a great hall of mirrors, all lit by a single candle-me.

All of us here have our own hallways that go back and back and converge with others into one great sanctuary.

And now in honor of these invisible people next to each of us in synagogue, in these mirrored lives in the great distant sanctuary that we all carry with us, we turn to the Yizkor service to remember."