

The foundation of Jewish life is Community. Community is constituted by those who show up. You have chosen to show up today. You have given up the opportunity to be somewhere else, to do something else. You have willingly paid that opportunity cost because showing up here, on this day, at this time, is important to you.

According to Woody Allen, showing up is 80% of life. Your presence matters. When you show up, you make a difference. Yet as we know, showing up entails risk. Traveling to get here. Exposing yourself to other people. And the lesser risks of exposing yourself to uncomfortable ideas, sitting with people you don't get along with.

Religious community, as its best, is exhibited in the nobility of setting aside differences and disagreements and gathering together for a common purpose. Our people have experienced exile, destruction, expulsion, inquisition, persecution, and holocaust. And none of these things destroyed us. How did we do it? How did we survive? By gathering together, identifying the tragedy, mourning together, rebuilding together, and celebrating. Consider our Jewish calendar. Six days after the tragedy of the destruction of the Temple on the 9th of Av comes the 15th of Av. And on that day, Israel observed a festival devoted to love and partnership. Without such a gathering, we would be left mired in destruction and mourning. Without gathering together for festivals dedicated to connecting with each other, we have no future.

There is great power in remembering in community and power in setting aside time to remember individual names. Memorials which etch names into stone, like the Vietnam War memorial, or which speak names out loud, like the Yad Vashem Holocaust Children's memorial, have a particular power and beauty. The individual memorial prayers we say today are powerful because we focus on the name of each person.

All of us have somebody in our lives who we remember, a grandparent or a friend who is not with us any more. A sense of grief unites us because we are all human, we all know what it means to lose, we have all known sadness, we have all needed the support of someone else to get us through a tough time. We show up to express our own grief, and we show up to support each other.

One of my Yizkor practices each year is to pay attention to the obituaries of people who have altered the world we live in. I do it as a spiritual exercise, an act of religious devotion to remembering the names of those who shaped my world. Sometimes they are famous in the world of sports, entertainment, business, or politics, and sometimes they are virtually unknown. In every case, the work they have done has widely affected the world that we all live in, for good or for bad. There are some outstanding people on the list and there are some people who are disgusting human beings, to put it mildly. I try to summarize each life in one sentence which evokes their memory and how that memory powerfully impacted many, many, people. I offer this list along with the names that we carry around within us.

My list of names is idiosyncratic. Each year I offer it to you, but you may want to develop your own list of people who have shaped your world, reflecting when and where you grew up and who you have become. I also carry around a much more personal list of names, as do we all. This is the list I will remember during the Yizkor prayers. We each carry within us people who may not have impacted millions, thousands, or even hundreds, but who nonetheless are important to us.

The last episode of the Israeli series Shtissel illustrated this with a powerful scene. The title character, at a meal with his son and brother, offers a quotation he believes incorrectly to come from Isaac Bashevis Singer:

“The dead don't go anywhere. They're all here. Every man is a cemetery An actual cemetery, in whom lie all our grandmothers and grandfathers. The father and mother, the wife, the child. Everyone is here all the time.”¹

And as he is talking, all of the loved ones from his family who had died appear at the table, laughing, talking, and eating. The people we remember are right here, within us and next to us. They'll come home with us and break the fast. They'll stay with us as long as we let them.

My cast of characters populating my Yizkor table includes my Uncle Howard, Uncle Howie, and Aunt Jay, among others. As I remember them, I remind myself why I remember them. They each had a part in building the person I grew to be. Aunt Jay, my grandmother's sister, taught me that people die by virtue of being the first person I knew who died. Uncle Howard taught me how to take a right turn without swinging the car in a wide arc to the left. Uncle Howie showed me that strong and masculine can also be loving and caring.

Yizkor is a time to set aside recriminations and regrets and the burden of unspoken intentions and thoughts and mourn together. We have all lost someone. If not a direct relative, then a grandparent or great-uncle or distant cousin or the person after whom we are named. I know some embrace the custom not to stay in the sanctuary for Yizkor while you have living parents. Please understand that this is a custom, not a mandate. Equally powerful is the suggestion that for Kaddish to be valid, there have to be people present who are not saying Kaddish to hear and respond to the Kaddish. We don't say Amen to our own berakha. We need someone else to say Amen to our Kaddish, to bear witness to our faith.

I'll conclude with a story about the father of Dr. Louis Finkelstein², who was the rabbi of a synagogue in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

It happened in that congregation, as it sometimes does, that the Rabbi and the Hazzan quarreled. May God protect us from it ever happening here. The congregation took sides, and the quarrel escalated until finally the congregation decided that both of them, the Rabbi and the Hazzan, had to leave.

Years later, this rabbi moved to another congregation and much to his surprise, he found that Hazzan a member of the synagogue. For years, each week, the rabbi would walk from his seat to the middle of the room where the speaker's stand was in order to give his sermon. On the way he would have to pass the seat of the former Hazzan, and the two of them would ignore each other. Not a single word of greeting passed their lips.

And then the rabbi's wife died. The children worried about how their father would survive the enormous loss. During shiva, the house was full and his mind was occupied, but they worried about how he would manage after shiva. One day, soon after the completion of the shiva, they came to see him and they found him, much to their surprise, all excited.

1. ~misattributed to IBSinger. It's really Romain Rolland. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Jle3FoFCpM>

2. Dr. Louis Finkelstein was one of the greatest Judaic scholars of the 20th century and was the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary from the 1940's to the 1970's.

“Do you know who came to see me today?” he said. “It was the hazzan.” The children were surprised that after so many years of stony silence, the two men would have made up, and they asked their father: “What did he say?”

The father said: “He said to me, Reb Shimon, *mir halten shoin baide bai neilah; lomir zich iberbeten*.” We are both already at the neilah stage in our lives. We are both closer to the end than to the beginning, so let us make up.

And they did. And from that day on till the day that the rabbi died, the two of them played chess together every single afternoon.

Let that story be a lesson to each of us. We are all one year older than we were at this moment a year ago. We are all a year closer to the neilah stage in our lives. Let us make up.³

Yizkor is a reminder that life is too short to bear grudges. Our health can turn on a dime. At any given moment, we don't know our future. Each cycle of breathe is a precious gift. Let us now turn to the Yizkor memorial service and let us remember, and let us vow to use that memory to create stronger bonds with those who are still with us.

3. from the writings of Rabbi Friedman z"l of Temple Hillel, Woodmere, NY