

Goodbye used to mean goodbye.¹ When we parted from our dear relatives and friends, we truly didn't know whether we would see them, speak to them, or even hear from them by mail, ever again. This was true 100 - 150 years ago when many of our grandparents or great-grandparents immigrated to this country, not expecting to see or speak to family members left behind ever again, and it was still partially true 50 years ago, when the cost of long distance communication was a significant barrier to keeping in touch. Communication was at best sporadic. Back in those days, most of the time, you had no idea what those you leave behind were doing from day to day much less from hour to hour. Did you travel abroad 40 years ago? Recall that your parents probably had no idea where you were. If you were the parent whose children took a summer backpacking trip across Europe, maybe you had a vague notion that your child was going to be in France on a certain Wednesday, but she and her traveling companion might have decided to take an extra day in England or go to Belgium instead, and you would have no idea where they were. That's why every goodbye, each God be with you, was a rehearsal for death. It was preparation and practice for a permanent loss. And that's why the Talmud teaches:

One who sees his friend after thirty days have passed since last seeing him recites: Blessed... Who has given us life, sustained us and brought us to this time. One who sees his friend after twelve months recites: Blessed... Who revives the dead. [Berakhot 58b]

What a different world we live in! Now, goodbye means no more than I'll see you again in living color tomorrow on my communication device, I'll hear from you later this evening, we'll talk or message the moment a thought pops into my head that I think you'll enjoy. If I change my plans on the fly, you'll expect me to update you immediately. You'll follow me on Instagram or Facebook and you'll have a good idea of what I'm doing all day long because you'll see pictures of my food and my activities and me with my friends at frequent or regular intervals.

This means that goodbye is no longer a kind of rehearsal for death. We have no practice for feeling and understanding loss. Much of the permanence of saying goodbye has been lost to us. But I do think we need the practice. We need to practice experiencing loss before we actually experience loss.

Jewish funeral rituals used to provide a fixed structure for saying this final, permanent, goodbye, but for many people, the language of Shiva, Sheloshim, a year of mourning and saying Kaddish, Yahrtzeit and Yizkor is a lost art. The rituals that guided us to say goodbye and live with the grief are too often seen as a burden, rather than a normal, emotionally healthy, process of recovery.

I can't solve the whole Jewish mourning practice today, but I can ask you to focus on just one small piece of it that occurs four times a year, and that is the practice of Yizkor, the memorial service that we experience on Yom Kippur and on three of the major Festivals of Shemini Atzeret in two weeks, Pesah, and Shavuot.

There is a custom that people who have not lost a parent should leave the room during Yizkor. This is based on a superstition, rooted in a story in the Talmud [Yevamot 106a], that the jealousy of those without parents will give those with parents the ayin hara, the evil eye, resulting in the death of their parents. I have said before that I think this is a mistaken custom for two reasons; one halakhically practical, and the other, psychologically practical.

1. This sermon was inspired and enriched by an article by Rabbi Jack Moline entitled, "Never Can Say Goodbye," <https://www.jackmoline.com/weekly-column/archives/12-2021>

First, during the yizkor service, we say kaddish. Kaddish is meant to be said in a community to proclaim one's faith in God, and to engage the members of the community as witnesses. We don't say Amen to our own blessing, we don't say amen to our own kaddish. We need someone else, someone who is not saying kaddish, to say amen to our kaddish. And if everyone who is not saying kaddish leaves the room, there is no one left in the room to witness our proclamation of faith.

Second, I want to suggest that engaging in the Yizkor service, even without reciting the specific yizkor prayers, is a rehearsal for saying goodbye. We may never have had a first degree relative pass away – yet. But at that moment, when we are physically, emotionally, and spiritually, surrounded by family and friends who have had to say that final goodbye, the reality is inescapable. Each of us is one day closer to losing someone, each of us is one day closer to death. Yizkor is the rehearsal of an awareness that each of us is mortal, as is each person around us. Death is inevitable.

Leaving the room for yizkor is an avoidance of the reality of death. In a medieval world in which the process of dying was fairly public, along with death and burial itself, sheltering people from Yizkor was fairly harmless. But in a world in which death is sanitized, hidden away behind curtains in hospitals or institutions, placed out of sight in funeral homes and inside caskets, better that we take the opportunity to sit for 10 minutes with the reality of someday saying a final goodbye.

I am not suggesting that the rehearsal makes the actual moment of death any easier. No matter how many Yizkor services you've sat through, the loss of a loved one hits hard and you feel that again the first time you mention their name in a Yizkor prayer. But the more time you spend in Yizkor, in the act of remembering, the more comfortable you are visiting, with your thoughts and memories, the world of *olam haba*, in the world of people who have died.

So please, today, consider staying in the room as we communally remember those who have passed away. Say a Yizkor prayer for one of the Ahavas Israel members we lost this year. Say a Yizkor prayer for a person after whom you are named. Say a prayer to support the people sitting next to you who lost a part of themselves that they will never recover when they said goodbye. And if you are saying Yizkor prayers for a parent, a child, a sibling, or a spouse, consider making this gathering four times a year a part of your memorial process. May your memories be a healing balm for your soul.