



## **Yizkor, Shemini Atzeret 5780:**

### **Mourning and Dancing at the Same Time**

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Athletes and actresses and others for whom peak performance is most important often have elaborate game-day rituals: wearing a certain article of clothing, for example, making sure to eat particular foods, or repeating a favorite mantra. And for me, as a rabbi, there is also one tradition that I practice unfailingly in the course of my work - one which has to do with funerals. Whenever I enter the gates of a cemetery, it is my custom to immediately turn off the radio that is ever playing in my car in accordance with the Jewish values of *k'vod hamet* (showing respect for the dead) and *loeg larash* (not flaunting one's ability to do enjoyable things in the presence of those who cannot). Music seems incongruous in a cemetery, even within the closed confines of my car; it feels an affront both to the departed and also to those who have come to mourn them.

While this first piece of my cemetery ritual comes quite naturally, the second piece of the ritual is often harder and yet, perhaps, is even more important. When my vehicle eventually leaves the cemetery gates, I force myself to immediately turn the radio back on – no matter what the funeral was like, no matter how well I knew the deceased, no matter how sad I still may feel. There are times that this ritual is an act of permission - an acknowledgement that it is ok to witness grief and loss without becoming personally consumed by it, a reminder that one can attend a funeral and still wish to hear beautiful music on the car ride home. There are other times, however, when this ritual is an act of will – an attempt to keep sadness at bay and accelerate the transition back into every-day life despite the very

strong pull of melancholy feelings. It is hard to move from joy to sorrow and back to joy again. And yet, that is exactly what Jewish tradition often has us do!

Over the holiday of Sukkot we read in the Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) one of Judaism's favorite meditations on the life experience of the human being: "A season is set for everything, a time for every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). As we well know, Kohelet tells us that there is a time to be born and a time to die, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to weep and a time to laugh. But are we always granted the luxury of having our lives so neatly and conveniently compartmentalized? The great Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, critiques the Biblical verse when he writes: "A man doesn't have time in his life to have time for everything. He doesn't have seasons enough to have a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes was wrong about that." Amichai goes on to say that "A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment, to laugh and cry with the same eyes, with the same hands to throw stones and gather them, to make love in war and war in love." Essentially Amichai is saying that our lives are full of situations when we are forced to feel conflicting emotions at the same time, when we are called upon to attend to disparate needs, requiring of us disparate resources and reserves, in the very same moment. Life is perhaps easy enough when we are able to mourn and then to dance. The great challenge is to be able to mourn and to dance at the exact same time.

This morning we gather together for Yizkor, Jewish tradition's service of remembrance and honor. We mourn and dance simultaneously, interrupting our jubilant holiday festivities to stand in memory of our loved ones, now departed, hearts heavy with sadness and grief. For many of us here mourning and dancing together is nothing new, for it is – in fact – at times of our greatest joy when the absence of our loved ones is most acutely felt – at holidays, at weddings, at graduation ceremonies and the birth of new

babies. We smile through our tears and cry along with our laughter – so happy to have reached these sacred milestones and yet so sad to be arriving alone without our loved ones here beside us.

A man doesn't have time in his life to have time for everything," writes Amichai. "He doesn't have seasons enough to have a season for every purpose." Or perhaps it is instead that our seasons are always colliding with one another, that it is quite rare to have time solely for one thing because of the concurrent demands of its very opposite. A parent's death coincides with the birth of a new child or grand-child; a man loses his job just in time for his son's bar mitzvah; one sister begins chemotherapy while the other prepares to walk down the aisle. More often than we would like, we are called upon to embrace great challenges, and these challenges frequently occur just as we stand poised to enjoy another of life's many pleasures. Joy and sorrow mix in the same moment.

There is never a good time to face serious illness or marital discord or major depression or the loss of a loved one. While certain circumstances may be particularly inopportune, the demands of modern life almost always make it difficult to devote ourselves entirely to our struggles, even as we try our best to give them the grave attention that they deserve. As we watch our children develop and our parents decline, as we delight in the achievements of our spouses even as we see our own careers falter, as we walk the world with a mourner's heavy heart yet remain hopefully on the lookout for experiences of beauty and joy, we live with the very tension that Amichai describes. We try our hardest to mourn and to dance at the very same time.

One of the reasons that I find Yizkor so meaningful is that it helps us to create that designated space for grief that is so often elusive in today's hectic times. We join together with our community, with others who have also experienced painful losses, and take the time to mourn and mourn alone – unencumbered by other responsibilities and distractions. We luxuriate in our memories – the sound of a loved one's voice, the smell of her skin, the not-so-funny joke he always used to tell, the special smile she reserved just for us. We also luxuriate in our mourning – allowing ourselves to truly feel the terrible sadness and longing that goes along with loving and losing a treasured family member or friend. Just as Jewish tradition has the mourner buffeted from the demands of everyday life during shiva so that she can begin to find healing and comfort in this new, radically altered sphere of existence, so too does Yizkor allow us to take time for our grief and ultimately to find consolation. It is one of Ecclesiastes' sacred times to mourn.

The Yizkor service comes abruptly to an end, however, and forces us immediately back into the familiar rhythms of Musaf. The radio is turned back on; we are reminded that despite our losses life marches forward. The presence of Yizkor in our worship doesn't keep us from joyfully singing *Eyn Keloheyynu* or *Adon Olam* later in the service; it doesn't prevent us from having a festive Kiddush lunch. It is hard to move from joy to sorrow and back to joy again. And yet this is what Jewish tradition has us do.

We are all trying our best to mourn and to dance at the same time, to create space to honor our losses while still making room to celebrate all that is so very good and joyful in our world. Some of us here have experienced recent deaths and still bear the jagged, fresh wounds of the grief-stricken. Others remember loved ones long departed, saddened to think about how very much time has passed since our close ones died. Some of us stand today in the very heart of the paradox that Amichai described – soon

anticipating weddings or births or *b'nai mitzvah* even while struggling to recover from fresh tragedies and heart-breaks; others of us struggle with the more general challenge of grieving our losses amidst the busy, chaotic, wonderful adventure that is life. It is not always easy to turn the radio back on, to laugh and cry with the same eyes. It is so very important to try and do so nonetheless.

*Zichronam livracha* – may the memories of our loved ones be a blessing to us - in our mourning and in our dancing.

The Yizkor service begins on page \_\_\_\_.