

How in the World? – Yizkor Shavuot 5780

It is said that the people of Rome spoke of the great artist, Michelangelo, as a man with four souls because he excelled in architecture, sculpture, poetry, and painting. His vast skill produced many of the world's most beautiful buildings and statues including, of course, his iconic rendering of the Biblical King David. When Michelangelo was on his death bed, a group of friends gathered at his side. One said sadly, "Michelangelo, how in the world will Rome ever get along without you?" With a weak wave of his hand in the direction of the window, pointing vaguely towards the landscape of the city below, Michelangelo answered: "Rome will never be without me." And so it was and so it remains, over 400 years since the great man's death.

How in the world will we ever get along without you? Those of us who have lost someone dear are all too familiar with the impossible question. How in the world will we ever make it through the initial days of grief, our entire life upended by your absence? How in the world will we ever make it through the months that follow, when life has ostensibly returned back to "normal" yet, of course, is anything but. How will we ever be able to celebrate milestones and achievements and times of great joy without you there to share them? How will we ever make it through the dark moments without you there for support? One need not have created some of the most famous sculptures ever known to humankind in order to leave a gaping absence when he ultimately passes on. How in the world will we ever get along without you? It is so very hard to imagine it.

This morning we gather together for Yizkor, Judaism's sacred hour of remembrance and honor. We call to mind those treasured individuals without whom we thought we could never get along, the loved ones so integral to our very being that life in their absence seems impossible. At Yizkor we feel the full weight

of our losses, the quiet missing that accompanies each day invited to claim its full power. And at Yizkor we also marvel, just a bit, at the resilience of the human spirit – the fact that we have, indeed, continued to move forward in the wake of terrible grief. We have found a way to carry on even without our dear ones here beside us.

Some of us this morning are marking losses that are quite new, the pain still fresh and raw, lives not yet fully adjusted to the dramatic change in our circumstances. And others of us mourn for those who have been gone a long while, patterns and routines shifted to accommodate the absence no matter still how deeply felt. Over the years there have been graduations and weddings, new jobs and new babies where, despite the missing seat at the table, we surprised ourselves by feeling genuine happiness. There have been difficult decisions that we somehow were able to make on our own, Jewish holidays that we managed to get through even without our favorite seder-leader present, so many new things we learned to do for ourselves. You'd be proud that I figured out how make a meal that involves more than boiling water; you'd be amazed that I actually went down to our place in Florida all on my own this winter; you wouldn't believe it but I've actually become quite good at working the grill and doing taxes. Your birthday was hard but my kids got so much joy out of eating chocolate cake in their Bubbe's honor. We really missed you at Thanksgiving but I've taken over carving duties and didn't do half bad. Family vacation felt so different this year but we made a picnic at your favorite spot and toasted you with lemonade. I wasn't sure I'd want to put up the sukkah but the kids insisted and it really looks great. How in the world will we ever get along without you? It hasn't been easy but we're slowly making our way.

Gathering together this morning for Yizkor, in the midst of a pandemic that has already claimed over 350,000 human lives, more than 100,000 in the United States, including members of this congregation

and their loved ones, our questions only deepen and multiply. How in the world will we ever get along, knowing that we weren't able to give you the burial you properly deserved, filled with all the faces of people whose lives you touched? How in the world will we come to peace with the fact that you died alone, in isolation, rather than surrounded by those who love you so much? How in the world will we find comfort, robbed during this time of mourning of familiar rituals and community that would bring solace, instead sitting shiva alone and reciting Kaddish over Zoom. How in the world can we understand the weight of all this loss – imagining the 350,000 faces, names, and personalities behind the mere number.

Perhaps one of the gifts that veteran mourners can give to newer ones is that the very fact of their existence affirms that life goes on, even amidst tremendous sadness and loss. The keriah ribbon that we tear at a funeral represents the enormous, permanent upheaval brought on by death – a rip, even re-sewn, can never again be made complete. We move out of our makom kavua (our fixed seats) in the synagogue and scoop earth with an overturned shovel to indicate that our lives have been totally upended. We feel like we'll never again be happy or whole or at peace.

And then, with time, we find a way forward. Shiva turns to sheloshim and eventually, to yahrtzeit; we surprise ourselves by smiling or laughing or maybe even forgetting, just for a moment, we are so very sad. The rocks that we place on gravestones at a cemetery remind us that despite how hard and intractable grief seems, as strong and unrelenting as stone, it is capable of turning into heat and light just as rock, when scratched hard enough, eventually emits a spark. Even on our darkest days, we take hope that better ones are to come. The presence of others who have walked this path and lived to tell the tale helps us remember the inner strength and resilience lying at the heart of the human spirit.

When Michelangelo said, “Rome will never be without me,” perhaps there was in his statement a note of hubris, a sense that he alone could transcend the limits of human mortality because of the greatness of his works, but I also see in the artist’s words a note of comfort. Rome will never be without Michelangelo because he’s left something behind which will endure, a legacy to be enjoyed even after the sculptor passed on. And our friends and relatives, now departed, have done the very same for us. Rather than statues or buildings, our cherished ones have left us with stories and memories, lessons and encouragements, unfinished works for us to help them complete, hopes and dreams that we will try our best to realize. And our loved ones, too, have left us with physical reminders of their presence whether in the letters they wrote to us in our youth or favorite recipes we now make in their name, a well-worn *tallit* passed down from one generation to the next, a new baby which bears her auntie’s name, a growing toddler whose lopsided smile looks just like his grandfather’s did. We wear their jewelry and don their ties, tell their jokes and give to the charities they valued, keep their pictures on the mantel-piece and wear the bands that they gave to us in marriage. We miss them dearly and yearn to hug them or laugh with them or listen to their sage advice once more, yet we’re never really without them. They are instead a part of us.

And so this morning we turn to the Yizkor prayers, words of honor for those whom we love so deeply and we miss so much. How in the world will we ever get along without them? It certainly is not easy. But by carrying them close, embracing the healing powers of time, and trusting in the resilience of the human spirit we will move forward. And we will never be totally without them as they instead live deep within us.

Y’hi zichram baruch– May our loved ones’ memories be for a blessing. We now rise for the Yizkor service on page _____.