



Yizkor 5780: After Psalm 90

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A thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

“According to an old fable,” teaches Rabbi Hillel Silverman, “the devils were assembled at a convention. Their theme—how to do their work more effectively.”

One said, “When I want to get my work done, I convince people that there is no God. People then do everything I want them to do. They are not accountable, they’re not responsible.” The second one said: “I do it a little differently. I say to them ‘You can believe in God, but you don’t have to follow all the laws and commandments. The Bible is not true. So you’re on your own.’ When he’s on his own, he’s doing my thing.” The third devil said: “I don’t use either of these devices. I tell them there is a God and the Bible is true. But what’s your hurry? You’ve got plenty of time!”ⁱ

We always think we have more time. Yizkor reminds us that time is the most precious thing we have, and that every year, every day, we have less. Rabbi Joseph Potasnik tells the poignant story of officiating at a memorial service for a young parent:

Speaking to his only child, a boy of eleven years old, I asked him what he remembered most about his father. He thought for a moment and said, “He bought me a lot of toys and spent a lot of time with me. Rabbi, you can have the toys, but I want the time.”ⁱⁱ

I want the time. What we would give, for more time. The time itself is not always easy; I have witnessed seemingly endless vigils by hospital beds, the deep pain of caregiving through illness, the shock that comes with sudden death. I remember saying to a woman once how hard it must be to be sitting by her husband’s side as he spent his final days unconscious. “No,” she said gently, her words much wiser than mine as she held his hand in her own. “I’m grateful for every moment we still have.”

A thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

When we know the days go quickly, we live them in different ways. And so the psalm goes on:

Teach us to number our days, that we may grow wise in heart.

What is a wise heart? A heart that knows that our days are numbered. A heart that knows that everything ends. Rabbi David Wolpe writes:

The human heart is not a sculpture. It is a mosaic. Our hearts resemble stained-glass windows. You can see where the pieces are joined, the cracks and fissures. But soldered



together they let in light and cast radiant images. There is a composite beauty. Life offers great joy alongside overwhelming sadness. At times we are moved to neglect one or the other, to speak only of enjoying God's blessings, or to shake our fists at the sky in fury for all the pain. To hold joy or sorrow alone oversimplifies the stained glass, multi-hued heart. Hearts that are too defended in this world, that avoid being hurt or broken, end up worn and wasted, in the way that an old, rusted clock, unpolished, unwound, uncherished, will no longer run. When the Talmudic Rabbi Alexandri defined the difference between God and human beings he did not speak in terms of power, or creativity or eternity. People, he said, are ashamed to use broken vessels. God cares only for broken vessels. We are those broken vessels. Our promise is in that brokenness, that beauty. The light shines through the fragments of each shattered, treasured heart.ⁱⁱⁱ

We come to Yizkor, and our hearts are broken. A wise heart is a heart that has been broken open. Open to knowing that the measure of love is loss. Open to knowing that we cannot stand as solitary figures on the horizons of our solitary lives. Open to the vulnerability of being cared for, and caring for each other. Open to mourn, and open to give comfort.

Rabbi Naomi Levy's father died when she was fifteen years old. Here is what she remembered:

When my father died, there were many people in my house during the shiva, the week of mourning. They would look at us children and shake their heads in pity. Periodically, someone would come over and say, "Keep a stiff upper lip. You have to be strong for your mother." But one man stood with me right outside the kitchen. He had that thick, dumb-sounding but street-wise Brooklyn accent. Short, bald, pudgy, and wearing a striped button-down shirt, he said, "I just wanted to tell you something." I thought to myself, "Oh no, what brilliant piece of advice is this one going to have?" He leaned over, and his eye slit up as he began to speak: "Your father and me, we were second cousins, we grew up down the block from each other. I was much poorer than he was, and he was pretty poor, and one day your father saw me looking at his roller skates. I knew how much your father loved his roller skates, but he says to me, 'Take them. I want you to have them.' That's the kind of person your father was. I'll never forget him for giving me those skates. That's all I wanted to tell you." And he walked away.

I don't know who that man was with the thick Brooklyn accent. But he cast a spell over me and, for a brief moment, let me forget my grief. Instead of reminding me of what I had just lost, he actually added to my stockpile of memories of my father... he offered me the comfort of memory in the middle of my sadness. He didn't try to change the subject, lecture me on the art of mourning, or pity me. He gave me a jewel, a memory, a small piece of my father that I did not have before. A piece of my father that always makes me smile.^{iv}

Similarly, Margaret Renkl recalls:



When my mother died, I saved every card, every letter, every enclosure that came with every flower arrangement or potted plant. I printed out every email. I even copied all the Facebook messages into a Word document and printed that out, too. I was desperate to hold onto any shred of evidence that her life mattered, and to far more people than just my brother and sister and me. I needed to keep learning about her from others, now that she was no longer here to keep revealing herself in real time. I needed to be reminded that my own memories were not the only ones keeping her in the world.

On the very worst days in the months that followed her sudden death, I pulled out those reminders and read them again and again and again... A condolence letter is a gift to the recipient, but it's a gift to the writer, too. Remembering someone you loved is a way of remembering who you were, a way of linking your own past and present. Even when you love only the survivor — even if you hardly knew, or never met, the mourned beloved, you know something crucial: You know that person had a hand in creating someone you love. A condolence letter confirms the necessity of connection, one human heart to another. It's a way of saying, "We belong to one another."^v

Teach us to number our days, that we may grow wise in heart.

When our hearts grow wiser, our hands grow wiser. We act differently in the world. And so the psalmist says:

O let the work of our hands endure.

Yizkor asks us this question: What is the work of our hands? What have we done for others, and not just for ourselves? What is our legacy? What will last? We remember those we loved and lost by putting up stones in their memory and leaving pebbles on top, trying to find what is solid and enduring in the midst of so much absence. As the days and years pass we begin to grasp what they meant to us, what they will always mean in our lives. But what our lives will mean when they are ended is in our hands, each and every moment that we live.

A story has been making the rounds this year which I want to share, as we are immersed in our remembrances and approaching the end of Yom Kippur. It was written by a bookseller, Christine Turel, who recounts how a "lovably kooky" older woman approached her counter in the middle of the day:

Ok. I think to myself. Awesomely happy, weird little old ladies are my favourite kind of customer. They're thrilled about everything and they're comfortably bananas. I can have a good time with this one. So we chat and it's nice.

Then this kid, who's been up my counter a few times to gather his school textbooks, comes up in line behind her. She turns around to him and, out of nowhere, demands



that he put his textbooks on the counter. He's confused but she explains that she's going to buy his textbooks.

He goes sheetrock white. He refuses and adamantly insists that she can't do that. It's like, \$400 worth of textbooks. She, this tiny old woman, boldly takes them out of his hands, throws them on the counter and turns to me with an intense stare and tells me to put them on her bill. The kid at this point is practically in tears. He's confused and shocked and grateful. Then she turns to him and says 'you need chocolate.' She starts grabbing handfuls of chocolates and putting them in her pile.

He keeps asking her 'why are you doing this?' She responds 'Do you like Harry Potter?' and throws a copy of the new Cursed Child on the pile too.

Finally, she's done and I ring her up for a crazy amount of money. She pays and asks me to please give the kid a few bags for his stuff. While I'm bagging up her merchandise the kid hugs her. We're both telling her how amazing she is and what an awesome thing she's done. She turns to both of us and says probably one of the most profound, unscripted things I've ever had someone say:

'It's important to be kind. You can't know all the times that you've hurt people in tiny, significant ways. It's easy to be cruel without meaning to be. There's nothing you can do about that. But you can choose to be kind. Be kind.'

The kid thanks her again and leaves. I tell her again how awesome she is. She's staring out the door after him and says to me: 'My son is a homeless meth addict. I don't know what I did. I see that boy and I see the man my son could have been if someone had chosen to be kind to him at just the right time.'^{vi}

But this isn't just a story about kindness. It's a story about how every life has its heartbreak; every life has its wrong turns and regrets. Every life has its legacy, and we shape it every day. We remember those whose lives have ended, and we dedicate ourselves to living in such a way that we can say: *let the work of our hands endure.*

And so, on this day, when we remember losses old and new, we turn once more to ancient words:

A thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

We do not have endless time.

Teach us to number our days, that we may grow wise in heart.

We live with broken hearts.



O let the work of our hands endure.

The choice is in our hands.

ⁱ Rabbi Hillel E. Silverman, in Elkins, Dov, and Pettit, Anne, *For Those Left Behind: A Jewish Anthology of Comfort and Healing* (Mazo Publishers, 2016), pp.116-17.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.174.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.66.

^{iv} Rabbi Naomi Levy, *To Begin Again* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), pp.101-2.

^v Margaret Renkl, "The Gift of Shared Grief," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2019

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/04/opinion/death-grief-condolences.html>).

^{vi} <http://forreadingaddicts.co.uk/news/bookstore-employee-shares-amazing-story-after-encounter-with-tiny-old-woman/37788>.