

Yom Kippur 5761 2010 Beth Huppin Yizkor

I want to begin by thanking Rabbi Borodin for this opportunity to speak at Yizkor and for her willingness to share the bimah during these days of awe. Rabbi, your generosity and your ability to make space for others have truly enriched us. We are blessed to have you as our Rabbi and teacher.

I also want to acknowledge and thank Rabbi Ira Stone. I am indebted to him for the ideas regarding soul creation and the world to come that I will be discussing. And I would like to thank my parents and grandparents who taught me about the influence of a family table. Their positive example allowed me to make the connection between Rabbi Stone's teaching and the texts that I will be sharing today.

This year, as we approach Yizkor, my heart is heavier than usual. This summer marked the loss of 3 dear friends – my beloved teacher and mentor, Joyce Shane, my dear childhood friend and peer, Mimi Arfin, and my cherished, former camper and student, Josh Isaac. They left us much too soon after lengthy and difficult illnesses. Even as each carried a crushing physical burden, I watched in awe and I was deeply moved as they graciously and generously helped carry the burdens and joys of friends and loved ones.

I know that many others here today had overwhelming losses this year. Though every year the intensity of Yizkor differs for each of us, we all face this moment with the memory of people we have loved and miss deeply. Reflecting on their lives, we naturally wonder about our own life's purpose. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "Life's ultimate meaning remains obscure unless it is reflected upon in the face of death." (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, pg 366)

For me, connecting with other Jews throughout time and space who have reflected upon life's meaning always brings me comfort, so in my own sorrow I sought guidance from Jewish texts. And as I studied, I stumbled upon a text I'd seen before, but hadn't looked at closely. This time, it called out to me: "Darshaynee! Interpret me!" And it is this text that I want to share with you now.

It is from the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, a code of Jewish law written in the late 1800s in Hungary.

"The generous people who had fed the poor at their table should be buried in a coffin made of the boards of that table, as it is said in Isaiah 58:8: : v'halach l'fanecha tzidkecha 'And your tzedakah shall go before you.'" (kitzur shulchan aruch 199:1)

This text led me to another related text in a Musar book called Kav HaYashar written over 100 years earlier.

“It has been the custom in some places for some people to be buried in coffins which were made from the tables upon which they studied, or upon which they fed the poor, or upon which they worked faithfully at their trade.” (Kav HaYashar, chapter 46)

Literally, I know what these texts mean; But when I read any text, I want to know what values inspired it. I’m certain these texts aren’t technical accounts about how to make a coffin. Rather, they ask me to consider what tables can teach us about the mysteries of both life and death.

I’ve always thought a lot about tables and what they mean, perhaps because I inherited my grandmother’s table. My grandfather always sat at the head of that table where he capably and efficiently ran the ritual aspects of the holiday meals. But, somehow, I think of it as my grandmother’s table. Perhaps it is because the table always was overflowing with huge quantities of her lovingly prepared delicious food. Or perhaps it is because she refused to let us wash dishes after meals since she thought we should use our time together to sit at the table and visit. We could have visited while doing dishes, but she wanted us all together - at the table- for as long as possible.

Today, that same table sits in my house. I often tell my own guests that I remember sitting around that table at holidays with all the extended family and, of course, it wasn’t a proper holiday without guests at the table - young men serving in the military; students; members of the community who didn’t have an extended family in Spokane who became part of our family for the holiday; and the handful of newcomers my father and uncle and grandfather sought out at services that evening and brought home for the meal. There was always room for one more at my Grandmother’s table. And, if you went away hungry, as she would say, that was your own fault. But it wasn’t just food that was served. From my young eyes, at least, love was also served. And Acceptance. And Community. And Safety. I was nourished in every way at that table. And when my grandparents died and their furniture was being distributed, I somehow inherited the table.

I love that table because it represents the best of my grandparents’ values. Still, do I need the exact same table in my house in order to keep their values alive? What if my Grandmother had been buried with her table?

To answer these questions, I come back to the texts. I repeat the kitzur shulchan aruch text:

“The generous people who had fed the poor at their table should be buried in a coffin made of the boards of that table, as it is said in Isaiah 58:8: v’halach l’fanecha tzidkecha ‘And your tzedakah shall go before you.’” The tzedakah, in this text represented by the table, will go before us, presumably into the next world. The way we treated others at the meal table will accompany us and define us for all eternity.

The other text talks about 2 additional tables:

“It has been the custom in some places for some people to be buried in coffins which were made from the tables upon which they studied, or upon which they fed the poor, or upon which they worked faithfully at their trade. (Kav HaYashar, chapter 46)

What do these 3 tables have in common? Very simply, I believe they represent our opportunities for interactions with others. The table used to feed the poor indicates a meal of some kind. And conversation. And companionship. Like my Grandmother’s table.

The table used for study? Traditionally Jewish study is done in hevruta, meaning with a partner. There is no question that this form of study, with the right partner, is far more powerful than studying alone. Truly listening to someone and having that person truly listen to us forces us to clarify thoughts and to understand far more than would be possible alone. The French 20th century philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, refers to this potential deep connection as seeing the face of another person. He suggests that when truly seeing another’s face, we actually obtain a glimpse of the Infinite. And when our chevruta partner or any person who sits with us studying or sharing a meal or at any other time, becomes someone whose face we truly see, he or she becomes our Teacher. Seeing the Divine spark in another person allows us to learn Torah in the most profound sense of the word. Rabbi Stone writes that when this happens: “As our teacher, our relationship with him or her is transformed such that it achieves the status of our relationship with God.”

I believe the Rabbis understood this idea when it tells us that when Honi the Circlemaker awoke after 70 years of sleep and realized his friends were all dead, he cried out to God: “Oh hevruta, oh metuta,” “Give me my hevruta,— my study partner, my access to Your very presence, God – or give me death.” God had mercy on him and allowed him to die.

We have established, then, that both the table where we eat our meals and the table where we study include other people, and therefore the potential to experience the Divine through meaningful relationship with others. What about the table where, as the text says, “the person worked faithfully at his trade.” Even if we work alone, our clients, our boss, or our co-workers are impacted by what happens at our work table. We can help carry their burdens and joys by our actions, by our facial expressions, by our work ethic. I have never met a person whose work table doesn’t somehow present the opportunity to recognize God’s presence in others.

So, why was there a tradition to be buried on the table upon which we fed the poor, studied or worked faithfully at our trade? Perhaps it is because those tables are the inanimate objects that see most intimately how we behave. Whether it is the study, meal or work table, the table is a metaphor for how we interact with others. And, if any of the inanimate objects that witness our interactions with others could speak, objects symbolized in this text by our table, what would they say about us? If we were buried on our tables, would they go before us to God to bear witness to the positive qualities of our souls?

These texts require us to ask ourselves important questions: What happens when we sit at our tables? Do we include others? If so, what do we talk about? Do we talk about other people? Or, do we talk about ideas? What is the tone that we set? Do we gossip? Complain? Whine? Accuse others?

Or do we comfort? Study? Care for others? Do we articulate dreams? Alleviate pain? Share moments of joy?

Do we recognize the image of God in the faces of the people who sit with us at our tables?

Let's go back to my grandmother's table. I was blessed to have joyful table memories and I learned wonderful values at that table. But, I want to acknowledge that for some of us, the memories of family tables are painful. However, I want to suggest that we can also learn from those memories. Emotionally difficult table experiences can help us recognize in ourselves the potential to inflict pain on others and can help us avoid repeating that behavior.

I have no idea what my grandmother's childhood table memories were, but I do know that she and my grandfather had very difficult lives. Their childhoods were marked by losing parents and siblings at young ages, leaving their homes as teenagers and coming to a new country where their lives were not easy. When they met each other in Spokane, they had both already experienced great losses. After they married, there were more losses, and they ended up raising 4 orphaned relatives, as well as their own 3 children. They had very little money. They worked extremely hard. When I was a child I never thought much about the fact that before I knew them their lives were exceptionally difficult. To me, their home was filled with love. I realize now that they didn't use their pain to justify inflicting more pain on others. Instead, they generously opened their home and their table.

Unfortunately, we know that today there are more and more homes where regular table gatherings are rare. Everyone is too busy.

And if we don't have time for gathering around the table for meals, for study or for meaningful work with others, memories of gatherings around tables with people now dead are not enough to sustain us and create new memories into the future. Perhaps that is one reason why people were buried with their tables.

We remember loved ones and sometimes we think the values we saw at their tables define us—for good or for bad. But it is what we do with what they taught us that defines us. My grandmother's table, but itself, cannot welcome people. I may own her table, but the merit of her generosity is her merit, not mine. And if I came from a family that didn't care for others, I would still be able to make the choice to live my life differently. I can learn from that which I don't want to emulate as well as from that which I do want to emulate. Either way, I still have to make a choice about how I am going to act. As Rabbi Stone has written, no moment is neutral. Every moment represents a choice.

Today, as Yizkor approaches, we reflect on the choices made by loved ones and choices we still have the power to make. We are reminded that there is a limited amount of time in which to make those choices. Our body won't last forever. It is given to us at birth and we aren't given a choice about what it will look like or what its physical needs will be. Our body is a vessel which needs to be fed and cleaned. It is finite. It can get sick. Ultimately, it will die. But our soul is infinite. And what is it about our soul that makes it infinite? Rabbi Stone argues that while God breathes a soul into each of us, that soul is still ours to develop, to expand, to, as it were, create. How do we create our souls? Here is where I believe that the table is crucial.

When we sit with someone at a table, to eat, to study or to work we have the potential, as I discussed earlier, to really see the face of another person. Franz Rosenzweig, a 20th century German Jewish philosopher and colleague of Martin Buber, wrote in his book, *The Star of Redemption*, of the encounter with another person (pg 257) and reflects on the commandment, you shall love your neighbor as or "like" yourself - *kamocho*:

"...out of the infinite chaos of the world, a neighbor, his neighbor, is placed before his soul, and of him, to begin with exclusively of him, he is told: he is like you. 'Like you,' hence, not 'you.' You remain You and you will remain You. But he will not remain a He for you and hence only a This for your You; no, he is like you, like your You, a You like you, an I,- a soul."

Rabbi Stone also writes about the soul when describing our potential relationships with others. Building on Levinas' idea of seeing the face of the other, Rabbi Stone suggests that when we truly see the image of God in the other, when we are able to help carry his or her burden and escape our own natural tendency towards self-absorption, that is when our own soul is created. Our soul is ours to create – but it can't be created alone. To do that, we need to truly experience and care for another soul.

Rabbi Stone suggests that this is the moment of *olam habah* – the world to come - a taste of eternity because this is the moment that our soul is created and, unlike our body, our soul is eternal. That eternity of our soul is what we mean when we say *Olam Haba* – the world to come. Each time we truly make space for another human being – our soul – our infinite self – expands. Each moment that we sit at the table with another we have the potential to escape our self-absorption and enlarge our soul. As a result, the table is the concrete witness, not only to our deeds, but also to the creation of our soul.

Once we die, we can no longer sit at any table. We can no longer provide meals for those who are hungry. We can no longer show up at a shiva house or count in a minyan. Our hands can no longer knock on the door of a friend who is sad and we can no longer bring consolation or do acts of kindness. Those opportunities to create our soul by carrying the pain or joy of another exist only while we have bodies. In the next world, where we are purely soul, our soul lives into eternity reunited with the souls we helped create when we were present for them – including the people we loved and who loved us. Because we intersect meaningfully with others in the process of creating our own souls, we have the potential to help create and develop their souls as well. And

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they, as a result of developing their own souls, potentially are moved to recognize God's presence in others. This chain of soul creation and expansion can be infinite. Indirectly, we play a part in the ability and opportunity of those we have cared for to interact positively with others we may never meet. And as a result, we are connected to those souls as well. And since this intersection happens infinitely throughout time – back in generations until the beginning of time, as well as forward until the end of time, then by expanding our own souls each time we make space for another, we are also connecting with people we will never know, infinitely, through the present, into both the past and the future. And this is infinity. This is *olam habah*.

We don't know what happens after we die. But I believe that our souls spend eternity living with the results of the space we make for others while we are alive. This may be literal or it may be metaphorical – but it doesn't matter because either way, the kindnesses we extend to others do matter. This is why the text says our table goes before us into the next world. Our table will vouch for the creation and quality of our souls. I have no doubt that the symbolic tables of my friends Joyce, Mimi and Josh have spoken well of their beautiful souls. They made space for many people, including me and for that I will be forever grateful. I am comforted by the belief that though their bodies are gone, their souls and mine are now bound for eternity.

I want to end by going back to the beginning. At that time I acknowledged Rabbi Stone, my parents and my grandparents for providing inspiration for this *D'var Torah*. As I conclude I also want to thank those who inspired and taught them. These are people I never met, but without whom, Rabbi Stone, my parents and grandparents could not have taught me. And, in truth, I must also thank those who inspired the people who inspired them, and so on and so forth back to the beginning of time, because we must acknowledge that none of us came into this world on our own and none of us became who we are on our own. Each of us is indebted to many more people than we can ever know. In fact, the debt is infinite. As we remember our loved ones, we should also remember that there were people they remembered - people we didn't know. And so that debt of memory and gratefulness and soul creation goes back in time, just as we will be remembered and those who remember us will, in turn be remembered, and connected to our souls forward into time. As *Yizkor* begins, let us reflect upon the choices we can make to expand our own souls at our own tables, for this expansion of our souls is our gateway to *olam habah*. Perhaps our tables provide the opportunity to connect and reconnect eternally with both past and future generations of our loved ones.

G'mar hatimah Tovah