

Yizkor 5785: The Power of Presence

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Every Shabbat in Sioux City, Iowa, Sam would walk over to his grandson's Jules' home. He would pick him up and take him to synagogue. Then, they would spend the entire afternoon studying Talmud and reading stories together. I can tell you from personal experience that it's not easy to teach Talmud, let alone, I would imagine, to your own grandchild. But over time, it became clear that the only thing Sam loved more than Talmud was spending that precious time with his grandson Jules.

Jules would stay local for college. The two would continue to learn every Shabbat. Then, after he graduated, Jules would move to New York where he would study to become a rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

You might have thought that was the end of Sam's presence in Jules' life. Sam was in Iowa. Jules was in New York. Yet every week, Jules would write to his grandfather to share his Talmud learning. In addition to writing notes about his day, he would write little notes on paper explaining all the finer points of what he had studied, right down to the page he was learning in the book.

Then, one week, Jules got the call he knew would come. Sam had died. He gathered his things. He rushed back to Sioux City, lamenting that time he and his grandfather had not been alongside one another.

Yet when he arrived home there was a surprise waiting for him. Jules found a Book of the Talmud open on Sam's favorite chair. Embedded in between the pages, were all of Jules' letters. The student had become the master. His grandfather had been using Jules' notes to study. Jules realized in that moment that his presence had not been broken by the distance. Nor had their love diminished. Separated by hundreds of miles, his grandfather had still been studying Talmud alongside him all along.

What is the secret to immortality? How do our memories continue to endure, long past our time in this world?

I've always been struck by the words of the Kotzker Rebbe who remarked that the key to our own immortality is in remembering that Jewish parents have two choices. "We can force our children to study Torah; or, we can devote some of our own time to studying Torah alongside them." He goes on to say that "If we do the former, our children may instruct their children to study. But if we do the latter, and you study Torah alongside your children, you will find your children learning at your side [forever]."

Indeed, it is through this beautiful teaching that we can learn a lesson about the power of presence. Rabbi Brad Artson writes that when we give our presence—our time, love, and attention—to a child, we teach them a sense of worth, "providing a firm base on which to stand for the rest of his or her life." No doubt this was a lesson understood by Sam. He felt it deep inside his kishkes every Shabbat that he would spend with Jules, knowing not only that he was making a difference, but memories together.

But there was also, as our story points out, an everlasting quality to their study that transcended not only the miles apart, but in space and time. And it is here, I believe that as we come to Yizkor, we may also find a lesson that is instructive to us, as we aspire to be remembered, just as we recall our loved ones whose memories we immortalize today.

Why as Jews, is our presence—our love, patience, and undivided attention—in the lives of our children and grandchildren so important? And how does living an intentional life of being present with those we care about ensure that we are not forgotten?

First and foremost, I think that our story of Jules and Sam points out that living a life of presence is immortalizing because it creates the opportunity for us to be teachers. And I don't mean teachers in a conventional sense of a subject matter, but teachers on the road of life. There is a beautiful passage in the Talmud...it's actually on the wall

of the pool at the JCC...that teaches that all Jewish parents have the obligation to teach their children Torah, a trade, and to swim. The first two seem rather conventional. But why swimming? It's not because swimming is a life skill. It's because swimming is a metaphor for how children born into this world struggle against the current, and how it is our job as parents to teach them how to find their way back to shore. Good teachers, the ones we remember, understand that their job isn't only to teach skills, it's about giving them a part of ourselves. That's what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel meant when he once remarked that Jewish parents are not "textbooks but text people. It's the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget." Echoing this sentiment is Adam Gopnik writing in the New Yorker, who once remarked that there is a difference between gurus and teachers. A guru he writes, "gives us himself and then his system; [but] a teacher gives us his subject, and then ourselves."

That's how we become worthy of being remembered. It's when we teach and give the gift of our presence.

Why else is your presence such a powerful vehicle for memory? It's because our presence in the life of our children transforms ordinary moments into holy ones; and it is into these holy moments which we infuse our feelings and our memories. He may not have been thinking about Sam and Rabbi Jules, but Dr. Yosef Chaim Yerushalmi wrote that when we study Talmud alongside our children that our memories of learning become embodied in Jewish rituals and text. It is these holy moments of time, presence, and endearment that grip our children, that lead them to take hold of us and carry us alongside them forever.

Some of us teach Talmud (I may be the only one). Others teach our children to learn to ride a bicycle. We help them with their math homework. We help them with dance routines for their recitals. We can work with them to master those skills. But ultimately, what we cannot forget is that what we are actually doing is leaving imprints of memories and emotions that are far more important. We leave them a part of ourselves, and that is the text, according to Rabbi Heschel, they will never forget. Father of modern psychology Carl Jung once pointed out "that one [may] look back with appreciation to brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings...for it is that warmth that is the vital element for growing the soul of a child." Our kids may not be interested in geometry, bike riding, dance, or decoding a page of Talmud: but they will remember that you did it with them. They will remember your love, your pride in their success. They will remember the way that you made them feel forever.

Therefore, at last, I would argue that giving our presence in this life ensures that we never leave them, not in this life, nor the next. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that "To be a Jew is to be part of a living memory." for "Jewish time is not linear but cyclical, [with] the past liv[ing] in the present [each time] we recall and retell the story of our ancestors." This commitment that we make to recall and retell the story of our ancestors is the promise we make each time we come to Yizkor. It is the promise we make every time we retell the story of their presence in our lives. It may surprise you to find out that the Rabbi Jules in our story was not just any "Jules," but would go on to become the famous Rabbi Jules Harlow, the man who wrote the conservative machzor that synagogues across the country used for decades on the High Holy Days. Rabbi Harlow passed away in February of this past year. But when we recite the service that he crafted, we retell his story. We become a part of that chain from Sam to Jules that continues with us.

In our home, we have a beautiful needlepoint of a woman lighting Shabbat candles. Growing up, Baba Betty would cover her hair in a kerchief, show her granddaughter Amy how to say techinas, prayers on behalf of their family, like she had learned as a little girl in the shtetl. She passed away a little more than a year ago at 99 years old. But I have no doubt that somewhere in Olam Habah, every time that we *bensch* licht, that she becomes a living memory lighting Shabbat candles alongside us. When I close my eyes, I can see the glow and it transcends time and place. Her needlepoint that now hangs in our home was her *yerushah*, her gift to us.

My grandfather Herb, who Zev and Haley call "Old Zayde" is still living thank God, at 96 years old. But I can still recall how growing up he would call our home every Erev Shabbos and ask me about the Torah portion. I honestly didn't know the answer at least half of the time, but I always cherished that time we spent discussing and learning Torah together. We may today be separated by a distance from New Jersey to Atlanta, no greater than Jules and Sam Harlow. But I know that when Zev and I sit and discuss the parasha, or when I wrap Zev in my tallis during tefillot like

I would hide under his, that he is also studying with us, transcending that distance in time and space, carving out his own memories and his own immortality in this world.

The graffiti artist Banksy once said that people die twice. We die when we die a physical death. But “we die a second time when someone says our name for the last time.”

Perhaps, that is why so many of us come to Yizkor. We all have names we want to remember. But let us not forget that what makes a person immortal, what makes them worthy of being remembered, isn't just a name. Today, the people we remember at Yizkor most fondly, those who will always remain at our side, are those who taught us how to swim. We affirm that it is not the textbooks, but the text-people whose lessons we continue to read. We recall that what was memorable wasn't what they taught us, but their presence, the attention they gave us, and how they made us feel.

Yogi Berra once famously quipped: “the future ain't what it used to be.” Certainly, at this moment of Yom Kippur, we recognize that we all live with moments of regret. We regret moments when we failed to be present. We mourn that the time was never enough to leave the imprint we would've wanted. We wish there hadn't been such distance from Iowa to New York, let alone to Atlanta.

But then, on our day of atonement, we flip through the pages of the book. We recall how Sam had placed Jules' notes in between the pages of his Talmud. What we find at Yizkor in our Machzor are also little notes and memories that are tucked into our souls and hearts. Like Jules, we find comfort in these pages. We realize just how much we continue to always mean to them, even after they are gone.

We may not recall how to ride a bike. We may struggle to decode a page of Talmud. But today, on the day of atonement, what we can never forget is the way they made us feel. As we swim through the seas of life, we know they may be physically gone, but because they studied Torah alongside us they remain a living memory. We swim because of them. We smile because of them. We cry because of them. Their life lessons continue to guide us. Their love continues to endure.

May we never forget that this is the power of being present: the secret to our own immortality, the way that we Jews remember one another from one generation to the next.