

Yizkor

Yom Kippur Yizkor Sermon

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim

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Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander

(With much gratitude to my colleagues, Ed Feinstein, Deborah Prinz, Aaron Sherman, Charles Sherman and Josh Taub)

We've heard it and said it, "time heals all wounds." And this is true, though mainly of minor wounds—rude waiters, traffic jams, a bruised ego—are all forgotten with the passage of time. With time, the smaller irritations and aggravations of life fade into the background.

But real pain—the debilitating loss of those we love, the excruciating loneliness after they are gone—these never fully go away. The tear in our hearts, like the symbolic tear in a *k'riyah* ribbon, can be mended—but its scar will always show. Yet, over time, the sweetness of memory does soften the bitterness of loss. The pain, the loneliness—they're still there, but they mellow as we remember, and as the years go on. As we shared on Rosh Hashanah: *Gam zeh ya'avov*—this, too, shall pass.

Tennis star Arthur Ashe was far too young when AIDS ended his life. To his young daughter, Camera, he wrote a loving farewell letter in which he said: "I may not be walking with you all the way, or even much of the way, as I walk with you now. Don't be angry with me if I'm not there in person, alive and well, when you need me. I would like nothing more than to be with you always.... [But] Camera, when you feel sick at heart and weary of life, or when you stumble and fall and don't know if you can get up again—think of me. I will be watching and smiling and cheering you on."

Our Shabbat *Siddur*, our prayer book, suggests that "memory can only tell us what we were in company with those we loved; it cannot help us find what each of us alone must now become." But I'm not sure that's wholly accurate. Is it not reassuring to consider that our loved ones are watching, smiling, cheering us on, perhaps even helping us back to our feet as we struggle to live this journey we call life? When our lives sparkle with beauty, they are watching; when our lives are filled with laughter, they are watching; when we succeed in our endeavors at home and in the marketplace, they are watching; and when our success is derailed and our lives are painful, they are watching and cheering us on.

A beautiful story is told about a young man and his father. The son loved the game of football, but he wasn't blessed with sufficient size to make his way off the bench and onto the playing field. Nevertheless, his father always encouraged him and attended every game on the schedule.

When this young man got to college, he tried out for the football team as a "walk-on," and with his relentless determination and hard work, he not only impressed the coach, he also made the team. In fact, his commitment and tireless effort inspired the entire team to raise its level of play. Sharing in his son's excitement, the father purchased season tickets and never missed a

game—though through four years of college, four football seasons, the young man had yet to play a single down in an actual game.

At the end of his senior football season, during the final week of practice before the big play-off game, the coach called the young man aside and gave him a telegram that had just arrived. As he read it, the student became very silent. He swallowed hard and said: “My father died this morning; is it all right if I miss practice today?”

The coach put his arm gently around the young man’s shoulder and said: “Son, take the rest of the week off. Go home and don’t even think about the game on Saturday.”

Saturday arrived and the game wasn’t going well. Suddenly, out of the tunnel, the young man appeared in uniform—much to the surprise of the coach and the team. With compassion, the coach told him: “Son, I thought I told you to be with your family.” But the young man pleaded. “Coach,” he said, “please let me play. I’ve got to play today.” The game was too close and the coach tried to ignore him. But the young man badgered and badgered until the coach relented and put him in the game.

The rest of the story is the stuff of legends. The young man ran, passed, blocked, and tackled like a star. In the end, he intercepted a pass and scored the winning touchdown. In the locker room after the game, the coach approached the young man and said: “Son, what the heck got into you? How did you do it?”

The young man looked at the coach, tears in his eyes, and said: “Well, you know my dad died. But did you know that Dad was blind? Dad came to all my games, but today was the first time he could see me play, and I wanted to show him that I could do it.”

We are challenged to live our lives, even in the shadow of our loss, not because we have something to prove, but rather because we have something to share. They are watching—our grandmothers and grandfathers, our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers, our sons and our daughters, our spouses, our friends, our dearest companions. How? From where? We do not know and Judaism, leaving a host of possibilities open, is careful not to tell us. But in our hearts we know it is so: They are watching and cheering us on.

In the words of poet, Juniata De Long:

Do not come when I am dead
To sit beside a low green mound,
Or bring the first gay daffodils
Because I love them so,
For I shall not be there.
You cannot find me there.

I will look up at you from the eyes
Of little children;
I will bend to meet you in the swaying boughs

Of bud-thrilled trees,
And caress you with the passionate sweep
Of storm-filled winds;
I will give you strength in your upward tread
Of everlasting hills;
I will cool your tired body in the flow
Of the limpid river;
I will warm your work-glorified hands through the glow
Of the winter fire;

I will soothe you into forgetfulness to the drop, drop,
Of the rain on the roof;
I will speak to you out of the rhymes
Of the Masters;
I will dance with you in the lilt
Of the violin,
And make your heart leap with the bursting cadence
Of the organ;
I will flood your soul with the flaming radiance
Of the sunrise,
And bring you peace in the tender rose and gold
Of the after-sunset.

All these have made me happy:
They are a part of me;
I shall become a part of them.
[And there you shall find me.]

The pain of loss will pass; and as we sense our loved ones watching, smiling, cheering us on,
may their memories ever remain with us, an abiding blessing. Amen.