

Yom Kippur 2017
The Jewish Center
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Yizkor: *The Replaceables*

It's Super Bowl Sunday and one particular fellow has an amazing seat: 10th row right at the 50 yard line. As the game is about to begin, he notices that the seat next to him is unoccupied. He leans over to the gentleman on the other side of the empty seat. "Can you believe it? Who would pay all this money for a ticket to the Super Bowl and then not use it?"

"Well actually the seat belongs to me," the man says. "I was supposed to come with my wife, but she passed away. This is the first Super Bowl we haven't been together in 30 years." "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that," the man says. "But couldn't you have given the ticket to a family member or friend?"

"No," the man says. "They're all at the funeral."

Returning to the topic of wearing white today:

The next reason I'd like to suggest has to do with how we order our priorities. We don't spend lots of time during the year thinking about our own mortality. But Yom Kippur reminds us to do exactly this. As the Rema writes, the kittle is the בגדי מתים – it's reminiscent of the shroud in which a person is buried.

We wear white to help put us in the frame of mind to confront our own death. And in fact, signs and symbols of mortality are everywhere on Yom Kippur:

- Like the person on his deathbed, we recite vidui;
- Vigorous, living people eat and drink, but we do not;
- Vigorous, living people procreate; but we abstain from intimacy of Yom Kippur;
- It's not just that we proclaim that the ספרי חיים and ספרי מתים are open today; we articulate all the graphic ways that people meet their end: מי בחרב ומי בהיה, מי במים ומי באש, ...
- And on top of it all we clothe ourselves in the shrouds of death.

Of course on one level we understand that coming face to face with mortality deepens our appreciation for life's fragility and gives us a sense of urgency. But I think there's something more going on.

There are three Biblical heroes of Yom Kippur: Moshe, Aharon and Eliyahu Ha-Navi.

- Moshe gives us the י"ג מדות – the thirteen attributes of divine mercy – that constitute the refrain of the day.
- Aharon gives us the Avodah – the Temple service that forms the backbone of Mussaf and looms in the background of our liturgical consciousness: We wax nostalgic for those ancient times and dream of a rebuilt בית המקדש.
- And Eliyahu gives us not only the soft still voice of ונתנה תוקף; he gives us the closing line of the day. When we call out הוא האלקים ה' seven times as Yom Kippur ebbs away, we're citing the very words he uttered on Har Carmel. He coined the phrase! [And in case

you think Yonah should be on our list, Chazal are quick to point out that he's a placeholder for Eliyahu. Yona, the Midrash says, was the boy on the edge of death that Eliyahu brought back to life.]

What's fascinating to notice is that the three heroes of the day share a common bond. They're the three individuals in Tanakh who are told by God exactly when they were going to die.

If today we're meant to confront our own mortality, perhaps there's something to be gleaned from the Biblical giants who found themselves in this selfsame circumstance. With the knowledge of their imminent demise looming, what did they do? How did they react? How did they occupy their time?

As the text makes plain, each of them had the same reaction. Each of them moved immediately to identify a successor. Each of them moved to make themselves replaceable.

- Moshe tapped his protégé Yehoshua to lead the Jewish people.
- Aharon clothed his son, Elazar in the priestly vestments.
- And Eliyahu passed his prophetic mantle to his student Elisha.

If today we can actually wrap our heads around the idea that tomorrow we may be gone, that knowledge should impel us not just to live more fully, but to think about what we will pass on to the next generation.

In a sermon he delivered in 1952, Rabbi Jung spoke about this very theme: their place. One day, sooner or later, you and I will be called away and what will matter, beyond tears and shocks, is that we have somebody worthy, able and willing to take our place. The people of Israel lives. This and the next generation will go on, but what ultimately matters is that we arrange for somebody to take their place, after they have gone to their eternal reward. This is what death means to the Jew. One day we shall be called away from our desks, telephones, committee meetings, family table, from our little amusements and disappointments, from our great worries and happier visions. Somebody else will preside over the business, somebody else will be the treasurer of the corporation or the engineer of the concern, somebody else will address the congregation, somebody else will teach or lead, or comfort, or advise. This is the normal, eternal course of things. It should not frighten us but it should concern us.

Some day, maybe tomorrow, or next week, or next year, or in 30, 40, 50 years during Yom Kippur, the 24 hours of fasting and affliction, the books of life and death will be open to us.⁷ We must ask ourselves: "Are we prepared? Who will take our place, who will do our job, will they who follow us do it well?" That should be our main concern. "Give us advice

So how do we do it? How do we make ourselves replaceable?

The first answer is to think about our children. It's no accident that we reserve for Erev Yom Kippur the most elaborate ברכת הבנים of the year. There will come a time when we won't be here; and they will. We have to instill in them the values that we hold most dear. As Rabbi Sacks puts it, "Children grow to the size of the ideals they see their parents live by, and the greatest gift we can give our children is high ideals." Of course we have to be role models. But every so often, we also have to articulate in words what it is we expect of them – what it is we dream for them.

The Gemara says there used to be a beautiful custom in Jerusalem: If children were fasting or learning to fast, their parents would take them to the elders of the city to receive a bracha and give them encouragement. Here were the bearers of the Jewish future; surely they needed to be held and cherished and blessed.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin said that when he became a rabbi, at his ordination, Rav Soloveitchik talked about the concept of *smicha*. Like Moshe and Yehoshua, it's the means by which the master confers upon his disciple the authority to give rabbinic direction and halakhic guidance to others. The word "lismoch" means to lean but the question is: who really leans on whom? You'd think the student who is receiving ordination is leaning on his teacher, on past generations of teachers whose tradition is being transmitted to him all the way from Sinai; but the Rav said: "if you ever see an older man with his hands [upon] a younger man, who is leaning on whom? Generally it's the older man leaning on the younger man!" The Rav looked at his students and said: "you're not leaning on me; I am the one who is leaning on you. Whatever I've learned and expounded, whatever new approach, insight or interpretation I have formulated, will die with me unless it lives through you".

Looking around at the state of American Jewry, there is assuredly nothing we can take for granted. We can pat ourselves on the back and say, "The Orthodox community is OK. We're going to make it." But the moment we become complacent about educating the next generation of Jews is the moment we slip into obsolescence. We need to create a generation of Jews whose Jewish knowledge and Jewish commitment exceeds our own. We need to imagine a world in which they could replace us and – not only would the Jewish world be undiminished – it would be stronger. If Jewish education isn't atop our list of communal priorities, then we will have made ourselves irreplaceable, bequeathing to the next generation an unfillable void.

But there's a second answer, too. Not everyone is raising little children. There's another way to make ourselves replaceable. And that's to attach ourselves to something that will outlive us.

Yehuda Leib Girst wrote a memoir about his time in the Lodz ghetto. In the lengthening shadows of the imminent liquidation, leaders of various movements began to air their confessions.

First came the Bundist. "I dedicated my life to my fellow Poles," he said. "But it was they who stabbed my brother, sold us to the executioner, sneered at our plight and looted our belongings at the first opportunity."

Then came the assimilationist and the academic who regretted having abandoned the people who had never abandoned hope.

And finally came the Zionist. “I know the land will rise,” he said. “Jews will one day live without fear on the sacred soil of Palestine. All the sacrifices will not have been in vain. What has sustained them was the faith of their fathers. What they need is the Torah to assure the faith of their children.”

The fate of those men in the waning days of the Lodz ghetto isn't known; but the fate of the causes for which they stood most assuredly is. To be part of a movement – to be part of an institution that we know will outlive us: That's how we make ourselves replaceable; that's how we assure the future of the Jewish people.

In this 100th year of our Center: To stand in this pulpit occupied by Rabbi Jung; to sit in these pews occupied by the great leaders of American Jewry; to sing the Tefillot sung by our forebears is to know that we are part of something transcendent. We're a family and a home to the members of our community; and a cornerstone for a movement with global aspirations. To be part of The Jewish Center, to be part of The Jewish people – is to be part of Jewish history and a Jewish destiny that will reach far beyond our mortal lives. The only question for us is what we'll contribute to the cause.

In a moment we're going to recite Yizkor. And we'll remember people who lived by these ethics: people who were counting on us to complete the work that they began. Our success will be measured in a currency not yet in circulation. Our success will be measured by the generation that says Yizkor for us. Let's make sure the memories we leave them are worth remembering.