

Remember Meⁱ

A Sermon for Yom Kippur Day 2018

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Shanah Tovah

As you may know, I am a National Park junkie. My husband, David, is a good sport as I build our vacation itineraries around maximizing the number of National Parks we can visit and the number of National Park magnets I can add to our considerable refrigerator collection. That is one reason we ended up at the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park on the last day of our summer vacation. But that wasn't the most important reason.

My father was barely 17 when he arrived in San Francisco as a torpedo man first class. He enjoyed exploring the city before being shipped out from Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay to the Philippines where he served on a PT boat during World War II.

He never spoke about his San Francisco escapades when my brothers and I were young. I did not learn about them until I spent a semester at San Francisco State University. He drove cross country in his old Econoline van to meet me and bring me and my boxes home at the end of the semester. He taught me how to drive a stick shift in that van on one of the steepest hills in San Francisco. While I showed him around my San Francisco, he showed me around the city of his youth. That included the San Francisco waterfront. He was a sailor through and through. He loved anything to do with being on or near the water or with any kind of boat. I remember us standing with him at the Fisherman's Wharf docks for what seemed like hours examining the features of each working boat moored there.

If you have been to San Francisco recently, you know that the area around Fisherman's Wharf has changed. It's noisy and crowded, not

with the shouts of fishmongers but with tourist attractions. After experiencing the disorienting hubbub there, I convinced David we should try the relatively new Maritime National Historical Park. It was far from the noise of Fisherman's Wharf and, of course, I could buy a magnet. But there was something deeper I really hoped to find: a piece of the San Francisco I remember sharing with my Dad. Indeed, as I walked through the exhibits in the Maritime Park's museum and down the pier examining its working replicas of 19th Century boats, I could not help saying to David over and over again, "Dad would have loved this," "Dad would have loved this." David agreed. And, because I knew how much my father would have enjoyed the boats and exhibits, I enjoyed them doubly well.

That is the power of remembering those we have lost and still love. As long as we remember them, we carry a part of them within us. That is how we can know what they would have said, what they would have liked, what they would have advised. We can see through their eyes and, hopefully, with at least some of their wisdom.

It has only been a little more than two years since my father's death so I was surprised that my memories brought me joy untinged with sadness.

My mourning process for my mother had been different. It took over three years before memories of my mother brought a smile without also eliciting a tear. Maybe our mother-daughter relationship was more complicated than the relationship I had with my father. Or maybe our physical distance made her loss harder to bear. There was so little I could do for her from so far away, though I called weekly and visited as often as possible.

It was different with my Dad. He began living with us in 2010. For six fulfilling and exhausting years, even after he moved down the street to assisted living in Harmony Hall, we spent at least part of everyday together. There is deep comfort in knowing we have done everything possible to make our loved ones' last years as comfortable, enjoyable and meaningful as possible.

The process of mourning is different for each of us. After each loss, we undergo a different journey. Some of the landmarks may be similar. Our initial numbness gives way to sometimes indescribable pain as our sense of loss becomes real. We may find ourselves disoriented in the strangest circumstances as we realize our loved ones are no longer there to see, to visit, to call, to care for and worry about. As we settle into our post-loss life, we adjust to daily, weekly, yearly schedules without them, even as our sense of loss resurfaces with each new holiday and experience lived without them by our sides. Hopefully, at some point sooner rather than later, the journey of mourning becomes easier. Whether after one year or two or three, we learn to live with their physical absence even as their continued presence in our lives begins to outshine our experience of their loss.

That is the power of remembering those we have lost and still love. Memories that, at first, painfully remind us of all we have lost gradually transform our sense of loss into an appreciation for what we were able to enjoy together, even if for not as long as we would have desired. Such memories help us along our own life's journey.

I like to think my Dad actually knew we were thinking of him as we walked around the Maritime Park and that he came to join us as we explored it this summer.

According to our ancient Rabbis, the division between this world and the next is permeable, allowing our loved ones to see and hear us, and to continue to care for and watch over us, from above. According to tradition, they also join us for special occasions. That is why I refer to our guests in the mezzanine section, our sanctuary's cupola, during happy occasions like B'nai Mitzvah, sure the family's ancestors are gathered around to stand witness and *shep nachas*, sharing in the joy from above. I am sure my parents were here with us last October to celebrate the *ufruf* of our son Yoni and daughter-in-law Maddie on this bimah.

But just as our best relationships in this world have an element of mutuality to them, so, too, our relationships with those who have moved

on to the next world. While they continue to care for us, we are to continue to care for them. That is why we recite Mourner's Kaddish for them for a period of time following their deaths and on the anniversary of their passing, on their *yahrzeit*. That is why we light a candle for them and give charity in their memory. That is why we recite Yizkor not only on Yom Kippur, as we will do in a few minutes, but also again in about two weeks on Shemini Atzeret and on the last days of Passover and Shavuot. We are to remember our loved ones on all our major holy days, when family traditionally gather. In this way, they are never truly missing from around our tables. Our ancient Rabbis believed these time-honored traditions not only help us on our journey of mourning. They believed, as do I, that those of us in the world of the living have a responsibility to those who have passed on to the next world and that our efforts on their behalf assists them on their own journey there.

These traditional Jewish beliefs are surprisingly similar to a Mexican tradition I learned more about this summer when I finally saw the beautiful and touching movie *Coco*.

Maybe you saw it? *Coco* won an Oscar this year for best animation for good reason. The movie is not only for children. It is a movie about the power of remembering those we have lost and still love and how our memories shape who we are and who we can become. It is a movie for anyone who has ever lost a loved one or ever will, which is all of us.

Coco is the story of a young boy named Miguel who is magically transported to the Land of the Dead during preparations for *Dia de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead. The movie captures the celebratory tone of the holiday, when those in the Land of the Living prominently display photographs of deceased relatives and surround them with flowers and treats cooked especially for the deceased to enjoy on their journey between worlds. Lit candles are laid out to guide the beloved deceased to the land of the living. Stories are recounted of the relatives who are now gone but not forgotten. In the movie, when remembered in this world, the deceased receive a ticket to travel from the Land of the Dead to the

Land of the Living, just for the day, to check on their loved ones and descendants and enjoy the stories the living recount about them.

While in the Land of the Dead, Miguel meets a character named Hector who explains that there is a fate worse than death. It is the “second death,” fading into obscurity when no one in the Land of the Living remembers you anymore. This is something Hector fears will happen to him, for he knows he has not been thought about in a while. He is desperate to find someone who will take his photograph to the Land of the Living and find someone to remember him there. Together, Miguel and Hector undertake an extraordinary journey that unlocks the real stories of their lives and their connection to the movie’s Oscar winning song, *Remember Me*:

Remember me
 Though I have to say goodbye
 Remember me
 Don't let it make you cry
 For even if I'm far away I hold you in my heart
 I sing a secret song to you each night we are apart...

...If you close your eyes and let the music play
 Keep our love alive, I'll never fade away

...Remember me
 And let the love we have live on
 And know that I'm with you
 The only way that I can be
 So until you're in my arms again
 Remember me!ⁱⁱ

It is a beautiful song. While it means different things at different points in the movie, I hear it as an affirmation of the belief that our loved ones, though they seem so far away, remain with us in the only way they can, in spirit. While they no longer have a physical form, the song of their lives can still whisper to us as long as we keep them alive in our

thoughts. As long as we remember them, someday, hopefully far, far into our own futures, we will find ourselves back in their arms, reunited with them when we make our own journey across the bridge linking this world and the next.

At some point in our mourning process our tears end as we come to understand that love never fades as long as we remember them, as long as we continue to recount the story of their lives, as long as we continue to share our lives with them as if they were here, which in some ways they are, if only in memory.

That is the power of remembering those we have lost and still love.

According to Jewish tradition, we are to recite Mourner's Kaddish only for our immediate family, for a parent, a spouse, a sibling, God forbid, a child. While we can volunteer to be the designated "Kaddish" responsible for reciting the prayers for more distant relatives, as I have done for my maternal aunts, Jewish tradition does not generally assign such a weighty and, honestly, inconvenient responsibility beyond mourning for an immediate family member.

However, there are other ways to remember and honor our more distant relatives, whether grandparents or those further down on our family trees.

This is also one of the lessons that can be found in the movie *Coco*. Once Miguel arrives in the Land of the Dead, he immediately recognizes his great great grandmother, uncles and cousins, though they are literally only skeletons of their former selves. He recognizes them from the photographs his family lovingly displays of them each year on *Dia de los Muertos*. He knows their stories because his family continues to recount them each year.

How well do we know the stories of our grandparents, great grandparents, great great grandparents? Would we recognize our ancestors as Miguel does in *Coco*? Do we understand how the stories of their lives shaped our own? If we are lucky enough to be able to answer, "Yes," to any of these questions, it becomes our responsibility to pass on their photographs and recount their stories so their memories never fade away, so future generations have the benefit of their wisdom and

experiences and the comfort of knowing there are generations of ancestors who love them and are rooting for them from the next world.

I do not know if my father was actually walking with us in the Maritime Park on that sunny day in San Francisco. I do know that he was with me because I carry his memory with me in my heart everywhere I go. Though we are apart, the music of his life sings within me, keeping his love, his enthusiasm, and his wisdom alive even though we are physically apart, I in this world and he in the world to come.

Whether at home or on our travels, we carry our loved ones in our hearts wherever we go. How we remember them shapes our present and guides our future. It is up to us to keep their memories alive in this world by recounting their stories to our children and children's children, to other relatives, and to those who may have known them. In this way, our loved ones live on not only in the next world but also in this world, as the song that accompanies our own journey through life.

That is the power of remembering those we have lost and still love. As long as we remember them, they are not lost to us. As long as we remember them, we carry a part of them within us. That is how we can know what they would have said, what they would have liked, what they would have advised. We can see through their eyes and, hopefully, with at least some of their wisdom. *Zichronam Ivracha*, may their memories be for a blessing. And let us say, Amen.

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ⁱⁱ Excerpted from "Remember Me," written by Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez.