

Yizkor Yom Kippur 5784

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Let me tell you a story that happened five or six years ago. It was early on Shabbat, 1:15 am, to be exact, when my phone rang. We all know that when our phone rings at 1:15 in the middle of the night, it is probably not good news. I answered and heard the voice of a woman hardly able to talk say, "My son has just been removed from life support. He has been in a coma for the past several days and does not respond to anything. He is not expected to survive the night. Since it is Shabbat, I cannot get a rabbi to answer their phone let alone come to the hospital to say the Vidui prayers. Please, please; could you help us?"

Even though this is not something we usually do on Shabbat, I told her I would be there within an hour. When I arrived at the hospital, I immediately went to the room in ICU where they were, a room I have been in too many times. The parents were sitting by his bedside crying, preparing themselves to accept what was about to happen.

After introducing myself, I asked them for their son's English and Hebrew names. They told me it was Scott; Yisrael Ben Yehuda HaLevi v'Golda. He looked so young. Asking his age, they told me he was 32. To say I felt horrible would be a huge understatement.

When saying Vidui, which is what we call the Final Confessional, the person saying it must sit lower than the patient. I sat on the floor, took Yisrael's hand in mine, and began chanting Vidui.

When it was time to say Shema, I stopped and asked Yisrael's parents if they would like to sing it with me. They agreed. We started to sing: "Shema Yisrael, Ad-nai..." Then we stopped. We could not believe our ears. From the bed, we clearly heard the words "El-heinu, Ad-nai, Echad". Yisrael's parents and I looked at each other and completely lost it. We cried like babies.

Up until now, Yisrael had responded to nothing. We stood in amazement as we watched Scott open and close his eyes a few times. Even though I had never met that family before, I could not help but cry right along with them. There were no words to describe the moment. Describing it as a miracle would be an understatement of the greatest proportions. Neither Scott's parents nor I could say a word. All we could do is look at each other and spill tears from our eyes.

Again, without saying a word, I hugged Yisrael's parents and went home. I took a shower, changed my clothes, and went to the synagogue to lead Shabbat Services and name a baby. I am sure you can imagine what kind of emotional roller coaster I was on.

Expecting the worst, after Havdalah, when Shabbat ended, I called Scott's mother to see if anything had changed. She told me that the medical staff was shocked since Scott's condition was improving with every passing hour.

She then told me what had happened to her son. Somehow, he had tripped and banged his head on a cement wall, hitting his head again on a metal object that was attached to the floor. This had caused severe trauma to Scott's brain.

When he arrived at the hospital, he was completely unresponsive, but the parents insisted on artificial life support even though the doctors insisted it would not help.

After several days, the doctors convinced the family that their son would not survive, so they agreed to remove the artificial means of keeping Scott alive. Now, surprising everyone, Yisrael was improving. Everyone was pleased but remained in disbelief.

I called back the next morning and was told that Scott was well on his way to recovery, so much so, that they were talking about transferring him to a rehabilitation facility at the end of the week.

I called back the next afternoon and was told that Scott would probably be in rehab for two to three weeks and then should be able to go home. Then, to my surprise, his mother put Scott on the phone, and for the first time, he and I spoke. When I heard his voice, I have to admit that I cried again.

A couple of days later, my phone rang. It was Scott. He called to thank me for coming in the middle of the night on the Shabbat to say the Vidui for him and for helping his parents. It was then that I learned that the entire family is Orthodox. He shared with me that he never answered the phone on Shabbat, but his remarkable survival was causing him to rethink a lot of things. He then asked me my Hebrew Name so he could say a Mishabeirach prayer for my welfare as a way of thanking me. After that, we started talking about the power of the Shema.

Somehow, we got into a discussion about the reference to the P'til Techelet, the blue thread, that is mentioned in the Shema and how today's Orthodox community is becoming more and more accepting of returning to its use. This was a remarkable "conversation between the generations". We ended the call by Scott telling me he had been planning to go to Israel, and as it turned out, he went about two months later.

One day, not long after that, I received a text message from Scott. It said, "Did you receive a package from Israel today?"

I texted back, "I don't know. Let me check."

Being home, I opened the door and, sure enough, there it was; a package from Israel sitting in front of my door. I opened it and the tallit that I am wearing today was inside the package.

Rather than text, I called Scott to ask him what this was all about. He told me that he had commissioned this Tallit to be hand woven for me in gratitude. He knew it would be meaningful to me.

He told me that, from our conversation, he wanted the Tallit to be blue and with the P'til Techelet to represent the Mayim, the lower waters, or the planet earth, and the Shamayim, the upper waters, or the heavens.

He went on to explain that the rainbow represents G*d's promise to Noah to keep the waters in balance. He then said that he was sure that the Shema we sang together on this earth from his "death bed" had to have been heard in Shamayim. It was then when I noticed that the Tallit has my full Hebrew Name on the Atara spelled out in gold.

I know you will not believe this of any rabbi, but I was speechless. All I could do was to thank him and cry. We said our goodbyes and I went into the room where my wife, Lynne, was sitting. She asked me why I was crying. I showed her this Tallit and told her the story. We both cried so much, I found myself wishing that Scott had sent Noah's Ark along with the Tallit.

Scott and I started with a "conversation between the generations" by singing the Shema. It started in New Jersey and went to Shamayim; it came back to New Jersey and went to Israel; it then came back to New Jersey.

Let us think about this when we recite our Yizkor prayers since Yizkor is a most important "conversation between the generations". Yizkor is much more than a collection of random memories. Yizkor is when we become reacquainted with those who left the lower waters to enter the upper waters; who left Mayim to enter Shamayim. Yizkor is a way for us to demonstrate that you and I have the responsibility to continue those conversations. Yizkor allows us to demonstrate the meaning of the words, "L'dor Va'dor, from generation to generation".

Yes, you and I are important contributors to this ongoing conversation. Yizkor is when we recognize that those we came here to remember, continue to live on in us; continue to live through us. We ask them: "What do you think of what I am doing with my life? Are you proud of my accomplishments? What about my failures?" Even though, these conversations are sure to include both happy and sad moments, still we measure our lives against theirs as they remain alive within us.

It is no accident that when anyone teaches Talmud, we always quote the Sages in the present tense. We say, "Hillel says X... or Shammai says Y... or Rashi teaches..." This is because they are not part of the past; their teachings remain alive in the present. We continue to learn from them just as if they are sitting at the same table with us.

Yizkor is the perfect time for us to engage in conversations with those we love who went ahead of us to Olam Habah, to the World to Come. What are we still learning from them? What unfinished business do we want to close-out with them? What things did we fail to say to them that we can say now?

Think about these questions. Our relationship with our loved ones does not end when the graves are filled with earth. Our relationships with them just change. These eternal connections should serve to inspire us to always do what we have to do to leave the world just a little bit better than the way we found it by living and cherishing those little Jewish moments in our lives.

Shana Tova and now let us Yizkor.