

## **Rabbi Brad Bloom**

### **Yom Kippur Yizkor Sermonette - 2013**

We know that life goes on after the death of a loved one. We've all done it. Somehow we have found a safe place inside ourselves to put away the grief we once experienced at their passing. For some of us the pain goes away, like stitches that dissolve into our bodies. Sometimes, on the other hand, it lingers for a long time even though we carry on with the business of living day to day. We're practical, we recognize that we have responsibilities and obligations to others who need us and who rely upon us, and we somehow manage to numb the pain of loss over time. Of course, time itself offers us a healing balm, and with the distance of years we learn how to cope, even if the full impact of losing someone we loved doesn't show itself until after the initial year of mourning.

Questions still swirl around in our minds about their passing. Yet, there comes a point when we start to think about their lives beyond the circumstances of their deaths. Time gives us the opportunity to review their deeds in a broader perspective, arrive at an understanding about the meaning of their lives, and relate to them as a memory rather than a life presence. What did they do that endeared them to us and vice versa? What did we learn from them? How deeply are they bound to us in spiritual way and how can we feel their presence inside us in special moments or even seconds that life events trigger in the most unpredictable moments?

Are there not also unique moments when we think or imagine if their souls still exist in ways we cannot fathom? Yes, it may defy everything we know or believe about the finitude of life, yet, human kind has never settled for the idea that a person's soul dies with their body. Religion has tackled this question since the beginning of civilized society with each religion having its own response. Judaism has also its array of teachings that presuppose a life after death, and Jews have called it many names: Gan Eden, the Olam HaBah (the World to Come), the Academy on High, and many other examples. They all remind us that Jewish tradition teaches that the soul is eternal, even though we cannot verify or define by empirical means just how that works.

Jews today still struggle with that idea, and especially since many of us never heard growing up that Judaism does offer an active idea that the soul is eternal, or even that God judges the soul after it passes from life. Still, whatever our beliefs about mortality or immortality may be, we recite the El Maleh Rachamim which says "may his or her soul be bound up in the bonds of eternal life." The mourner's Kaddish does not mention a world to come or the idea of the eternal soul, yet, through the force of history and tradition, Kaddish takes us to a different state of mind that opens a doorway to the possibility that our prayers may impact what happens to the souls of our loved ones.

Reform Judaism has tried to emphasize more that our good deeds are what give our souls eternal life and that if we live by performing mitzvot we shall bequeath that eternal soul to the next generation and to all of us who survived and loved the deceased. We all have different ways of thinking about these profoundly personal matters, and there is no one right answer or tenet of our faith which says that every Jew must embrace this belief or that dogma. Yet, Judaism does affirm that one's good deeds are a powerful way of contributing to the world we live in, long after we have left this world.

In one particular tradition a Midrash teaches that in a person's lifetime, he or she has three friends: children, wealth, and good deeds. At the time of this one's departure from the world, should that person gather their children and say to them, "I beg you, come and save me from this punishment of death," they will reply, "Have you not heard that there is no prevailing over the day of death? Go in peace and rest on your couch."

At this, the parent gathers their wealth and says, "For you I labored night and day: I beg of you, redeem me from death." But the wealth of the person replies, "Have you not heard that wealth is of no avail on the day of passing away?" Then the person gathers all their good deeds, to whom that person says, "Come and save me from death- do not let me depart from the world."

The good deeds reply, "Go in peace. Even before you arrive in heaven we shall have come before you, as it is said, "Your charity shall go before you." (Isa. 59:8) Midrash Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer 34

What our sages knew in ancient time still rings true today. What metrics can one use to determine whether we deserve life eternal? Judaism teaches it is not only about what we believe or what ideas we swore allegiance to before our passing. The ultimate measure, according to this Midrash, is the record of our good deeds that will precede us into the kingdom of Heaven, whatever that concept may mean today.

My take on this midrash, then, is that, at the very least, when we can remember the deeds of the departed and share them with others, our loved ones' deeds will indeed have preceded them in the world to come, and precisely because they are still treasured in this world. We have a lot to do, therefore, to insure that the good things we have done while we are alive will be remembered, and that our presence will be felt by our families, long after we have departed this earth.

That is why I urge people to share the stories of their loved ones. Tell their stories and teach us what you learned from them. It is sometimes easy, for some, to focus only on the negative, and to forget the positive. For others, of course, it is tempting to forget a person's struggles, but even someone's failures can teach us great lessons, without referring to them in a disparaging way. Ultimately, it is when we honor them with our memory that we have gone on before them, to the world to come, and presented their case to God, without their ever knowing it. The beauty of it all is that the rabbis believed that what we do here and now can ultimately affect the realm of the world to come, even if that world is unfathomable to us.

It is through memory that we bestow grace and dignity upon the departed, as we remember them this afternoon at Yizkor. May it be God's will that we find that our loved ones' deeds have welcomed them all in the hereafter and bequeathed to the memory of their love and their goodness.

24:1 A Psalm of David. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.

24:2 For the Eternal has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.

24:3 Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord? Who shall stand in His holy place?

24:4 The one that has clean hands, and a pure heart; who has not taken My name in vain, and has not sworn deceitfully.

24:5 This one shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

24:6 Such is the generation of them that seek after Him, that seek Thy face, even Jacob. Selah