

Monuments of Memory
Yizkor –Yom Kippur 5779
Rabbi Uri Allen

Try to remember the kind of September
When life was slow and oh
so mellow.

Try to remember the kind of September
When grass was green and grain was yellow.

Try to remember the kind of September
When you were a tender and callow fellow.

Try to remember and if you remember
then follow.

Try to remember when life was so tender
When no one wept except the willow.

Try to remember when life was so tender
When dreams were kept beside your pillow.

Try to remember when life was so tender
When love was an ember about to billow.

Try to remember and if you remember
then follow.

Deep in December it's nice to remember
Although you know the snow will follow.

Deep in December it's nice to remember
Without a hurt the heart will hollow.

Deep in December
it's nice to remember

The fire of September that made you mellow.

Deep in December our hearts should remember and follow.

Today we have come to remember. We gather to follow our memories of loved ones now departed but not lost. We use this day of Yom Kippur, a day on which we rehearse our own mortal end, to call to mind our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters – and to hold them in our hearts as we as always do, surrounded by a supportive and steadfast community. Yizkor. We remember.

It's been about 3 and a half year since Sari's mom, Linda Roy died. That was fast. I know that I will never forget how long she has been gone, since Yedidyah, our youngest child, was born only five weeks before she left us. His age will always remind us how long we have lived without her. What a gift that she got to hold her third grandchild before passing away. The photograph that was taken just days before she passed, lying in a hospital bed, tubes protruding in many directions – with little Yedidyah laying on her chest brings tears to our eyes even although Linda looks as happy as can be. Our kids were her everything – I can only imagine that they still are.

The intervening years have been marked by so many ups and downs that it is hard to list them

all. Just the range of emotions between the birth of another child on the one hand and the loss of a parent on the other – we could say *dayenu* to that and really mean it. But of course there is always more. I can say that in our internal family life, it was hard to know where we stood at times. Transitions in our professional lives, in where we lived, each took their toll. Then two years ago, my father was diagnosed with ALS. This cruel disease has given us yet a new reality to face. Baruch Hashem, he is still with us, though there is only one way that ALS ends. We were a mess. All of our identities as partners, as parents and as children in our own right were challenged and in doubt. Our whole world was shook to the core and so our place in it was also in question.

I remember sharing some reflections at Linda's grave when we flew to Tucson for the unveiling. It is a teaching that I continue to share when officiating at unveilings. It is an idea related to the headstone. The Hebrew word for headstone is *matzevah*, which is perhaps best translated as a monument. Indeed – headstones all around the world stand in solemn testimony and respect for the person buried there. They are monuments to the lives of our loved ones and help us remember their best qualities and the ways in which they touched our lives. That is why in addition to names and dates, many, perhaps most matzevot include words like – Mother, Father, Sister, Brother, Bubbe, Zayde, soldier, pioneer, lover, child.

Monuments stir our memory just as they stir our imagination. Think about the great monuments of the United States. The sculpted stone, the grand columns, the etchings of texts on the walls. We build them to honor our past, to revere our heroes, and to think big about the future we might create armed with their legacy. We remember in the same thought as we dream. It is a hard thing to do – to hold the past together with a future that might never come to be. It is happy and sad at the same time, uplifting as well as depressing, life affirming as well as sometimes the opposite.

But the idea of a monument does not end with its ability in allowing us to experience those contradictory feelings at the same time. The word *matzevah* also carries another connotation, that of stability and firmness. Not only in the physical sense of a hard stone unmoved by the elements, but also in the sense that when we erect a matzevah, we hopefully return to some stability, to some sense of rootedness – of knowledge of our place in the world.

Our loved ones - our family and friends - are our stability. They are there for us when we succeed and when we fail. They heal us when we are sick and play with us when we are well. They offer a listening ear and a caring heart when we are troubled or need advice. They laugh at our dumb jokes even though they've heard them a hundred times. They cook for us. They clean for us. They love us. And we love them. They are our monuments.

I know that I don't have to explain to this group the layered mix of emotions that accompanies the death of a loved one. It can be destabilizing. It leaves us unsure of whom we are and what we are supposed to do now that they are gone.

Yet their capacity to continue serving as a steadying force is not lost despite their physical absence. Only now, we must rely on memory to help steady us. *Yizkor*. Our tradition is wise to suggest that at a stage of transition in the mourning process we might acknowledge how we have been tossed about as a ship on the ocean, and provides a way to help return us to firm ground. We place a *matzevah* a firm monument and a mark of stability

even as we know that we can never return to the kind of steadiness of our life before.

And when we return to visit our loved ones, our custom dictates that we don't bring flowers for though they are beautiful, they cannot give us the feeling of constancy that we need. They are fleeting. Jewish custom has us bring a stone – a mini *matzevah* if you will – something more weighty, with the ability to last, and stand the test of time.

Today we gather for Yom Kippur, the day of judgement, which among other things, commemorates the giving of the second set of two stone tablets of the Law that stand as permanent monuments to our relationship with God and the Jewish people. On them are carved the 10 core principles of our faith. They are our stability in the face of uncertainty. They served that purpose for those that came before us just as they will for generations to come.

The original tablets, the broken ones, were carried inside the ark along with the whole ones. An eternal testament to the notion that what was once broken can be made whole again. We don't ignore our past deeds, we carry them forward with us as a reminder to be better, to work towards better relationships, to strive for wholeness and holiness. Though they are broken, the original tablets are made of tough stuff that lasts. They are no less a *matzevah*, a technology of stability and firmness.

I want to invite us for a moment to imagine a different set of tablets. I want us to imagine a set of tablets that represent the core of the relationship with the people we are remembering this day. What are the commandments we will carve? What values stand in the center of that relationship? What teachings will we hold up and place as monuments to our loved ones? I invite us now to write these tablets in our hearts and minds and to erect a *matzevah*, better yet – to write a new Torah.
– a steady monument to our loved ones.

I invite us to rise and for a few moments of silence and private contemplation before we continue with the Yizkor service.