A Complex Memory

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5786 Rabbi Barry H. Block

The nineteenth century French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps is best known for making the Suez Canal a reality. Ships would no longer be forced to circumnavigate Africa as they transported people and goods from Europe to Asia or the other way around.

That success at Suez gave de Lesseps and the world confidence in a repeat performance, this time in Panama. But he failed. As historian David McCullough explains, de Lesseps miscalculated, imagining that a sea level canal could be possible in Central America as at Suez, then stubbornly sticking with that plan when it proved foolhardy. McCullough shares a contemporary account claiming that de Lesseps "'had hardly done anything at all in the isthmus.' The money, declared *The Times* of London was 'as clean as gone' as if it had been sunk in the North Atlantic."

De Lesseps' reputation was in tatters at the end of his life, facing claims of corruption and of squandering France's wealth and reputation. Still, McCullough writes, "It can also be said, and with certainty, that nothing whatever would have been accomplished at Panama had it not been for Ferdinand de Lesseps."[i]

We have gathered here today to remember our beloved dead. Our loved ones might not have operated on the world stage like Ferdinand de Lesspes; but like him, each of our beloved dead possessed an array of qualities and did a variety of things in their lives, not all of them entirely positive. Having met with hundreds of grieving families, hearing the stories of people who have recently died from those who knew them best, I am grateful that, almost always, overwhelmingly positive memories are shared. Still, most families share at least one story that offers a more nuanced—that is, realistic—picture of the person who has died.

During my last year of rabbinical school, Rabbi Maggie Wenig urged my classmates and me to speak truthfully at funerals. No, we should not harp on people's weaknesses or wrongdoing. Her point was that a person delivering a eulogy ought to consider "a more balanced oration, in which the speaker shows that a person's failings do not erase [their] merits."[ii]

Yizkor services are held four times a year—not only on Yom Kippur, but also at the end of the festivals of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. Today's Yizkor, though, has a unique resonance. On Yom Kippur, we may ask God for atonement of sins we have committed against another person only after we have made sincere attempts to be forgiven by the person we have harmed. But what if the person we

have sinned against is no longer living? Yizkor on Yom Kippur offers us an opportunity to ask their forgiveness before the gates of repentance begin to close.

Just as important, today's Yizkor offers us the opportunity to forgive our deceased loved ones. A few minutes ago, we read these poignant words by Cantor Linda Hirschhorn: "I do have an ongoing relationship with the dead, and I do think about the afterlife—my afterlife, that is—after someone I know dies: what happens to me afterwards, in my life…[I]n this afterlife of mine I am still in relationship with people who have died… During this *Yizkor* I am given the opportunity to forgive myself for cutting off that last conversation with my father [and] I have the opportunity to forgive my mother for her harsh ways; to let go of being angry—for my sake in this world, if not for her sake in the world to come."[iii]

I do not know more about Cantor Hirschhorn's mother, but I have heard mourners acknowledge that their now-deceased loved one had a short fuse, knew how to hold a grudge, was miserly, drank or smoked too much, or was too busy at work to be as present as they might when their children were young, among other common human failings. Sharing those memories is an important part of mourning, enabling us to grieve the whole person we loved.

This summer, Jewish singer-songwriter Neshama Carlebach wrote about a deceased loved one whose legacy is far more complex than those most of us confront. On the one hand, her father creatively transformed American Judaism. On the other, he committed unspeakable crimes against children. After she wrote an article acknowledging his wrongdoing, Carlebach received an outpouring of letters from people about "parents, grandparents, teachers, siblings, and spiritual leaders whose goodness was real and whose wrongs were also real." Carlebach adds a critical insight, "We grow when we learn to live in the uncomfortable space between truths, resisting the urge to turn people into saints or sinners. Both can be true…The love can be real, and the harm can be real. The goodness can be real, and so can the failure. Sometimes we love someone not because we failed to see who they are, but because there really is something good in them."[iv]

The person who worked tirelessly to feed the hungry might also have consistently invaded their adult children's privacy. The long marriage we celebrate at its end might have been temporarily interrupted decades ago by infidelity. The person who was so generous with charities was miserly with their family, or vice versa. We knew about their failings, and we loved them, and we revere their memories, all the same.

The loved ones we remember today were, like each of us, imperfect. Even the fondest of memories is complex. Even the most troubling of memories includes recollections of goodness and joy. Let each of their memories bring of blessing.

Amen.

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[i] David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870-1914*, Simon & Schuster, 1977, Chapter 8.
[ii] "Reform Judaism Magazine Explores the Rituals Surrounding the End of Life," https://urj.org/press-room/reform-judaism-magazine-explores-rituals-surrounding-end-life.
[iii] *Mishkan HaNefesh*: *Machzor for the Days of Awe*, New York: CCAR Press, 2015, p. 581.
[iv] Neshama Carlebach, "Less alone than I thought," *The Times of Israel*, August 19, 2026.