Passover Yizkor 5785

Shabbat Shalom! You may have heard me talk about this ritual before, a ritual found in the Mishnah and recently brought into our modern Jewish conversation by Rabbi Sharon Brous. This ritual used to occur in Jerusalem: Hundreds of thousands of our people would make a pilgrimage and gather at the Temple Mount, the holiest site in our tradition. Everyone who entered the large platform would circle around going to the right, moving as one community. Except, if someone there had something happen to them since the last pilgrimage - they had been ill, they had experienced something traumatic, they were feeling lonely, a loved one had died recently - they would circle to the left. Those folks, as they circled to the left, would be asked by those circling the opposite direction, "מה לך, What happened to you? Why do you circle to the left?" They would reply, "Because I am a mourner" or "Because I am alone", or whatever their situation was for moving to the left. And in response, the ones moving to the right would bless them: "May the holy one of blessing comfort you", "May the one who dwells in this house draw your community close to you." These interactions would happen throughout the pilgrimage, members of the community encountering one another, asking "מה לך, What happened to you?", listening for their response, and then providing them with a blessing for the road ahead.[1]

[1] Mishnah Middot 2:2

Tonight, as we gather for Yizkor, one of the four times throughout the year in which we gather for this commemoration, I'm thinking about these people, our ancestors, who would circle to the left because a loved one had died. I'm imagining their fellow community members asking them, מה לך, "What happened to you?", and then the mourners replying, "My beloved, they died. And I miss them so very much." And then perhaps they would share a memory or a story of their loved one, something about the way that they lived in the world. The person would listen, getting to know their loved one, taking on their memory as well. And then the people would part, with more interactions, more sharing of stories to come. In that moment of connection, there is a shift from an individual grieving, mourning, and remembering by themselves to a collective grieving, mourning, and remembering. And in that shift, from individual to collective, the memory of the loved one grows even more strongly.

Passover in particular, of all our holidays, is focused so intensely on collective memory. We are remembering the ways in which we, each of us, personally, left Egypt. Mishnah Pesachim makes this clear: “Bechol dor v’dor…In each and every generation a person must view themself as though they personally left Egypt, as it is stated: “And you shall tell your child on that day, saying: It is because of this which Adonai did for me when I came forth out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:8).[2] And yet, while we must take on this individual experience, we rely on each other, through an interactive seder, to help us take on this feeling of collective memory. In this way, our individual memory of escaping Egypt, of gaining freedom and liberation on our march toward the Promised Land, can only happen through a collective memory of freedom and liberation. It is not we alone who escaped Mitzrayim, the narrow place, but each of us, as part of the collective, making our way forward.

[2] Mishnah Pesachim 10

As we mark the end of Passover, there are other moments of collective remembrance approaching in the Jewish calendar. Just next week, we will mark Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, in which we will remember individuals, some of them our own family members, who were killed in the Holocaust, while also remembering the collective six million Jews who were killed during that most tragic time in our people's history. The following week is Yom Hazikaron, Israel's Memorial Day in which we remember individuals who fought to defend the state of Israel. And, as a way of understanding a broad collective of mourning, we also mark this day through the Joint Memorial Day Ceremony, with Israelis and Palestinians standing side by side, with and for each other, mourning the losses that they have experienced. And in the beginning of June, we will gather once again for Yizkor on Shavuot, our holiday celebrating the revelation of Torah on Mount Sinai. In each of these instances, our individual remembrances are strengthened through collective practices of mourning, grieving, and remembering.

Judaism as a whole understands this dynamic not only with holidays, but also with our mourning practices. When a loved one dies, we have community members volunteer to recite Psalms while they are prepared for burial. After the funeral, we have the ritual of gathering people for shiva, surrounding the bereaved with a community in which they can grieve, mourn, and share stories of the loved one. In order for us to say kaddish, our prayer in which we remember those who have died, we need a minyan, a gathering of ten people, so that we do this remembering together. And we see this dynamic at work with our ritual from the Mishnah, in which those who are in mourning are seen and recognized and loved by their fellow community members.

So too, tonight. For Yizkor, we not only sit in our seats and remember individually, but we take time, especially in this community, to grieve, mourn, and remember collectively. There is, of course, no pressure to share these precious memories of our loved ones, for we each grieve in our way and fashion. And yet, there is something powerful about sharing not only a name of a loved one, but a memory - the way that they smiled, their favorite food or experience, the lessons they learned during their life, or anything else that will bring their life and their memory into this holy space. After some prayers together, the invitation will be there for each of you, and for all of us, to remember. And, if you came here tonight without the need to explicitly mourn, the invitation is to hold space for our community members, to get to know their loved ones, and take on their memory as well.

INSERT PRAYER

We turn to Page 576 for Psalm 23.