

We have welcomed in Shabbat with light and joy and rest, we have embraced our time of recovenanting through Shavuot, we have celebrated with bride and groom, and now, we turn gently toward Yizkor, our service of remembering, of grief, of reflecting on our memories of those we have loved and love still, even though their physical presence is no longer with us. And we know that some in this room have come here specifically for this reason.

There's actually a part of this week's Torah portion, parshat Nasso, that helps lead us into our own memory on this night. It's about the Nazirite, who is a person who has taken a voluntary vow to dedicate their life to sacred service to God. The Nazirite, we learn, is not allowed to drink wine, or cut their hair. The Nazirite can be a man or a woman. And the Nazirite - *al nefesh met lo yavo* - they shall not go in where there is a person who has died. They're not permitted to come into contact with a *nefesh*, a soul, a person in this time of transition. They can't touch that person's body. They can't prepare them for burial or be part of burying them. Even, the text tells us, if the person is their parent or their sibling.

Perhaps this seems unfair to us or unkind to the Nazirite who would very possibly want to be near to or to help bury their loved one. And certainly many commentators try to find ways to both understand what this is about, as well as to find loopholes for getting around it.

But in a lot of ways, I think we **have** some idea of what this is about. We also sometimes try to avoid touching death. It is all consuming to touch death, to touch loss. Being with a person while they're dying, or confronting the mortality of our parents or siblings or friends or tragically, our children - these can be all-consuming, and life-altering, transformative experiences. We are different after them, after loss. When we touch death, our lives are changed. And so if the Nazirite is intended to be all consumed by God and service to God, then touching death - actually or metaphorically - would be a serious problem, potentially rupturing a Nazirite's singular focus and commitment to God.

But oh it is a very human thing to touch death. Actually and metaphorically. Because as much as it is all-consuming and at times devastating, it is also a part of life, unavoidable, normal, and ubiquitous. And so we can *understand* the Nazirite, but we are *not* the Nazirite. You have come here tonight to touch, to engage with, to ritualize, to come into contact with the reality of your loss - knowing that it has changed you. And that is a courageous and tender and loving thing.

Just over a year ago, my Uncle Lou died, *alav hashalom*. When it became clear that he was dying, my cousin called and asked if I would come. And so of course, I did. Our circle of family came as well. And many things happened in that room. Whispers of gratitude, apologies, forgivenesses, prayer, and loving embraces. And as he died, his daughter held his one hand and I held his other. He was alive and then he was not. And we, too, had touched death. With our words, with our hearts, with our hands. The death of a person we loved and love very much - our hands and his, the last physical connection between this world and whatever is next. And we were changed by this. It is all-consuming to touch the loss of our loved ones.

And it can be scary and sad and can throw us so existentially off-kilter to come into contact with loss that we aren't sure what to do next. How to come back from that place, how to make meaning of that place, how to understand ourselves in that place.

And yet, we, you come here into **this** place to touch loss and memory and bring it to your mind and to your heart again on this night. Because **you** know a deep truth. That one way to survive such a loss is to remember. Is to tell our stories. Is to say that which helps to make our loved ones present again here with us. Not to run from touching them, but to touch them all over with our words and our memories of who they were and what they gave us.

In our stories, we find that we can also touch **life**. My uncle was not just that moment. He was also every memory of Chanukah and Passover. He was the ridiculous letters that he sent me in the mail without identifying who they were from just to make me laugh. He was the giant extendable fork he used to eat pastrami off his brother's plate. He was the time the cousins were taking too long to decide on their afikomen rewards and so he took a pen and a board of matzah and he wrote the word afikomen on it and then ate the entire thing.

We have learned as a people that when we touch death, we try not to run from it. We run towards it as best we can, even if we stumble and trip and our words are clunky, and full of tears, we try to touch this all-consuming and life altering loss as best we can.

Rashi reflects on the Nazirite's situation, and he teaches that if a Nazirite did in fact touch a person who had died, which was forbidden to him or her, there were a few things that they then needed to do. They had to shave their head, they had to make a sacrifice. But the most powerful requirement is, as Rashi writes: "he shall again count the days of his Nazaritehood as though for the first time." So however many years they had vowed to be in God's service, they would have to start that over, beginning again from day one.

This makes so much sense. Doesn't it ring true that a person who has lost their parent, their sibling, their child, their beloved family member, their dearest friend - would need to start over again, now as something, as someone, new. We begin a new chapter of our lives - where once we walked with our person, now we take a step forward into the world without them, as though for the first time. A new thread of our story also begins. And we need to relearn how to be here, how to talk to other people, how to relate to the world without one of our limbs, our roots, our branches. We, too, start over, in a way.

Some of us have come here with a recent loss and perhaps your story is still finding its way to begin this new chapter. And some of you have come here many years after your loss, but you can trace back to the moment when this new chapter began in your story. It has been writing itself for a long time.

As we proceed into Yizkor now, we'll remember through the words of the 23rd Psalm that even as we are changed by our grief, in this valley of the shadow of death, we will never walk alone. We'll share our stories, we'll remember our loss as much as we remember their life, and we'll

touch the nefesh, the souls, of our loved ones now gone, with as much love and courage as we can.