Gleanings
Yizkor Shavuot 5786
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Today is Shavuot, the festival of Torah.

In our imagination, we stand again at Sinai. The mountain trembles. Thunder and lightning fill the wilderness. Moses ascends into the cloud, and a people who had only recently walked out of slavery now stand together to receive a way of life, a covenant, a sacred inheritance.

That is the grand image of this day.

And then our tradition gives us the Book of Ruth.

It is a small book, a quiet book, a deeply human book. There is no thunder in Ruth. No mountain trembling. No heavenly voice speaking from fire. The

Book of Ruth begins with hunger, with a family leaving home in search of food, and then with death.

Naomi leaves Bethlehem with her husband and two sons. She returns years later without them. Her husband Elimelech has died. Her sons, Machlon and Chilion, have died. When Naomi comes back to the town that once knew her, the women see her and say, “Can this be Naomi?” And Naomi answers with one of the most painful sentences in all of Tanach: “I went away full, and Adonai has brought me back empty.”

Anyone who has come to Yizkor understands something about that sentence.

Grief changes the way we understand fullness. A house can be full of people and still feel empty. A holiday table can have every seat filled except the

one seat that matters most in that moment. The room can be noisy, the food can be good, the family can be gathered, and still there is an absence that seems to have its own presence.

Naomi comes home carrying that emptiness. And Ruth comes with her.

Ruth's words to Naomi are among the most beloved words in the Bible: "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. Your God, my God."

We often hear those words as words of love, and they are. We hear them as words of conversion, and they become that too. But first they are words spoken in the aftermath of death. They are spoken by one widow to another widow, by one mourner to another mourner.

Ruth cannot bring Naomi's husband back. She cannot restore Naomi's sons. She cannot remove the ache from Naomi's heart. What she can do is walk beside her. She can refuse to let Naomi make the journey home alone.

That is where the healing in Ruth begins: with presence.

So much of what mourners need is not explanation. It is presence. Someone who will sit beside us. Someone who will let us say the same thing more than once. Someone who will understand that holidays can be hard, that joy can feel complicated, that memory can arrive without warning. Someone who will stay.

Ruth stays.

And then Ruth goes into the field.

She goes out to glean behind the harvesters. The Torah commands that the corners of the field be left for the poor, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. When the harvesters cut the grain, they are not to go back and gather every last stalk. Some of the harvest must remain at the edges, because someone else's life may depend on what is left there.

Ruth goes into the field and gathers what remains. A stalk here, a stalk there. It is slow work, humble work, probably exhausting work. By the end of the day she has gathered enough to bring home to Naomi, and that gleaning becomes the beginning of their survival.

I have been thinking about that image for Yizkor.

Because in many ways, this is what we do when we remember the people we have loved and lost. We glean.

After a death, we do not get the whole person back. We would give anything for another ordinary conversation, another Shabbat dinner, another phone call, another chance to ask the question we never asked or say the words we wish we had said. We would give anything for one more day when their presence was so familiar that we barely knew how much it held us.

What we have now are the gleanings.

A phrase they used. A recipe they made. The way they sat in a chair. The sound of their laugh from the

other room. Their handwriting on an old envelope. Their tallit bag in the closet. The advice they gave so often that we rolled our eyes when they were alive and find ourselves repeating now that they are gone.

Sometimes the gleanings are very small. A smell in the kitchen. A song on the radio. A joke nobody else would understand. A certain kind of candy in a drawer. The way they stood at the sink, or kissed us goodbye. The way they said our name.

These are small things only from the outside. In the life of memory, of Yizkor they are everything.

When I sit with families before a funeral, this is almost always where the truth comes out. We begin with the facts: where someone was born, what work they did, who they married, who their children and

grandchildren are. Those things matter. They give shape to a life.

But then someone says, “Every Sunday morning he made pancakes.” Or, “She always packed food for people to take home.” Or, “He never said ‘I love you’ easily, but he filled up my gas tank every time I came over.” Or, “She would call at the exact wrong time and somehow it was still the call I needed.”

That is when, even when they are gone the person begins to enter the room.

The general words are true, but the specific memories carry the soul. “She was generous” is true. “She cooked enough for twenty-five people when twelve were coming and then sent everyone home with leftovers” lets us see her. “He was loyal” is true. “He drove across town every week to visit a

friend who could no longer get out" lets us know him. "They loved their family" is true. The particular ways they loved their family are the torah they leave behind for us to carry.

Yizkor invites that kind of remembering. It asks us to go back into the field and gather carefully, to glean the remnants of what they left behind, praying we would come after they had reluctantly left us and pick them up.

And because today is Shavuot, there is that other layer to it.

On Shavuot we celebrate the giving of Torah. We imagine Torah coming to us from Sinai, from God, through Moses, through the words written on parchment or carved in stone tables and studied in

every generation. That is the Torah we name most easily.

There is also Torah that came to us through the people we remember today.

Some of them taught it with words. Many taught it by living.

They taught us how to make a home, how to show up for people, how to keep going when life was hard, how to laugh in the middle of tsuris, how to argue and still come back to the table, how to light candles, how to give tzedakah, how to care for an aging parent, how to hold a family together, how to begin again after heartbreak.

They also taught us, as Torah often does what not to do by their own example. In our memory they may

be saints (though a Jewish version for most), but in life they were human, flawed and complicated, stubborn and sometimes infuriating. But in the, “I love, but sometimes I don’t know what to do with you kinda way”

They may never have called any of that Torah. But it was Torah.

It was instruction. It was an inheritance. It was a way of being in the world passed from one life into another. Not only generation to generation as our tradition teaches but truly from heart to heart.

That is why the Book of Ruth belongs so beautifully to Shavuot and to Yizkor. Ruth receives no revelation at Sinai. She receives no tablets. She follows Naomi, gathers grain in a field, builds a life out of loyalty and kindness, and most of all love.

From that life comes Obed, then Jesse, then David. The story of Jewish kingship, and eventually the messianic hope itself, begins in a field with a widow picking up what the harvesters left behind.

That is remarkable, the future begins with gleaning what was left behind and sharing it with those we love and care for..

A life that seemed emptied out becomes, slowly and unexpectedly, a source of blessing. Naomi's story does not erase her grief. Ruth's love does not undo Naomi's losses. The child at the end of the book does not replace the husband and sons who died at the beginning. The Book of Ruth is wiser than that. It knows that loss remains loss.

But it also knows that what remains can still sustain life. What we gather from what's left over becomes

sustenance, it's not enough but add it to what we have and it will get us through the winters.

That may be one of the deepest truths of Yizkor. We come here like Naomi, empty and broken hearted. We come here because there are people we miss, people whose voices we long to hear, people who shaped us in ways we are still discovering. We come with grief that may be fresh or old, quiet or overwhelming, simple or complicated.

And we come to gather.

We gather the memories that still feed us. We gather the teachings that still guide us. We gather the love that still asks something of us.

Because memory in Judaism is never only about the past. Zachor — remember — always means that the

past has a claim on the present. We remember Egypt and therefore care for the stranger. We remember Sinai and therefore live by covenant. We remember Amalek and therefore resist cruelty. We remember our loved ones and therefore ask what part of their Torah we are meant to carry forward.

So before we rise for Yizkor, I want to invite each of us to enter that field for a moment.

Bring to mind one person whose name you carry today.

And choose one memory. Not the whole life. Not the full biography. One gleaning.

Maybe it is something they said. Maybe it is something they did. Maybe it is something they taught you without knowing they were teaching.

Maybe it is a moment so ordinary that nobody else in the world would understand why it matters, and yet for you it contains the whole person.

Hold that memory for a moment.

Ask what Torah is in it.

What did they leave you to live by? What kindness, what courage, what humour, what stubbornness, what tenderness, what responsibility, what faith? What did their life place in your hands?

Ruth went into the field and gathered what remained. From those gleanings, she and Naomi found enough strength for the next day, and then the day after that. We come to Yizkor in the same spirit. We gather what our loved ones left in the fields of our lives, and we pray that it will sustain us.

May the memories we gather this morning be a blessing.

May the Torah of those we love guide us.

May their souls be bound up in the bond of everlasting life.

And may we live in such a way that one day, when others enter the field of memory looking for us, they too will find something there that gives them strength, comfort, and blessing.

Amen.