Yizkor for the Last Day of Pesach

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

Today is the last day of Pesach.

The seders are behind us. The matzah is almost gone. Soon the dishes will be put away, and we will begin the slow return to ordinary time.

And right here, at the end of this festival of freedom, we stop and say Yizkor.

That is not accidental.

Because Pesach teaches us something important, not only about liberation, but also about grief.

The sea parts in a moment.

But the journey takes much longer.

The Israelites leave Egypt quickly. They are out. They are free. But getting out of Egypt and getting Egypt out of them are not the same thing.

Freedom begins in an instant.

Redemption takes time.

They carry fear with them. Trauma with them. Memory with them. They are no longer where they were, but they are not yet where they are going. And so they begin the long walk from the sea to Sinai, from liberation to revelation, from survival to meaning.

That is where we are in the Jewish calendar right now. We begin counting the Omer. We start walking toward Sinai.

And I think that is one of the reasons Yizkor comes here, on this day. Because mourning works that way too.

Loss happens in an instant.

One phone call. One final breath. One moment a person is here, and the next moment they are gone, and the world is no longer the same.

The rupture is immediate.

But grief, mourning, learning how to live in the world after that loss, that takes much longer.

That is the real journey.

People often know what to do at the beginning. There is a funeral. There is shiva. People bring food. They show up. There is structure. There are rituals. There is something to hold onto.

But what comes after that is often harder.

What comes after is the long stretch of absence.

It is waking up and remembering again.

It is setting the table and seeing the empty chair.

It is hearing a song, catching a scent, making a recipe, walking into a room, and feeling the absence all over again.

You do not get over the death of someone you love. You learn, slowly and unevenly, how to carry it. You learn how to keep living in a world that has been altered.

That is what so many of us bring into this room today.

Some of us are carrying very recent grief, grief that still feels raw and disorienting.

Some of us are carrying losses from years ago, even decades ago, and we know that grief does not disappear just because time has passed. It changes. It softens in some places. It catches us off guard in others. But it remains, because love remains.

This past year, my own family has known some of that grief too. Last February, my mother-in-law, Susan Mishler, died. Many of you heard me speak about her at Yom Kippur, so I will not repeat that today. But I will say this: when someone dies, what you miss is not only who they were in some general way. You miss the very specific ways they inhabited your life. Their voice. Their timing. Their place at the table. Their way of loving. Their way of making a family feel like a family.

And that is true for every person whose name we carry into Yizkor today.

Each soul is its own world.

Each relationship is different. Each loss is different. Even when we stand together and say the same prayers, each of us is holding something no one else can hold in exactly the same way.

That is why Judaism gives mourning structure.

Shiva.

Shloshim.

The year of mourning.

Yahrzeit.

Yizkor.

These are not meant to control grief, as if grief could be neatly managed. They are meant to accompany us through it. Our tradition understands that sorrow has its own weather, and so Judaism gives us ways to honor it, mark it, and live with it.

Yizkor literally means, “May God remember.”

That is a powerful phrase.

Because memory in Judaism is never passive.

Zachor. Remember.

The Torah says it again and again. Zachor that you were slaves in Egypt. Zachor the day you stood at

Sinai. Zachor what Amalek did to you. Zachor the stranger, because you know the heart of the stranger.

To remember, in Judaism, is not simply to look backward. It is to keep faith with what was. It is to let memory shape how we live now.

And that is true of Yizkor too.

We do not gather only to think about the dead. We gather to remember them in a way that keeps love alive, that keeps connection alive, that keeps responsibility alive.

We say their names.

We bring them into the sanctuary of our hearts.

We ask God to remember them.

And in doing so, we remember who we are because of them.

That feels especially important this year.

Because this has been a very heavy year for Jews.

A year of heartbreak.

A year of fear.

A year in which many of us have felt vulnerable, exposed, and deeply unsettled.

A year in which Jewish memory itself has felt very close to the surface, not abstract, not historical, but present and pressing.

Many of us are not only carrying personal losses into this room. We are carrying a communal ache too. A sense that the world has become harsher. A sense that Jewish sorrow is sometimes misunderstood. A sense that Jewish fear is often dismissed.

So when we stand for Yizkor this year, we do so not only as individuals remembering our beloved dead, but also as Jews who know what it means to live brokenhearted, to carry memory as a people.

That is part of our strength.

We remember.

We remember those we love.

We remember those we have lost.

We remember what our people have endured.

And memory, painful as it can be, is also what keeps us from becoming numb. It keeps us human. It keeps us tender. It keeps us accountable to love.

The old wounds do not vanish. But neither do the old loves.

And maybe that is one of the deepest truths Yizkor gives us.

The bond does not end. It changes.

The relationship changes. Presence becomes memory. Conversation becomes recollection. Touch becomes longing. But love does not disappear just because the person is no longer physically here.

That is why Yizkor, this essentially random date on the Jewish calendar, that occurs three other times throughout our year can undo us. And that is also why Yizkor matters.

Because in a world that is always pushing us to move on, Judaism says: stop. Remember. Make room. Let the heart speak. Let the tears come if they come. Let gratitude come if that is what comes. Let silence come if silence is what is true.

There is no single correct emotion for Yizkor.

Only honesty.

Only memory.

Only the quiet courage of showing up and saying: this person mattered. This life mattered. This love still matters. This is what I remember and learned from them.

And there is something else we need to note in the midst of our grief and tears.

Pesach does not end at the sea. It moves toward Sinai.

In other words, the purpose of liberation is not only to leave behind what hurt us. It is to move toward a life of meaning, responsibility, and sacred purpose.

I think grief asks something similar of us.

Not right away. Not while the wound is still new and unbearable. But over time, grief does ask: now that you know how fragile life is, how will you live? Now that you know time is not endless, what will you do with the days you have? Now that you know what it is to love and lose, how will that shape the way you treat the people who are still here?

That may be the most important of the Torah's mourning teachings.

Be kinder.

Call sooner.

Forgive more quickly.

Sit longer.

Listen better.

Do not wait to say what matters.

Do not let distraction steal what is holy.

That is not a lesson we choose. It is a lesson grief teaches us anyway.

The sea parts in a moment.

But the journey takes much longer.

And still, we walk it.

We walk it with memory.

We walk it with ritual.

We walk it with each other.

We walk it with the words our tradition has placed on our lips when our own words fail us.

In a few moments, we will rise for Yizkor.

We will turn to words that Jews have carried for generations. We will ask that the souls of our loved ones be bound up in the bond of eternal life, *b'tzror hachayim*. We will ask that their memories be for a blessing. Because to remember those we loved is also to remember what they taught us, what they gave us, what they awakened in us, and that is a blessing.

So as we prepare to say Yizkor, I invite you to bring them close.

The parent.

The spouse.

The sibling.

The friend.

The child.

The one whose absence changed the shape of your life.

Bring their face to mind.

Bring their voice to mind.

Bring their name into your heart.

And may the Holy One, El Malei Rachamim, the One full of compassion, remember them for blessing.

May their souls be sheltered under the wings of the Shechinah.

May their lives continue to shine through the lives we lead.

And may we, who carry them still, be given strength for the journey. Strength to remember. Strength to love. Strength to keep walking through the wilderness of loss toward lives of meaning, blessing, and peace.