“Minyan in Memory of the Shoah”
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In 1988 Edwina and Paul Heller (z”l) commissioned world renowned artist Aharon Betzalel to create a sculpture in memory of Edwina’s family and all those members of our Jewish communities who perished in the Shoah.

The sculpture entitled, “Minyan in Memory of the Shoah” once stood prominently in the North-East corner of our Sholom Garden, just over there by the large hedge.

As happens, the hedge which hadn’t been planted at the time of the dedication grew and flourished as we hope and pray all living things will do. In time, even with constant attention by our landscapers the hedge enveloped much of the stunning and evocative sculpture.

This summer with the help of their daughter Irene and the family foundation Edwina and Paul established to further Holocaust education and honor sacred memory we relocated “Minyan in Memory of the Shoah” to the South-East corner of our garden, just over there, a more accessible and prominent spot for all to consider and contemplate its meaning and message.

A few weeks ago after the relocation I had the opportunity to sit and do just that, I sat on Sara’s bench - with its own thoughtful plaque, “Sit here and have a rest” and I considered the memorial from a perspective I never had before

Not unlike the perspective of a mourner who contemplates and meditates on the meaning of life with new appreciation for its fragility, the haunting and powerful piece revealed a new depth of despair of the shoah that transcends numbers too big to count and names of camps too many to recall.

That is the thing about memory, the more specific and detailed we remember people and moments, down to the way they wore their clothes, how they drank their coffee, the wrinkles, scars and sun spots on their skin, many of which came with their own story - the more detailed we get the closer we get.

So looking at this sculpture really for the first time, you just didn’t see it in all its detail hidden amidst the hedge, high up on that small mound near the back fence. Seeing it from this new perspective and now thanks to Irene knowing its proper name, “Minyan in Memory of the Shoah” it was brought to tears.

A minyan is of course ten Jews, traditionally adult men. Betzalel’s sculpture is a male and female figure, the female is holding an infant in her arms and standing between them is a young child. All are headless. They are surrounded by 6 tree trunks that

appear to have been roughly cut just a foot or two from their roots, the trees too are without their crowns, they have no branches, like the family, they have no future.

If there is a minyan to be found amongst these 10 elements it is composed of living things whose lives have been cut short. They stand straight but not tall. The minyan is incomplete not because it lacks ten, but because what was once living and growing has been severed from like, cut down, cut off. Life has been cut short, all that remains are the roots, what anchored us to the earth. The hopes, dreams, aspirations that rest in yearning tree branches and in the human face and eyes are gone. All that we are left with is the foundation, the evidence that they existed, not what they would become.

In the iconography that appears in old Jewish cemeteries, particularly throughout Eastern Europe, most prominently in the once flourishing Jewish community of Warsaw where Edwina's family was from and where nearly all of them perished. In those Jewish cemeteries that go back more than a 1,000 years through pogroms and catastrophes you will see scattered amongst the tombstones images of trees toppled over, or candlesticks cut in half – these were used by our tradition to depict a life unexpectedly cut short – a coded message that something was not as it should be.

I can only conclude that Betzalel, a learned Israeli artist, whose father was a rabbi and kabbalist knew this Jewish custom and incorporated it in our memorial sculpture.

A life cut short, like trees cut down - no matter how long a person lives, if we love them when they die it is always too soon, abrupt. Their life is ended and ours too is cut and broken and torn. Like the kriah ribbon or the torn shirt the mourner wears, something whole has been ripped apart. And we are left in ruins, with only the remnant, the memory and reminders of who and what they were to us.

But memories fade, we start to lose the details and remember in generalities:

- He liked to walk in the morning
- She had sugar with her tea
- They always held hands

But do we give ourselves the time and the gift of remembering how they walked and our conversations with them on that stroll or over that cup of tea. Those same hands that held each other more than once held us, can we feel that touch still so many years later?

Memorials, seen from a quiet contemplative perspective, invite us to remember in every detail, to dig deeply within the treasure box of our memories and find the glowing jewel that was their soul, a soul we carry with us everywhere.

That is the purpose of Yizkor, like the memorial that now stands prominently in our garden once again. It is there to help us to remember, in the case of the Shoah, "to never forget."

We build our own memorial to loved ones every time we visit their grave.

The Jewish custom of placing a stone on a tombstone is ancient.

In doing so, we are symbolically adding to the tomb, building the monument that honors the dead.

Putting flowers on a grave is not our custom.

The flowers wither and die. The stones remain unchanged

Although flowers are a beautiful gift to the living, they mean nothing to the dead.

In death, the ephemeral and temporary body disappears, and all that remains is that eternal part of the person, the n'shamah, the soul.

The body, like a flower, like those six tree trunks before they were brutally cut down blooms and then fades, but the soul, like a solid stone, like the stone and bronze of the memorial lives forever.

In the real world, the place we all go after life on earth, what counts is the lasting impact we have had on the world and those in it, those closest to us, who we loved and were loved by.

It's the conquests of the soul, not of the body, that go beyond the grave. The money we make, the vacations we take, the food we eat and the games we play, are all flowers that die with us.

But the good deeds we do, the love we show to others, the light we bring to the world, are eternal stones, pillars and monuments and memorials that never die.

Take a modest stone that will cost you nothing, and place it on the grave of your loved one, to tell them that even though they are gone, the impact their soul had on you is real and eternal.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us, "Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant. In an age in which computer and smartphone memories have grown so fast, from kilobytes to megabytes to gigabytes, while human memories have become so foreshortened, there is an important Jewish message to humanity as a whole, a message in stone and monument. You can't delegate memory to machines. You have to renew it regularly and teach it to the next generation."

Winston Churchill said: “The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward.” Or to put it slightly differently: Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children’s future. (Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)

Consider the stone, the monument, the memorial - it is not an inanimate thing, it breathes life into our memories, invites us to dwell deeply on every detail, in remembering them, they never truly die, the dead go on living inside of each of us, each generation as we remember them.