Yizkor Talk

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
5761

I had two Yizkor talks prepared today. One was prepared and one I was thinking about throughout the day. I hope that you will bear with me as I set aside the one I prepared, and give the one I am only slightly prepared to give. As a rabbinic student this past year and having just graduated this past June, I wrote my Rabbinic thesis and dissertation on a Rabbi who I only knew through the text. Perhaps like some of us with our dear ones that we remember, I only knew him through his writings or his writings about him. His name was Rabbi Ephraim Oshri, and he was a Rabbi in the holocaust in a small village called Kovno. Rabbi Oshri was without a doubt, the most amazing man I have ever read about or heard of. I would venture to say he was the most amazing man I ever met but I never met him.

His great gift to the world was that in the midst of the fire and darkness of the Holocaust, he was a Rabbi to his congregation and his community. As a Rabbi, people would come to him with deep questions about what to do in the face of the terror and darkness that was their life; what to do in the face of Nazi oppression; how to live Jewishly in light of all the pain and suffering that was around them. Rabbi Oshri, in the tradition of Rabbis that came before him for thousands of generations, would offer to them *Tushuvot*, answers. We know it as return and repentance. But Tushuvot has another connotation. He would offer to them orally or in writing, deep Rabbinic questions, that would take any other Rabbi years to research But he would offer answers in an instant, as they stood in line, perhaps for deportation on the trains.

As they hovered over a piece of bread and wondered if they needed to say a motzi over something so small; as they watched their children and loved ones separate from them – to the left and the right, what blessing do you say at that time. Rabbi Oshri would offer a response. And he wrote his responses on the paper of the sacks of cement that the Jews of the Kovno ghetto were required to carry as they themselves built the gas chambers and ovens.

He would tear the rough paper off the sacks, and with a pencil he would write his response to the father mourning a child, this community knew not how to say Kaddish. And he would bury those pages in cans in a yard behind his home inside the Kovno ghetto. He miraculously survived the war and returned to Kovno as soon as he was able, and went to his home and he went to his yard and unearthed those cans, and inside he found the stories and history of his people and their relationship with god in the most harrowing of experiences. He took those tattered pages and copied them down and published them in a book that I read for the first time in Jerusalem as a student 6 years ago. A book that inspired me to learn of his life and the stories of these people. A book that although has been published, was read by very few. If the story were to stop there, we could champion Rabbi Oshri for his courage and think ourselves lucky to have learned of his story. And until this summer, the story ended there. I wrote my thesis – it was well received – it was read by my family – it's on the shelf in the library.

But this summer, (as I do every summer) I went back to the camp I was at as a child and teenager. Back to the Pochanos in Starlight Pennsylvania, where I was a rabbi at the place I first realized I wanted to become a Rabbi. And as a Rabbi I taught a class about Rabbi Oshri and I took from the library shelf, one copy of the translation of Rabbi Oshris' responsa of the pages that were torn from the backs and sacks of concrete. And together with about 15 students, we studied these stories. We recalled and imagined the loss, the pain and suffering. 15 and 16 year olds encountered this aspect of Jewish life. The challenge to be Jewish in the face overwhelming odds to the contrary, they encountered it for the first time. They had never before heard of such stories. Perhaps even some of us have not. Of Jews who were Jews in the midst of the fire of the holocaust.

And as this is a true story, at the last class – I turned to the class with the book in my hand, as I tell you today, as I told them, these stories would have died a silent death on the shelf in that library had we not taken the book down and studied it together; had we not encountered the lives of those we had lost and learned from them; sought them out as difficult as it was and get their memory. And then not know it was coming, I told them this book had only been checked out once before! In the history of this camp a book that had been there for more than 2 decades. I opened the back of the book and took out the card of the person that had checked out the book that one time, and her name was Jennifer Oshri, and I knew as I had written in my thesis, that that was Rabbi Oshri's great granddaughter. That she had attended this camp and had been the last one and only one to read this book. To ever learn in that place of the stories of her great grandfather.

We have cans that we have planted with the memories and stories of our lives, scattered all over our homes, our lives. They are cans that are planted inside of us. As our educator and soon to be Rabbi, Bruce Raff spoke on the second day of Rosh Hashana, it is our sacred obligation to unearth those cans and to tell our story. To tell the story of those who came before us, that only we can translate to the next generation. The blessing of memory in Judaism, the command of memory is Yizkor. It is to remember. It is not to forget. In all of our sorrow and all of our sense of loss and pain, let us latch on to that commandment, to that mitzvah. Let us leave here to go home to break the fast and let us sit there and tell the stories of those who could not sit with us today. To do that is to honor their memory. To do that is to embody Yizkor – to remember. May the memories of all we hold most dear, be for us a blessing. Amen.