

Two Women That I Miss

Yizkor becomes more difficult and more important every year. It is more difficult each year because there are more of my friends, my teachers and my family who have died. The list grows ever longer. On a daily basis I remember my sweet little maternal grandmother who taught me to pray, my devoted mother who wanted me to be educated and my Germanic father who was the quintessential example of moral rectitude. Their love and support have been the driving force in my life. My passion for food and wine and my love and appreciation of the senses, music, art and literature came from them. I remember daily my father-in-law who, when he heard I was going to be a rabbi said, "You will have to be a good politician and develop a sense of humor." I also keep in the corner of my consciousness the memory of my cousin Hans and his wife Else who survived Auschwitz and who are my direct and enduring connections to the horrors of the Shoah and the depth of human evil. Both the goodness and the evil of human beings swirl around in the storehouse of my memory. Each of these people is an ever present companion in my life. They are alive even though they are dead. They are here even though they are buried elsewhere. Time and distance make no difference to memory.

Too often today when I conduct a funeral at one of the local cemeteries, I find that in fact I am visiting old friends. Their grave markers and grave stones are gentle but stark reminders of how much I miss them. So many have left the stage of life and entered the eternal paradise of memory. Yizkor is a time of sweet and sad nostalgia. I am transported backward in time. The present collapses into the past and the past is once again the present. I remember when almost thirty years ago Andy Melczer introduced me to Word Perfect and he was the first young Jew I met who was writing his own theology and Torah commentary. I remember standing on this bimah almost thirty years ago debating the legal and moral giant Victor Rosenblum on the subject of abortion and engaging Bernie Baum and his principled classical Reform Judaism and his pro-Israel anti-Zionism. These Jews, these congregational leaders, these friends, make this moment so powerful. My tenure at Beth Emet has been enriched and enlivened by so many others like these three. I revel in a world where time marches backward. My heart is bursting with memories of the incredible men and women who have touched my life. I wish I could name them all but I dare not even try.

Reality will soon intrude. It always does. I noticed that when I have spoken in the past it has been mostly men whose names I have recalled publically. Last year I, we, lost two precious women, both accomplished leaders in their fields, both dear and precious friends, both fierce fighters for what they believed. Rhonda Mlodinoff, our Director of Education, and Judith Krug, Director of the Office of Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association, and the founder of the Freedom to Read Foundation, both succumbed to cancer. Each fought a fearsome and furious battle with this complex plague which takes so many precious ones from our midst.

Rhonda believed in Jewish education especially for the youngest children, and Judith believed that the free exchange of ideas made a better world. I am not very good at communicating with young children, and Rhonda would stand at my side when I was speaking to young children and with a smile on her face and in a gentle tone say "Rabbi, what does incomprehensible mean?" When I wanted to tell the children a story she

would pick it out for me or better still have me create a story based on a story that the children already knew. On an almost daily basis she would challenge me to think about, explain or reconsider some idea, belief or practice. She was forward looking. When I convinced her to move from the Director of the Early Childhood Program to Director of Education I felt badly because I knew how much she loved the little ones. But in her all too brief tenure as Director of Education she began to transform our program. Even after she went on disability until the day she died she thought about her students and her teachers and was a constant source of strength and inspiration for us.

Once I said to Judith, "I just finished a bad book." Her response was "There are no such things as bad books." She loved and defended books, even books whose ideas were radically different than her own. As the internet gained prominence in the dissemination of ideas she fought to maintain an unfettered flow of ideas. She fought censorship and intolerance. She said she understood the importance of her work when she read "And Tango Makes Three" to her granddaughter's class. The book is often the target of censors because it's about two male penguins that "adopt" an unclaimed egg. When she was finished, a girl she later learned was being raised by two women, stood and applauded. It often seemed to me that Judith lived on an airplane. She traveled far and wide to help librarians in communities large and small. She started Banned Books Week. Both of these women were champions of causes in which I deeply believe. Both of these women were my heroes and my teachers. Both of these women were deeply committed Jews.

The people who we meet on our journey through life make a difference in our lives. They do not merely preach ideals but live them. Their stories, their struggles, their victories and their defeats all become part of the sacred building blocks of our lives. In death they remain with us. Their memory is a holy blessing. Memory is a special gift from God. It overcomes the gap of time and distance. Memory is present and never past. In memory our dear ones live within, for they and we are one.

It is a fearful thing
to love what death can touch.
A fearful thing
to love, hope, dream:
to be--
to be,
And! to lose.
A thing for fools, this,
and
a holy thing,
a holy thing
to love.
For your life has lived in me,
your laugh once lifted me,
your word was gift to me.
To remember this brings painful joy.

'Tis a human thing, love,
a holy thing,
to love
what death has touched.
Chaim Stern *Mishkhan T'fillah*