

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick May 21, 2018

### ***Shavuot Yizkor 2018***

Last week I had the opportunity to visit a member of our congregation who is homebound, at least for a while until she regains the ability to walk with confidence. When I arrived she had a large loose leaf notebook open at the kitchen table. It was her own personal record of her Jewish genealogy. Using websites like Ancestry.com she's been able to go back to the 1870's. And in the process, she's come to find so much information that it fills page after page of the binder. In fact, she is so fascinated by the process, she wants to start a Jewish Genealogy club here at Beth El, and I think that is a fine idea. But it is not just the biological connection that fascinates her, it is the spiritual one. There is the unbroken chain of Jewish tradition and Jewish history that connects her, and us, with generations gone by. It is as if, in some mysterious way, we are saying Kaddish for ancestors we never knew, somehow, mysteriously, aligning our souls with theirs.

There are now so many online resources that we can use; it's easy to trace our ancestry without ever leaving the kitchen table. It wasn't always that way. I can remember when Jewish genealogy studies were just getting started because it wasn't that long ago. The leader in the field is a man named Arthur Kurzweil. His own personal quest resulted in his seminal book on Jewish genealogical research, the classic best seller *From Generation to Generation*. He writes about the power of saying Kaddish as a link with the past.

Kurzweil spent time trying to rediscover his roots throughout Eastern Europe. He visited a small town in Poland where his great-grandfather was born. There he befriended an elderly couple, both Holocaust survivors. He ended up spending a lot of time with the couple. A few years later, Arthur returned and decided to visit the couple again...He knocked on the door and this time was met by the woman, who stood all dressed in black. It turned out that her husband had died a year and half earlier and she was still in mourning. She looked at Kurzweil, grabbed his arm, and said 'Do you know the Kaddish?' When he nodded yes, she said fervently, "Then tomorrow morning we will go to the cemetery." When he got there in the morning it was clear that she had been up for hours and was anxious to get to the gravesite as quickly as possible. They walked through the gate of the cemetery to her husband's grave and stood next to each other, the elderly woman clutching Arthur's arm while he began to recite the Kaddish. He had only spoken a few words when the woman began to cry. Moved by her outpouring of emotion he struggled to get through the prayer. A few days later he returned to her home but now her black mourning dress had been exchanged for more regular attire and her face was filled with relief. She had waited a year and half for someone who could say Kaddish so that she would be able to get on with her life".

That Kaddish not only brought her closure, it brought her connection. The Kaddish was her spiritual link, and instinctively she knew in her heart it had to be said. There is something so powerful about the Kaddish, so powerful an emotional connection that it's really hard to explain. Can you imagine feeling so desperate and cut off from family and community that you would do anything to have someone say the Kaddish you didn't know how to recite? That story is from Poland, where the Jewish community is virtually non-existent. Here, we have all the freedom in the world to practice our faith and yet we are in danger of this happening to us. Often Hazzan, Rabbi Green and I are at gravesides, or at shiva homes where the immediate mourners are unable to say the Kaddish, and not because they are wrought with emotion, it's because they don't know the words.

I know that when I was young I was told that Yizkor was only for adults, and only those who lost their parents. To this day, many of our own members walk out. But many more don't come at all. So I propose that we turn ancient custom on its head. It used to be that you never went to Yizkor if your parents were alive, lest you bring them bad luck. I get it, but superstition is robbing us of our legacy. I say bring your children, bring your teenage grandchildren to Yizkor. Let them see your tears as you say Kaddish for your parents and grandparents. Let them know you care about them saying it for you. Let them know that you would be terribly sad if you were not honored with Kaddish as we have honored our beloved dead for millennia. I think we need to create new traditions to safeguard the old ones.

So I encourage you to bring your kids to Yizkor at Yom Kippur, Shmini Atzeret, Pesach and Shavuot. Even if it means taking them out of school, bring them to watch you say Kaddish and know that as you have connected with the generations that came before you, they can do so after you and I are gone. That is the power of Yizkor, of Kaddish, of a Jewish genealogy that is more than simply a biological chain linking us with those who came before, but a spiritual connection as well. We keep this sacred tradition strong when we insure the next generation is committed to those that made us who we are today.