

## Yizkor Sermon Pesah 5770

Our tradition has much wisdom to offer about the power of speech. Most of the time, we focus on the potentially damaging effects of our words, and caution ourselves and others to be circumspect and mindful in what we say and how we say it. The book of Proverbs, משלי, captures this idea in its inimitably pithy way: מות לשון ביד וחיים , "Death and life are in the power, literally the hand, of the tongue." (Prov. 18:21) This verse has yielded numerous midrashic expansions and comments. One, from the Talmud, deals with the unusual wording that gives the tongue a "hand." Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina said: What is the meaning of the verse, "Death and life are in the hand of the tongue"? Does a tongue have a hand? This is to say to you that just as a hand can take action that kills, so too a tongue can take action that kills. (Eirubin 15b) Most of the comments on this verse, like this one, concentrate on the negative power of speech. There are other comments, however, that see the power of speech as going in both directions. Ralba"g, Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, a French commentator and Talmudist from the 13th and 14th centuries, shares the insight that anyone who speaks shall certainly enjoy the fruits of his speech, either for good or for

bad. As much as speech has the power to harm, it also has the power to heal.

I want to focus on this aspect of this verse from Proverbs. Words--words of comfort, words of support, words of praise--certainly have the power to heal. Words can also do more--they can give life. Our ideas, the concepts that define us, our stories can "live" or "die" based on how we carry them forward--through our speech. If we speak of them, share our ideas, teach our concepts and tell our stories, then they live.

This is also true of people, both those who still walk this earth and those who are gone from this world--the way we talk about them gives them life.

This is something I discovered on a personal level over these past couple of months, as my grandmother, Goldie Brill's, life came to an end. During her life, I will freely, if not proudly, admit that my relationship with her was not as deep or mature as I would have liked. She was always very proud of me, my brother, and my cousin, and made sure to tell us frequently how much she loved us. We knew unequivocally that we were loved, and all certainly enjoyed

spending time with Grandma. But I have few memories of her telling stories of her youth in Columbus, Georgia, of how she met my grandfather, after whom I was named, how they lived in Mobile, Alabama, and moved to Pine Bluff, Arkansas before settling in Baltimore. As a child, I didn't know how to ask her about these things. By the time I was old enough to know how to ask--and to want to cultivate that kind of relationship with her, I had gone off to college, and most of my interactions with my grandmother were during hectic visits back home, at holiday meals and family gatherings. When Grandma fell ill nearly a year ago, and those who loved her watched her slowly lose those qualities that made her who she was, particularly her ability to speak, I was saddened both by the suffering she was enduring and by the fact that it seemed I would never have the chance to get to know my grandmother in the way I had hoped.

And so, I began to mourn my Grandma, both the slow and steady loss of who she was, and the loss of potential in our relationship.

At the beginning of February, Jeff and I were called home to Baltimore--Grandma was nearing the end--and something powerful began to happen. Our primary focus during that last week of her life was her. For the most part, we talked about doctors and antibiotics, and tried to avoid the necessary talk about planning for a funeral, particularly with the three-foot snow storm about to hit. But in between all the details about her care, and the arrangements for family and friends to be with us, her family--particularly my mother and my uncle--began sharing her stories. We reminisced and laughed over her idiosyncracies, and pored over old pictures that showed her as a statuesque beautiful teenager in the late 1930's. Standing around her bedside after reciting the *vidui*, the end-of-life prayers, we talked about what we thought she would have wanted for this moment, and remembered her in her stronger days.

The night before the funeral, my brother, cousin, and I got together to write our eulogy for Grandma. We thought it would be best to share with those gathered to comfort us some of our memories of her; to get the writing process started, we shared our Grandma stories. That conversation is one that I will never forget. I learned that, years ago, when my cousin was very young, on days

when my uncle was going in to work late, Grandma would go to his house early in the morning, just to spend time with my cousin for a few hours. Grandma had a habit of reading road signs out loud on car trips. My brother told me how, once when he and my parents were bringing her to New York for a visit, she read every sign for the entirety of the 200 mile trip, and even paused mid-sentence to catch a sign. Grandma was a traveler, and the three of us, my brother, my cousin, and I, were delighted to discover that we had all had similar conversations with her after going on vacations or far-away trips--she would love hearing about where we went and what we did, and then would share how things had been different when she had visited that place.

Hearing those stories, memories, and reminiscences, I could almost see her standing before me, smiling and laughing along with us. Through our shared words, I was given a glimpse into parts of my Grandma that I hadn't before seen. Even as Grandma's physical presence in this world was fading, my sense of her, my understanding of who she was, was becoming fuller, richer, more enduring. Over the course of that week, the words we spoke about her gave her new life.

This beautiful surprise of the power of our words was not limited to the days surrounding her death. Just this past week, as I was rushing around making last minute Pesah<sub>h</sub> preparations, I was on the phone with my mother, talking about how Jeff and I would like them to come to us for seder next year. My mom said that she would want to help cover the expense for us, knowing how much it costs to put together a seder. She continued, explaining that Grandma had done that for her since she started hosting the seder. Grandma had told her that she wasn't able to do all the cooking herself, but that she wanted to help how she could, so that my mother wouldn't have to bear the responsibility of seder all on her own. And there Grandma was again, as though she were standing right in front of me, passing her generosity on to me.

Our words truly have the power to give life.

This experience of having my grandmother's memory come to life through my family's stories and reminiscences has shed new light for me on what it is we are doing here today by saying Yizkor. Although Yizkor was originally composed for use on Yom Kippur, to remember the martyrs of our people who gave their lives for Kiddush

HaShem, the practice of reciting these memorial prayers soon spread to the three pilgrimage festivals as well. It is not unusual to feel distress or sadness when reciting these prayers in memory of those who no longer are with us--given that, it might even seem inappropriate to say Yizkor during the holidays, times when we participate with community in joy and celebration. Holidays are also times of gathering together with family and friends--when the Temple was standing in Jerusalem Jews from all over the Jewish world would travel by foot to be together for the holiday. Nowadays, children come home from college, parents and extended family come from all over to be together--many of us even wind up travelling several times over the course of the holiday just to make sure we visit everyone. Of course, we miss our departed loved ones most at this time, when their place at the table is literally empty. But this is also a natural time for us to share our stories and memories of those who have passed from this world, and through the telling, to give their memories new life.

The words of the Yizkor prayers ask for God to remember our loved ones, to care for their souls that have gone on to their eternal home. The traditional wording asks that the souls of our loved ones

be bound up in [hebrew here], the bond of eternal life. We could spend many hours debating the exact meaning of that phrase, but I would like to suggest that we, those who survive our loved ones in this world, both bear the responsibility and have the wonderful privilege of giving our departed loved ones eternal life. As we offer our Yizkor prayers up to God, let us celebrate the memories and the stories that this moment stirs up. And after services, let us seek the strength to share those memories with each other--I for one would love to hear your stories, and I suspect that I am not alone.

May our Yizkor prayers today inspire us to bring new life to the memories of our loved ones, remembering them fondly for who they were, forgiving them for who they were weren't, and allowing their souls to live on through our words. Amen.