



Yizkor, Shemini Atzeret
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Basket of Trips
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I love it when a short story has a fabulously evocative title. That is why I was particularly drawn to one short story in the marvelous collection of short stories by Elizabeth Strout called *Olive Kitteridge*. The short story that intrigued me is entitled *Basket of Trips*.

What is that? I know what a basket is, and I know what trips are, but what is a basket of trips? A basket holds *things*. Trips are not things but experiences. How can there be a basket of trips?

This story tells the tale of a man named Ed Bonney who had lived in the small town of Crosby, Maine, with his wife Marlene and their three teen-age children, Eddie Junior, Lee Ann and Cheryl. Ed and Marlene were childhood sweethearts. They fell in love in elementary school, got married, and lived in the same community their whole lives where they worked in a small local grocery store. The family eked out a modest existence from that store, and Ed and Marlene raised their three children, without much money, but with solid values. They raised three productive and responsible young adults.

The story takes place on the day of Ed's funeral. Ed succumbs to cancer in the full bloom of his life, in the middle of his marriage to Marlene, and with his three children about to emerge into their adulthood. After the funeral, Olive Kitteridge goes to Marlene's house to set up the food and drinks for when friends come to comfort the family.

When Marlene returns from the cemetery to receive her visitors, one of the friends says: “I just wanted to say, Marlene...that he was so brave during his sickness. I never saw him complain.”

“No,” says Marlene. “He didn’t complain...He had his basket of trips.”

That is the first mention of a basket of trips. The reader’s wonder at what this might be, and how it helped her sick husband not complain, is compounded by what happens next:

Whatever Marlene has said [about his basket of trips] seems to embarrass her. Olive sees the woman’s cheeks flush, as though she has just divulged some private, very intimate secret that she shared with her husband.

At the end of the day, when the visitors are gone, Marlene at last can pour out her heart in a way that she could not before a crowded house of well wishers. She turns to Olive and says:

Olive, could I ask you to do me a favor?

I wish you would.

Could you please—And here the poor woman looks so bereft, dazed, in her green flowered dress, her brown hair coming loose from its pins. Before you leave, could you go upstairs in the bedroom? Turn right at the top of the stairs. In the closet you’ll find pamphlets, you know, of different places to go. Could you take them with you? Just take them with you, and throw them all away. The basket they’re in, too.

Of course.

Marlene has tears running down past her nose. She wipes her face with a bare hand. “I don’t want to open that closet door, knowing it’s there.”

“We sat there and made believe we’d go places together.” Marlene shakes her head. “Even after Dr. Stanley told us what the situation was, we’d go through these pamphlets, talking about the trips we’d take when he got well.”

“I sat there with him and we planned those trips. She tears at the Kleenex, which is pretty well shredded. Gosh, Olive, it was like we believed it. And there he was, losing weight, so weak—‘Marlene, bring over the basket of trips,’ he’d say, and I would...”

A basket of trips is that thing that we dream about. One day, one day we will actually do the trips that are in that basket. Until that day, we'll think about it, we'll dream about it, and doing so will give us some strength for the slog that we have ahead.

But that same basket that can inspire hope during the hard slog can also create heartbreak when those beautiful dreams come to naught. Marlene's husband dies, and they never take those trips.

As the narrator says in the story, who does not have their own basket of trips? All of our dreams are in equal measure deeply held and tenuous.

We are on the verge of reading the very last chapter in the Torah, Deuteronomy 34. The last message the Torah leaves us with is Moses dying on the wrong side of the river Jordan.

Moses had his own basket of trips, a trip to Israel, that he had worked hard for for 40 years. Moses is happily married to Tziporah, taking care of their children and tending sheep when God calls him to leave his happy domestic life, go to Egypt, and confront Pharaoh and tell him let my people go that they may serve the God of Israel. God tells Moses not only that you have to do this, but you will then lead the Israelites through the wilderness across the River Jordan and into the promised land.

Moses does all that he is supposed to do.

He confronts the Pharaoh.

He leads the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Sea of Reeds.

He brings down the Torah at Sinai.

He leads the people through the wilderness for 40 years.

He leads them through the sin of the golden calf and the sin of the spies.

All the while, Moses has his basket of trips. One fine day I will walk the land of our ancestors, the land God promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. One fine day.

But Moses dies on the wrong side of the River Jordan, with the trip in a basket not taken, because that is an ineluctable part of being human.

The Torah ends tomorrow with Moses dying on the wrong side of the River Jordan because every human being ultimately can see the promised land that they cannot enter. They can see over the river their child or grandchild's wedding or bris or baby naming or bar or bat mitzvah. They wonder whether they will be alive to be there. I remember once making a *misheberakh* for a man who was fighting cancer. As we walked into the Gann Chapel, I asked him what he dreamed of. His dreams were very clear and very particular. I want to live three more years to see the Bar Mitzvah of my grandson in San Francisco. Like Moses, he could see that promised land. Like Moses, he passed on the wrong side of the River Jordan.

Which brings us to Yizkor and to what we learn from the passing of Moses and of our loved ones whom we remember this day.

We learn that no one, not even Moses, gets to live forever. The beginning of wisdom is accepting our own mortality. May Yizkor help us be at peace with mortality, our own mortality, and that of the ones we love and remember today. We may as well make peace with that which just is.

We learn that since we cannot live forever, it is urgent that we embody certain spiritual truths that will outlast us, that we can transmit to those we love. Before Moses died he gave the children of Israel the Five Books of Moses. May Yizkor inspire us to turn our life into Torah for those who love us and who will look to our example for wisdom and guidance.

We learn that since we don't have forever, the time to live is now. The trip we don't take, the gesture we don't make, the love we don't extend today, who knows if we will be able to take it, to make it, to extend it tomorrow. May Yizkor inspire us with a sense of urgency. The time to take our basket of trips out of the closet, and to live those trips in the full light of day, is now. Please rise.