



Pesach, Day 8
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The Problem of Recency
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I want to name a problem that is very common, perhaps almost universal, but we don't talk about it. If not now, at Yizkor, when?

It is the problem of recency. It looks like this. Your loved one was fabulous when he or she was in the full bloom of their life. And then, X years ago, they faced a serious health challenge.

Perhaps it was Alzheimer's or some assault on their mind and on their cognition. Your loved one began to suffer from a word that is even cruel to say: dementia. They used to be sharp as a tack, but now they cannot remember. Your conversations used to flow about anything and everything, they were always reading a book, their intellect was ever curious. Now their world is much smaller, and your conversations are much smaller. What did you have for breakfast? For lunch? For dinner? And they cannot remember, and you have the same conversation over and over again.

Perhaps it was a stroke that assaulted their physical health. Your loved one used to be strong and vigorous but is now confined to a wheel chair.

Perhaps it is the indignities of aging. As my late mother used to say, the 90s are not like the 80s, which are not like the 70s. Or as my father in love likes to say, there is a difference between getting older and getting old. At a certain point, our loved one, if they live long enough, gets old, and becomes a shadow of who and what they used to be.

These declines--in lucidity, in cognition, in physical strength, in their overall humanity, who they are, what they do, the energy they radiate into the world--these declines can persist for years and years.

This is a not uncommon pattern. Your loved one is in the full bloom of life for their first 60 years. And then the next 20 plus years are years of decline.

This is a double problem. It was a problem for them, that their last years were years of decline. It is a particular hell to know that you are losing who you used to be.

And it is a problem for us, those who love them, because of the problem of recency. What is most recent tends to take up our bandwidth, our mental energy, crowding out what happened before. The last 20 years of decline tend to crowd out the first 60 years of life in the full bloom. When I meet with family members, that is what they will often tell me. I know that my loved one was not always this way, but it is hard for me to summon those memories of who they used to be, so many years ago, before they got sick.

How should we think about this problem of recency? What is the role of Yizkor?

The Torah itself has something extremely helpful to say here, a contradiction so blatant it cries out for explanation. These two sources have to do with the question of Moses' health at the end of his life. Was Moses, in his last chapter, thriving or struggling?

Deuteronomy 31 offers us Moses's own voice. His own answer is that he is struggling. He can no longer do what he once did. *Ben me'ah v'esrim shana anochi hayom loh uchal od latzeit v'lavoh*. I am now 120 years old, and I can no longer go out and come in. Going out and coming in, changing up locales, is a struggle for our loved ones when they get older and weaker. That's why they stop coming to shul. That's why they stop going to their grandchildren or great

grandchildren's bnei mitzvahs or weddings. Honey I would like to, but I just can't travel anymore. I have taken my last flight.

But just three chapters later, Deuteronomy 34 offers us a very different picture. This verse also refers to Moses being 120 years old, but it comes out the opposite way. *U'Moshe ben meah v'esrim shanah b'moto*, Moses was 120 years old when he died, *loh chahatah eino v'loh nas leichoh*, his vision was undimmed and his vigor was unabated. Here Moses is undiminished even until the very end.

How do we understand the apparent contradiction?

I think both verses are true. The key is understanding the different narrative voice behind each verse. Deuteronomy 31 captures Moses's own voice: I am old and sick. I am not what I was. I am not who I used to be. I have flown my last flight. I cannot dance at my grandchild's wedding. I am soon to leave this world.

Deuteronomy 34 captures the voice of the children of Israel *after Moses had passed*. Their emphasis, our emphasis, is not on his physical frailty at the end, but on his spiritual robustness during his entire life; not on his illness but on his impact.

His illness at the end is true. We don't deny it. The Torah includes it. It's just not the important point. The important point is his legacy, the five books of Moses.

Yizkor is about moving from Deuteronomy 31 to Deuteronomy 34; about moving from illness to impact; about moving from the loss at the end of a life to the legacy of a life in full. That is on us, today.

Thinking about this crucial role of Yizkor reminds me of the climax of *Hamilton*, what Lin Manuel Miranda calls the single most important line in the whole play: *who lives, who dies*,

who tells your story. Who tells the story of our departed loved ones? We do. Right now. Let's make sure their story is not how they died, but how they lived. We rise.