

Rabbi Michael A. White

Temple Sinai of Roslyn

Yizkor/2010

The journey from Egypt had taken 40 years, and our ancestors, now at the edge of the Jordan River, were preparing to enter the Promised Land. But Moses, their leader, teacher, inspiration, strength and prophet, would not accompany them. God had ordained that he remain behind, to die atop Mount Nebo.

Moses pleaded with God, "O Lord God, You who let your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand.....Let me, I pray, cross over with my people and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan." But God became cross with Moses. "Enough!" roared the Holy One, "Never speak to Me of this matter again!"

Moses was 120 years old; he had accomplished more and lived more than could be measured. And yet for him, for his family, and for his people, it was too soon. For if there is one undeniable truth about death it is that it always comes too soon for our dreams, for our prayers, and for our love.

We who mourn at this sacred hour know the emptiness that death creates. Grief becomes a melancholy companion.

Some days it retreats and we carry on with our lives out of its sway. And then, without warning, it returns to darken our view.

People speak of closure, of moving past the grief. And with time its harsher edges do soften. Yet we know that the emptiness never fully disappears.

A parent whose voice, whose embrace was our sanctuary, our trust and our strength. The husband, the wife, the life-partner who joined in all of life's joys and challenges, building a life, a family, decades of ordinary and blessed shared moments, whose passing makes the home seem so very empty and cold now. Siblings who were bound to us by the deep and common bond of blood and family love and history. Children whose vital and vibrant young lives, in the poet Bialik's cold, terse words, were like a flower, cut off, too soon. No simcha grants complete joy, no milestone as precious, because they are not here to share them with us.

And so, at this sacred Yizkor hour on this holiest of days we come here to revisit our grief, to dwell in it, to enable the emptiness and the ache to grow again within us because when we are honest with ourselves we understand that the pain the Yiskor prayers evoke not only saddens, but also exalts and soothes and reassures us that our loved ones remain, in some very special way, with us. The grief that fills us resurrects their presence in our lives.

The poet Philip Larkin puts it this way in his beautiful work entitled "Grief":

If grief could burn out
Like a sunken coal
The heart would rest quiet
The unrent soul
Be as still as a veil.

But I have watched all night
The fire grow silent
The grey ash soft

And I stir the stubborn flint
So the flames haven't left
And the bereft
Heart lies impotent no more.

Why would we prevent our grief from becoming still and silent? Because like the poet we somehow understand that our grief is the most truthful witness to the power of their lives, and to the myriad ways they ennobled and brightened our lives. Now that they are gone it is our grief that enables the flame of their love, of our love for them, to retain its glow. And we can see that

flowing through the ache that tells how much we miss them are the colorful and animated memories, memories of the glory of our shared days and years, our shared love and passion and intimacy.

We see them now, smiling, laughing; we can pleasantly sense the strength and the comfort of their touch. We can hear the sound of their voices, enabling our hearts to remain potent and alive with gratitude, with warmth, and with the need and the capacity to love those who still walk this world alongside us, to embrace them the way our departed loved ones embraced us.

They died too soon. And so we come to Yizkor and in our sadness we mark another year apart. But with faith and with family, friends and community, we will penetrate the grief, pierce the pain and stir the glowing embers that bring our loved ones back into vivid focus, back to us, giving us the strength to love and be loved, to find and experience joy, as they would want us to do.

Even in death, that is their gift to us.