

## *Yizkor Reflections*

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

Congregation Beth Torah

Eighth Day of Passover; 22 Nisan 5770; April 6, 2010

Recently I was having a conversation with a young man who is contemplating a career as a rabbi. We had a long, intense discussion about the commitments, the lifestyle, the opportunities, and the unique challenges of rabbinic work. What a wonderful job it is, I described, to work with the young and the old. To teach, and to counsel; to lead a community, and teach Torah every day! How many people get to dress up as Moses and tell children's stories for a living? I said with a smile. But because he is thoughtful and serious, I shared with him that while the rabbinate is a beautiful, deeply significant way to make a living in the world, there are also moments of loneliness; times when I feel disillusioned or that I question my own effectiveness; episodes when I become disconsolate about the challenges of living a lifestyle so different from so many of those I serve. But then I heard the following words come out of my mouth: *"Even though I periodically have those questions and doubts, I am reassured by the weddings and the funerals."* Now, I hadn't rehearsed that line. In fact, I don't think I've ever said something quite like that before. The weddings are obvious. To facilitate a Jewish event where two people lovingly commit themselves to sharing a life together, in the context of blessings, and rituals, and celebration...It should be abundantly clear why weddings are a highlight for any rabbi. *But funerals?* I've been thinking about this ever since I said it...and the more I think about it the more I realize that one of more salient and impactful things I do as a rabbi is to help people to say goodbye to their loved ones, to create a meaningful ritual of burial, to honor those who have passed on with heartfelt eulogies, and to teach people the mechanics of Judaism's profoundly sensitive, finely tuned rituals of mourning and bereavement. There are few other events in my life as a rabbi that make me feel that I am doing God's work; that my efforts are holy, significant, and transformative, than when I am involved in a funeral.

- Sitting with a family and listening to their stories about their loved ones reminds me of the precious relationships in my life, and not to take them for granted.
- Constructing a eulogy sensitizes me to how people are touched by others even in the smallest ways...how a person's catch phrase, or habit, or simple gestures can make a tremendous difference to others.

- Seeing a community come out in tremendous numbers to bury *our* dead...and I say 'our' dead because we Jews don't relegate burial to anonymous cemetery or funeral home employees; we prepare each other for death; we dress each other in shrouds; we physically lift the shovel for each other; we place the earth for each other; we constitute quorums of prayer and memorial for each other...that is part of the sacred bond of the Jewish community...and to stand in the middle of that...to facilitate that...to help make some meaning out of the chaos of loss that is the purpose of religion...and that is when I find some of my most authentic purpose as a rabbi.

It's interesting--and I'm neither the first nor the only rabbi to notice this--even in rather informal congregations like ours, where some people call me *rabbi* and others call me *Adam* [and I have never insisted on any particular title or form of address], in the context of a funeral, nobody ever calls me Adam. At those times I am, I need to be "Rabbi" for you, for your families, for our community. In those times, my role specifically as rabbi is of the greatest consequence.

These past several months have been traumatic for our precious congregational family. There have been weeks recently when one condolence message was almost immediately followed by another. Some people told me they didn't want to open their emails, for fear of finding out that someone else had passed away. It felt as if the *Malach Ha'mavet*, the proverbial Angel of Death we referred to in *Chad Gad Ya*, was hovering over us, and just when we felt it had finally passed, another loss occurred. There were times when I considered asking the congregation to join me in a day-long fast, or to collectively recite *Tehillim*, Psalms begging God to remove this plague from us. I was desperate, as I know many of you were as well. Several people asked me, how do you do it rabbi? How are you holding up through all of this? I'll tell you...I do internalize it. I am possessed with *ahavat Yisrael*; I am indescribably in love with the Jewish people...and you are the Jewish people I encounter most of all. When you grieve, I grieve. When you celebrate, I celebrate. But when I come home at night, from a family meeting following a death...from a funeral...from a shiva minyan, my secret survival tool is that I fly through the door right into the arms of my wife or the bedside of my children. And whether sleeping or awake I tell them how much I love them; how precious they are to me; how thankful I am to be their abba, or her husband. I often spend hours talking to Sari about what I learned about the person I just buried; about the remarkable stories about them I heard from their children or relatives. And I too absorb life lessons and am deeply affected by each and every one of these emotionally intense experiences.

It seems to me that these very same touch points get all of us through the *gei tzalmavet*...the valley of the shadow of death: Remembering those who have left this world, and cherishing those with whom we continue to share this life.

I will tell you that I remember each and every experience of loss in this community. And I believe that I am not only a better rabbi, but a better human being for having the indescribably powerful opportunity not only to dance at your weddings but also to bury your dead...and comfort the mourners among us. It seems strange to thank you for inviting me into these profound moments of your lives, but I am deeply humbled and so sincerely grateful to stand with you at all those times. And I am so thankful to Hashem for the opportunity to serve Him and the Jewish people in this complex, poignant, and overwhelmingly fulfilling role as rabbi.

Let us take the time, in these hushed moments of Yizkor, to recover some of the life altering memories of our loved ones, and also to dedicate ourselves to making positive imprints on the souls of those with whom we continue to share this life. Never miss an opportunity to tell someone how significant and beloved they are to you, and may this time of reflecting on loss remind us of how much we truly have in this world. And may the souls of all of our departed continue to be a blessing to all of us.

