

*Okay, I'm here and ready to listen*

Yizkor 5777

A little more than 2 years ago, my father sent a text to all of his children letting us know that our Uncle Kenny had collapsed and had a heart attack. My immediate response was “oh, he’ll be okay... At the time I believed that nothing could happen to that man – he was immortal. He was my Rabbi, my mentor, my loving and sweet uncle. Of course, the next few days carried an extra heaviness, but we all powered through, I traveled to my pulpit in DC and carried on. On Shabbat morning, we received another text, but this one was crushing. My dad told us that we should make our way to Boston... That this might be the end. Time had completely stopped, and the words I read in that text didn’t seem real. Before I knew it, I was on a flight to Boston. Soon after my arrival, surrounded by family, my uncle took his last breath. The next 24 hours were a blur, but I remember constantly thinking how unfair this was, and how much my uncle had left to say, to do, to experience. Selfishly, I knew I had so much I wanted to tell him. And then I thought about his children and grandchildren, his wife, my dad – those whose lives were shaped and molded by him from the very beginning. I was left with the thought that their words – the things that they always wanted to say to him – he would never hear. My uncle was small in stature but he stood taller than the redwoods at his beloved Camp Swig and to think that their words would be left unheard and his would be left unsaid, left me heartbroken.

Yes, I can continue to look at my uncle's life as a life lost, as words lost, but out of that loss, something truly magical happened.

Rabbi Kenneth Jay Weiss was a legend... in my mind and in so many others who were lucky enough to learn from him. His ability to truly make you feel listened to and understood is something that I will always try to replicate throughout my career. He heard everything. He had so much wisdom to share and as a result his sermons were compiled in a book called Voices of Torah – along with several other prominent Rabbi's across North America. Soon after my uncle's death, my dad and his childhood best friend Jim began to study my uncle's words, each bringing his own religious perspective to the mix. My uncle did not write his d'verei torah for the purpose of my Dad and Jim studying together, but what makes those words powerful is that my dad and Jim proactively decided to sit down and study them. My dad and Jim have been listening to him ever since in a way that neither had done so before, and that kind of deep listening is what keeps my Uncle Kenny alive. His words are living on in their weekly sessions and his thoughts come pouring out through their time together. That kind of listening is what keeps anyone we love and lose, alive.

Traditionally, Yizkor serves as a time to remember, a time to think about those in our lives who are no longer with us. Sometimes we enter into this experience with a feeling of guilt, that reminder that we didn't get the chance to say what **we** needed to say to the people who are no longer with us. Whether our loved ones died suddenly, or whether we never got up the nerve to share our thoughts, that guilt can be

overwhelming. Perhaps this year, we can look at Yizkor a bit differently. Consider what might happen if we flipped it all on its head. Rather than thinking about what **we** could have said to our loved ones before they passed, what if the effort was made to go to out of our way to seek what our loved ones have to say now, rather than focusing on our own thoughts. How powerful is it when a person sits down and says “ok, I am ready to hear you and whole-heartedly receive you?” The power truly lies in the listening – the hard active listening – that’s the selfless gift that we can give to others. We can say to ourselves “I am going to live my life helping others to live their lives, to speak the truth, by being one who truly hears.” It is about inviting others to speak their truths. It can often time be a difficult task to learn how to listen without our answer immediately running in the background. As my life experience expands, I understand more than ever the expression that teaches that God gave us 2 ears and only one mouth – so that we should listen twice as much as we speak.

Those who work as chaplains are keenly aware of how important listening can be. As one might imagine, the variety and severity of illnesses that’s chaplains encounter are significant. Many patients are unresponsive or heavily sedated, but sitting with them, holding their hand, perhaps singing something, helps to let them know that someone is there. Then there are patients who are eager to talk, to share stories, and all they want and **need** is someone to listen. And it is our tradition that places a profound importance on providing opportunities for people to be heard.

Rabbi Steven Leder, in his book “The Extraordinary Nature of Ordinary Things”, tells the story of Randy and her mother Sarah. Sarah was in her last few hours of life, and Randy had curled up on her mother’s bed in a fetus-like shape as if back in the womb. Sarah’s breathing was slowing as she and Randy whispered to each other; Sarah talked about her hopes and dreams for her daughter and of the grandchildren she would never know. Randy just stayed curled on the bed snuggled up as close as she could get and only responded with the words “I love you”. As surreal and as sad as it is, there is something precious about a last kiss on the forehead of the ones who brought us into life; something about those last final words that touch eternity. Helping someone you love **die well** means being with them as much as possible. Giving them the opportunity to share their thoughts, their dreams, and their fears, helps them to know that we are there and that we will be okay once they go. We are taught to leave more than a material legacy to those we love, we are taught to leave them words...hopes. In Hebrew, the translation for *words* and *things* are the same – “d’varim”. Words are real, tangible, and valuable. This goes both ways, for the one who is experiencing the end of their life as well as those accompanying them through it.

In January of last year, my father sent a letter to all of his children. Following his brother’s death, he had become more and more aware of his health. At the end of last year, he started experiencing chest pain that was alarming and the doctor wanted to do some tests to see what might be causing the pain. He was in a battle with

uncertainty. The letter began with “Today I sit staring at a computer screen, thinking about my life. It’s funny that I have to think of the words that fit 69 years of living. I can tell you that it seems like only a moment in time. I can remember my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday thinking that I had so many decades ahead of me and that I’d live to a very ripe old age.” The letter continues with a litany of all the things that he is most proud of and all the ways he is grateful for all 5 of his children and my mom. He continues with “Is this an ethical will, I don’t know. I believe that Mom and I have passed onto you an important element that runs through all your lives. We have taught you the need to push forward. We have taught you to accomplish your goals no matter how difficult the road may be. In the years to come, life will be more and more complex. With the drive that each of you has, I believe you’ll be able to accomplish your goals and continue to improve the world.”

My father’s words penetrated my very core. He is not one to share his feelings that often and although he is incredibly loving and sweet, he is usually the one to remain strong and not let his feelings show. He had exposed himself in a way that he needed to do so badly, probably for a lot longer than just that moment. What if we had gone to him before any of this had happened and said to him “Dad, ok, we are ready to hear it and whole-heartedly receive it?” These are not thoughts that occurred to my father as a result of his chest pain. These are thoughts that have been with him for a while. Would things have been be different if we had given him a chance to be heard? Would my Dad feel differently about what the future holds? I don’t know, but

I do know that moving forward, I want to listen more, to whole-heartedly hear the words that my loved ones so desperately need to say. All they need is someone to listen.

There is a story in the Talmud about Rabbi Joshua Ben Levy who is said to have been one of the only Rabbi's to be considered a *Tzadik Gamur* – a complete and utter righteous person. He had the opportunity to speak with Elijah the prophet and asks him, “Where do I find the Messiah?” And Elijah tells him “he stands at the gate of the city helping to change the bandages of the lepers.” He races off to the gates of the city and sees the Messiah and says “when will you come?” and he said “today...” Well the Messiah had more to say but Rabbi Levy doesn't listen to the rest and he runs off in great excitement. The day goes by and the Messiah doesn't come. Rabbi Levy is distraught and he goes back to the gates of the city and asks “Why didn't you come?” And the messiah says “because you didn't listen – I said “today... if you would but listen to my words.” Listening is the essence of any relationship... between the Messiah and Rabbi Levy, between my father and me, or even between ourselves and God. The ears are the way in – but the end goal is to receive someone with our hearts.

In my uncles rabbinic library in one of his books about ethical wills, I found the following words that I'd like to leave you with:

“Will they know love? Not passion – love.

The kind that does not ask nor care about reward.

The kind that seeks only to give to the loved one,  
The kind that has its satisfaction  
In a look of momentary joy  
That is relaxed and free of question, of rivalry, of jealousy, of fear;  
That can keep its vigor over the years and over the miles.  
The kind that gives and asks without the insult of questioning.  
This is true love, much more so than the kind where passion flames  
And burns itself out.  
Leaving ashes, or at best a not-too-bitter memory.  
Do they know that I love them  
Not from duty or some awkward sense of conventional piety  
But because they are so close to me –  
They are me –  
And when I am no more  
They are more me than ever.”