

"IMMORTALITY"

The very fact that

① We are here gathered this morning ~~to participate in these Passover Services of Shacharith, the Reading of the Torah and Mussaf, which also includes the Yizkor memorial.~~ The very fact that we are here to worship a Living and Eternal G-d, and also to ask Him to remember the souls of dear departed relatives, is in itself an expression of an age-old Jewish belief - the Immortality of the human soul. We pray to G-d Who is Eternal, and since He created Man in His image, then Man is immortal. We ask G-d to remember the soul, and therefore the soul must still exist before G-d; ~~else~~ what is the use of remembering it?

So that our presence here ~~is~~ presumes our profound though unarticulated belief that Man can achieve immortality. Though the body is perishable, the soul can live on.

② However, I feel sure that there is one question that must disturb many of us here this morning. Granted that immortality can be a fact. Obviously some people achieve it. No one will deny the immortality of a Moses or a Rabbi Akiva or a Maimonides. Rembrandt, Shakespeare and Einstein, in their respective fields, have achieved this deathlessness. Dr. Jonas Salk is probably the latest in this galaxy of Immortals. But that is true of people of world-wide fame, people of extraordinary ability and achievement, people of genius or power. What, however, of us common folk? What of those we memorialize this morning, and what of ourselves? - talented, ~~yes~~ perhaps, but ~~no~~ genius, ~~no~~. Well-liked, yes, but world-famous, ~~no~~. People who are good, kind, but ~~humble and modest and retiring~~. Can they said to be able to achieve immortality? Are they not swallowed up at once into this vast anonymous army of the dead, ultimately receding into eternal obscurity with the relentless passage of time? Can ANYONE achieve immortality?

③ And the answer is that yes, anyone can achieve immortality. We can assure it for those we loved and are departed, we can assure it for ourselves. And the formula for the attainment of immortality by us common folk, unpretentious and unassuming, was given in symbolic form by a man who himself was certain of eternal reverence and fame. That man was the great Sage, Rabbi Judah the Prince, the man who redacted the Mishna, the ~~very~~ editor of the great and sacred body of Jewish ^{oral} Law, who lived about 1800 years ago as both the spiritual and political leader of Judea of his day, beloved by all his people and revered as well by the Roman Emperor Antoninus. Certainly, he himself knew that his fame would last forever. Yet he knew, too, that fame in history is not the same as Immortality. It helps, but it is not the same. There are qualities of warmth and love that are prerequisites for true immortality. And so he gave us the prescription, a prescription with four ingredients. pathways to follow

④ The Talmud relates (Ketubot 103a) that the beloved Sage, R. Yehudah, was on his death-bed, He lay there in his bed while in the next room ~~was~~ gathered his entire family. And suddenly, as the end was approaching, the great Rabbi said, LE'VANAI ANI TZARICH, call in my children. I want my sons here, I want to tell them something of how to overcome the utter hopelessness and despair of death. I want to tell them how to take out its sting, how to remove the fear, how to recapture Life, even at the very end. And as they gathered about him, he ~~said~~ gave them four commands, ^{his} last wishes, as his final legacy to them. He said, SHIZAHARU BI'KVOD IMCHEM, **NEIR YEHBI DALUK BI'MKOMO, ***SHULCHAN YEHBI ARUCH BI'MKOMO, ****MITAH TEHBI MUTZAAS BI'MKOMAH.... all as when I was alive...do these, my dear children, and though I know that History will not record your names as prominent as mine, nonetheless, this is the way to assure yourself of perpetuity, for me as well as for you.

Bi'CHVOD

5. The first thing he told them - and us - was HIZAHARU BI'KVOD IMCHEM, ^{be} always careful to honor your mother. My sons, if you would have me live on with you, give all the respect in the world to your mother, for it was she who was the recipient of my love and will forever remain the repository of my fondest, profoundest and imperishable affections. Give honor to your mother, because she will be the symbol to you of the first great ingredient in this prescription: Love.

How did Solomon put it many years before? - KI AZAH KA'MAVESS AHAVAH, Love is as strong as Death. A true, deep and genuine love is not subject to the terrors of death. It can outlast it and vanquish it. A sincere love, without ulterior motive, ^{our} Sages of Pirke Aboth taught, is everlasting.

I am sure that there are a number of people with us here this morning who can testify to the truth of that statement. ~~Those~~ ^{Those} who have loved deeply, and who have lost a husband ^{or a wife, as the case may be}, know that after the first bitter pangs of grief have worn away, there comes a warm feeling to fill the void, a warm feeling of the presence of whomever it is we loved. The presence of the beloved person is then no longer ~~subject~~ to illness and disease, to long or short periods of absence. As I look about me I can see some of you whom I have in mind. I know that ~~as an outsider to the family~~, every time I see one of you I immediately think of the one whom you loved. It is not only that Love itself is immortal; more than that, it confers immortality upon them who practice it.

HIZAHARU BI'KVOD IMCHEM, R. Judah the Prince told his children, honor Mother and you will be honoring me, for I live on through her.

6. ^{was,} ~~He~~ ^② told his children, MITAH THEHEI MUTZA'AS BI'MKOMAH, the bed should be made as always, in its place. The MITAH, or bed, is, in the language of the Rabbis, a symbol for the word "family". A person's children are his second guarantee of Immortality. A child is, in a way, a recapitulation of the parent. Heredity is more than another science; it is a vehicle for extension of life even after death. A parent lives on in the person of a child, ~~who lives~~.

We must, however, distinguish between just having children and what kind of children one has. Merely having children does not assure one of deathlessness, any more than not having children automatically rules it out. Certainly, biological continuity is not the same as immortality. If it were, then an elephant or Japanese beetle which lived a thousand years ago would be as immortal as the greatest human. Family and children as a vehicle of Immortality derives not from the biological gift of father to son, but ^{from} the fact that the parent molds the personality of the child, and the child's behavior and life is then a reflection on the parent and a mirror of the kind of immortality he achieves. It is ridiculous to speak of immortality for a parent whose child becomes an evil destroyer of good. One cannot speak of immortality for a father whose child is godless and himself conceives of life as only a cruel accident of biology, as nothing more than a chance configuration of molecules, as a desperate, meaningless, hopeless struggle ^{which always} results in a disappearance into obscurity. ^③

MITAH THEHEI MUTZA'AS BI'MKOMAH, let the bed be in its place, let the family be the right kind of family, my sons, and then I know that I will be blessed with Immortality - the right kind of Immortality. When a father and mother pass on and leave children who come to pour out their hearts to G-d only three or four times a year, and thereby remember them, that is a measure of immortality, certainly more than nothing. But it is not enough. Immortality is not magically achieved by a superstitious visit to a certain building. It means developing the kind of religious, godly character that reflects upon a parent & upon the self. ~~Those of us who are here only that number of times per year are immortalizing those we loved. But the synagogue must be honest with you and must not fool you. It is not enough. G-d is always here, & by your being here regularly with us, praying and working & laughing & thinking & planning & living with us, you will salvage eternal life for yourselves, and for those parents whom you loved. That is the second of R. Judah's suggestions: requests: you live the right kind of life to grant your parents imm., & train your children to live full, Jewish lives if you desire this blessed gift of Imm. for yourselves.~~

7. The third thing he told his children gathered round ^{his} ~~about the bed of their father~~ was: SHULCHAN ^{YEHEI} ARUCH BIMKOMO, let ~~the~~ table be set and prepared as always. The Table in Jewish life was never ~~only~~ a place ~~to stuff one's stomach privately and greedily.~~ ~~A~~ ~~①~~ ~~XX~~ The Table was always a MIZBEIACH, an altar. About it were seated the family, yes, but also ~~present~~ were the poor and the weary, the stranger and the needy. The Table was the altar, ~~about~~ ~~②~~ ~~XX~~ which one put into practice all the beautiful precepts of charity and philanthropy and hospitality and neighborliness. The SHULCHAN, ~~the Table~~, has become the workshop-table of Jewish charitableness. It is the symbol of benevolence, charity and kindness. No wonder the great code-book of Jewish Law, that Divine book of humaneness, is called SHULCHAN ARUCH, the Prepared Table. ~~P~~ So that when R. Judah told his sons not to disturb the position of his Table, he meant that the prominence he had given charity and hospitality and help to others in his life-time should be continued after his death, and that that would be one way of immortalizing him.

Indeed, part of the Yizkor prayer we soon will recite includes the statement that we promise to make a contribution to charity in memory of the soul ~~of so and so.~~ ^{we memorialize} What does that signify? It signifies that by performing this act of goodness in the name of someone we loved, he lives on in that act of goodness, for goodness outlives death. It outlives even Life. When you leave the Synagogue, ~~after Mussaf, not before~~ look at the plaques and at the stained windows. The names on them are more than names - they are people who are immortalized in an act of goodness performed by themselves or by someone else on their behalf. What better way of living on than through goodness! I know that for ~~an~~ ^{many} years, during my schooling at Yeshiva University, I ~~received a stipend from a fund set up by the children of~~ ~~one Mendel Gottesman.~~ I never knew him. But I shall never forget him. There was one time that I received an award called the Riva Sarah Kadin Award in Talmud. I never knew her too. But neither shall I ever forget her. I know that those wonderful charitable souls who showed goodness ~~to~~ ⁱⁿ charitableness to the Day School where I received my early education and the University where I received my higher education will live on in my heart. If ever I studied a folio of the Talmud, if ever I delved into the heart of a verse of the Torah, if ever the Good Lord in His way gives me ~~any credit~~ ^{reward} for these, they - those whose goodness made it possible - have even a greater share ^{in it} than I do. I ate at their Table. Even after they left, the Table at which they lived was set - and in its place. What a noble way to live on!

8. Finally, R. Judah told his sons NER YEHEI DALUK BI'MKOMO, let the light be kindled in its place. ~~Every~~ ^{No} man, no matter how humble and ~~meek~~ ^{modest}, never leaves this world without kindling some kind of lamp, without ~~achieving~~ ^{some} bit of good in some way. That candle, that special individual achievement, is his memorial, his path to immortality. Some people, like R. Judah himself, leave powerhouses. Others leave chandeliers of tremendous illuminating power. Others leave bright lights. But every man, no matter how small, leaves at least a candle. Everyone of us can think back to those we loved and whom we memorialize, and out of the darkness that shrouds the years, we will notice the flickering rays of that candle, that special act of goodness which was the constant specialty of that person. Speaking again from my own personal experiences, there is one old lady who still works at her specialty, and may she continue to do so for the full measure of her days, who is, in my eyes already an immortal. Her specialty was the lunchroom of the Yeshiva in which I studied as ~~a six and seven year old.~~ She never missed a day. It was her business - and she had absolutely no official connection with the school - that every boy ate his lunch, whether home-packed or school-served. MEN DAF ZEIN GESUNDT TZU DINEN G*TT. She encouraged the ~~BRACHAH~~, she encouraged the eating, she encouraged the blessing afterwards. And she has, ~~in~~ ^{by} this way, assured herself of blessings for alleternity - even afterwards. It was her candle, and I hope that there will always be someone to keep it kindled in its place. ~~As~~ ^P As you who are here to remember loved ones recite the Yizkor, think about his or her special candle, and remember to keep it lit - whether it is a special charity, or special act, or special Mitzvah. It is a candle which burns forever. ~~And - set one up yourself.~~ And then choose and light a candle of your own - it burns bright, and very long.

Prince

9. And after he passed away, the Talmud relates, R. Judah the ~~Prince~~ ^{Prince} became an immortal. And he would visit his home every BEI SHIMSHA, every Friday night. At the table, his family would unastonishingly be aware of the fact that ^{steps} father was there with them. For there, at the ~~Friday Night~~ Sabbath table, he would see the four ~~ways~~ ^{steps} to Immortality which he had taught his children.
- ① There was his beloved wife, reigning like a Queen with the Sabbath candles as her scepters and the radiance of love filling her face, ~~and her home~~.
- ② And there his MITAH MUTZA'AS, his family, his children, gathered round the table and making of eating a worship and of feasting a mitzvah; children of whom he could be eternally proud.
- ③ And then there was the SHULCHAN ARUCH, the Table, his Table, undisturbed; for there together with his wealthy and aristocratic and scholarly sons were the poor and the indigent, travellers and strangers - common, ignorant ^{as Sallouj} and plain - but all together enjoying and hallowing the sacred Sabbath.
- ④ And finally, after the meal was done, he saw the lamp he kindled burn ever brighter. For the legacy he left to eternity was not neglected. ~~Instead~~, there were his sons studying assiduously the Mishna, the book ~~their~~ father edited, delving into the Torah, the realm where he, in his life, had found meaning and joy and creativity. Yes, he was truly immortalized.

10. As we, therefore, begin to recite the Yizkor prayers, let us too remember that ~~anyone~~ ^① ~~Can Acieve Immortality~~. With the ~~right~~ kind of Love, the right kind of Family, the right kind of Charitableness, and the right kind of ~~creative~~ Goodness, we can even now endow those we loved with the blessing of ever-continuing life; and we can assure ourselves, no matter how ~~modest~~ and how ~~humble~~, of true Immortality. ^②

③ KI VYADCHA NAFSHOS HA'CHAYYIM VE'HA'MEISIM, for in Thy hand, O G-d, are the souls of the living and the dead, and only by commending ourselves to the Hand of G-d can we be certain of eternal life for ~~those who~~ both those who live, and those who live on.

הנהגתו הנפלאה! / מן המצוות הנפלאות
 קבלנו את המסורת הנפלאה
 והוא כלל את כל המצוות הנפלאות!
 - אנו חייבים להם ולעולם
 (הנהגתו הנפלאה) את המצוות הנפלאות
 ואלו המצוות הנפלאות
 הנהגתו הנפלאה!