

"ALL THE KING'S MEN"

In the context of the long stretches of Jewish history, the custom of reciting Yizkor is quite recent. The first reference to it is only a few hundred years old; even then, only Yom Kippur is mentioned, and not the other festivals. Halakhically, it has almost no standing at all; certainly it is infinitely less important than such laws as Shabbat and Shofar and Kashrut. Nevertheless, it is the kind of custom which has assumed great significance in the lives of Jews throughout the Ashkenazic world. Jews who have lost all other contact with the synagogue still flock to services on these four times a year, sometimes unfortunately ignoring the main service while reciting this one prayer. An index of its appeal is the reaction of Russian Jewry. These millions of our brethren who have for two or three generations been denied any Jewish education, many of them loyal Communists, observe but two of our rituals en masse: Simhat Torah and Yizkor on Yom Kippur. Many of these Jews who do not publicly admit to the belief in God, and perhaps are genuinely in doubt, will, on Yom Kippur, gather in front of the synagogues and with tears in their eyes say Yizkor Elokim et nishmat... "May God remember the soul of" parents or other relatives.

Is this but a superstitious expression of the fear of death? Hardly so! Our greatest and clearest thinking Sages have both permitted and encouraged the custom of Yizkor. I know of no protest

against it by our leading authorities -- something which surely would have occurred had it been nothing but superstition.

Why then its popularity and acceptability?

The answer, I believe, lies in the fact that Yizkor points to a major fundamental of the whole Jewish outlook on life. It is this concept which evokes such warmth, such tenderness, such vitality from the hearts of Jews of diverse backgrounds and commitments. And that is -- the supreme and inviolable importance of each individual human being. If man is nothing but a biochemical accident and a cipher in a demographic explosion or a vast labor force or a national group or any other faceless collectivity, then his death is unimportant and his life is meaningless, and there is no point to the recitation of Yizkor. But if we do say Yizkor and we do recall the lives of dear ones for whom we still grieve and we do seek for some purpose in our own lives, then we affirm that, despite all, man as an individual is unique, irreplaceable, and infinitely precious.

This belief is, of course, an essential of Judaism. It is the idea that man was created in the Image of God and is hence of vast importance and immortal and invaluable. It does not mean that the family or the nation or the world is less important; but it protects the individual human being from being crushed by the weight of numbers of the outside world.

That is why Yizkor strikes such a resonant chord in the hearts of Jews. None of God's children can ever be lost in the shuffle of

of men and nations. Those we remember today are gone from earthly existence. Yet we remember them in love, and this memory is but a reflection of their immortal presence before God. Other men and groups can ignore and forget individual human beings; but Yizkor Elokim, God remembers, and we are God-like when we too remember.

So there is nothing superstitious about the feelings which well up within us at an occasion of this sort, or about the particular way we articulate them. Our emotions, in this case, are not just the indulgence of a childish fantasy; they are the expression of one of the noblest ideas that Judaism has contributed to mankind.

Indeed, a measure of the importance of each human being is discovered by Hasidim in a famous Mishnah. You know that when three adult Jews eat together, they recite the Grace or birkhat hamazon together, with one of their number saying nevarekh she'akhalnu mi-shelo ("Let us bless Him of whose bounty we have partaken"), and the others responding. When there is a minyan of ten men, however, the formula is expanded to nevarekh Elokenu she'akhalnu mi-shelo, "Let us bless our G-d of whose bounty we have partaken" -- the Name of G-d is added explicitly. This holds true for ten men or a thousand. This is the decision of R. Akiva, which we accept. However, the Mishnah records the opinion of R. Yosi (Ber.59b) who followed a somewhat different procedure. With ten men, he required the Name Elokenu, as is our practice. But if there were a hundred men who broke bread together at one meal, the formula is expanded to Ha-shem

Elokenu -- Let us bless the Lord our G-d. If there are a thousand, the leader recites: nevarekh la-Shem Elokenu Elokei Yisrael, Let us bless the Lord G-d, the G-d of Israel. And if there are ten thousand who have dined together, the leader proclaims, nevarekh la-Shem Elokenu Elokei Yisrael Elokei Tzevaot Yoshev ha-Keruvim -- Let us bless the Lord our G-d, the G-d of Israel, the Lord of Hosts, He Who dwells between the Cherubim. With each increment, there is a more exalted Name of God that is used. Now, ask the Hasidim, what would R. Yosi say if there were only 9 Jews? Or only 99, or only 999, or only 9,999? Of course, the absence of that one person would disqualify the use of the holier and more august Name. Thus, if one single person is missing from among ten thousand, G-d's praise is diminished, and He can no longer be exalted as the "Lord of Hosts Who dwells between the Cherubim!" And if one is missing from a thousand, then that lesser Name is in turn diminished; and if one Jew is absent from a hundred, then that divine Name too is lessened; and if one is missing out of ten -- G-d cannot be mentioned at all! That is why we mention the Name of God, Elokim, in our Yizkor prayer: not only do we remember, but God does, for the death of this one person has somehow diminished the Creator in whose image each of us is created.

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It is this idea that God too, as it were, suffers and is affected by the loss of a single individual, that we may understand why the Kaddish is recited for those who have passed away. It has often been asked: what relation is there between death and the

Kaddish? Why this particular prayer at this particular occasion?

A touching and illuminating explanation has been offered by the great Hebrew writer and Israel's Nobel Laureate, Sh. Y. Agnon, in a brief eulogy for the martyrs of the Holy Land many years ago. There is a difference, says Agnon, between a mortal, human king and the divine King of the whole world. When an ordinary mortal king goes into battle, he sends forth his soldiers as a group, but does not consider them as individuals. If one soldier falls, another can take his place. It makes little difference to the king who the individual soldiers are, what their needs or loves or fears or aspirations. Generals fight their wars by commanding whole divisions and regiments, not individual fighters. The President and the Defense Department and the Congress think in terms of thousands of troops deployed and of replacements in large numbers for anonymous soldiers. Not so the Almighty, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He! Every one of God's troops is unique. With Him, all the King's men are each ineffably precious. The Lord does not deal with His children as statistics, but as wholly unique individuals. Therefore, when one of the soldiers in God's army dies -- and we are all His soldiers, all the King's men -- that place remains empty forever, and no one else can ever replace him. When a person passes away, therefore, not only does his earthly family grieve but God, too, as it were, grieves for him, and God too must be consoled, for He suffers with us. And so we offer the divine Father our condolences for His grievous and irreparable loss: Yitgadal ve'yitkadash shemeih

rabbah, May Your great Name be magnified and sanctified. When one of Your children dies -- and they are so few and so precious! -- Your "great Name" is diminished and it is desecrated, it is a hillul ha-Shem. So we pray: may Your great Name yitgadal, may it be magnified and restored to its previous greatness, and yitkadash, may it again be sanctified after its dreadful desecration. God's kingdom has suffered; His soldier has fallen. There is a void, an emptiness in His realm. So we say to Him: ve'yamlikh malkhuteih, may His kingdom too be restored...

What a consoling thought -- to know that we are not alone in our grief! And what a powerful and sensitive and beautiful way of enunciating this principle of man's individual greatness, his abiding significance even in a world of population explosion and over-kill and mass movements and Vietnam and China and the Middle East and large-scale urban riots! Yizkor and Kaddish are certainly not superstitions; they are the reflections of the most enlightened idea ever to seize the human mind.

It is from this background that we religious Jews must formulate our responses to some of the grave questions of life and death that confront modern man. The problem of when life begins and when it may be said to have ended is highly complex and unusually complicated. We cannot and ought not give easy, simplicistic answers.

For this very reason, and because of the enormous significance that Judaism accords to each life, we must beware of thoughtlessly embracing the latest ober dicta of so-called "progressives" whose

views on such matters are formed all too easily on a basis other than that of man's creation in the tzellem Elokim, the divine Image. Without any pat answers of our own, we must not jump on the bandwagon of advocating the unlimited availability of abortions, which sooner or later leads to eugenics, to euthenasia, and to all forms of "mercy killing." Consider the recent revelation of instructions given by a London medical superintendent to his hospital staff, urging that resuscitation in case of heart failure be denied to patients over the age of 65 or those suffering from malignancies or certain types of chronic diseases. Can anyone doubt that this decision by a mere mortal who has mistaken himself for a deity bespeaks contempt for the individual and for life in general? Is a man or woman over 65 to be denied the gifts of life and recovery simply because he or she is less able to engage in competitive sports, or -- as seems more likely -- less able to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh and of this world, or less able to produce for the benefit of society? Is the value of a man to be judged by the athletic standard? -- or the hedonistic standard, that of deriving pleasure? -- or the social and economic standard of productivity? Or are we to abide by the Jewish standard, the only truly human one, which avers that every single human life is in itself infinitely precious because we are "all the King's men," God's beloved children?

On Yom Kippur, when we plead for life, for kotvenu le'hayyim and zokhrenu le'hayyim, and when we recite Yizkor affirming the

irreplacibility of each and every human being, we declare our revulsion with such pagan standards, whether uttered in the name of science or of professional societies or of ordinary malefactors.

But this assessment of the individual human being as infinitely valuable and ineffably sacred is not by any means restricted to man's biological life. Its consequences go beyond mere physical existence; they embrace man's endless spiritual and religious potentialities as well. If a human being is so precious to God that He must be consoled at a man's loss, then He, the Almighty, has invested something of Himself in each of His human creatures. That something is the source of man's religious potentialities, his moral greatness, his spiritual attainments.

It is because of this that we must never despair of any man, at any time. The doors of teshuvah can always be open. No matter how far one has wandered from Torah, no matter how thoroughly one seems to have alienated himself from that divine investment in his own being, we must always have confidence in the sudden, miraculous rekindling of that dark ember of Jewishness within him. Ki lo yidah mimenu nidah -- we must never concede the loss of any Jew to Judaism.

Right after the recent Six Day War in Israel, the evening paper Yediot Aharonot carried the following report to it by the vigorously anti-religious author, Aharon Amir, identified with the "Canaanites." He tells of a conversation between his young daughter

and himself:

"God," she emphatically and with certainty declared, "God is looking after us."

"God!?"

"Yes."

I was utterly astonished. I thought for a moment and then posed a further question:

"Who told you? Nadav?"

Nadav is my older son. He is already nine and is in grade three.

"Yes," answered the child in simple faith.

Afterwards I cross-examined my son and told him all about my conversation with his baby sister and the final triumphant retort that she had attributed to his wisdom.

"You told her that God is looking after us?"

"Yes," he answered simply.

"And who told you? The teacher?"

"No. No one."

"Then who told you?"

"No one. Just myself."

"How do you know?"

"I know. I just know."

There you have it! In those three words from the mouth of a nine-year old, "I just know," you have the finest proof of the

ahavah tiv'it u-mesuteret, the indomitable and irrepressible religious urge, the unconquerable essence of Jewishness, that bespeaks man's enormous spiritual potential, which derives from his essential sanctity, his value, his worth.

You ask me wherefrom my obstinate optimism that all Jews will eventually return to Torah -- as Maimonides put it (in his Hil. Teshuvah), le'ke'she'yaasu teshuvah, "when" the community will return to Torah, not only "if," -- and my answer is: I JUST KNOW.

Wherefrom my unwillingness to concede that any young Jew or Jewess, no matter what his or her sudden sophistication at being exposed to the wide, wide academic world in the universities, and his or her first brush with pungent and polysyllabic apikorsut -- my unwillingness to acknowledge that such a person is irretrievably lost? My faith that with greater wisdom and more experience there will be this teshuvah, this return? -- I JUST KNOW.

Wherefrom our desire to keep all channels of communication open to all Jews, no matter how far gone in assimilation? How do we know there still remains a chance for the Jewish spark to be fanned to life? I JUST KNOW.

Why this persistence of the Halakhah that yisrael af-al-pi she' hata yisrael hu, that no matter how much a Jew has sinned he remains a Jew -- a doctrine often heatedly rejected by Jews who refuse to remain identified as Jews and who consider this principle racist and undemocratic? It is because you and I and the whole Jewish tradition "just know" that man is both biologically and spiritually worthy, and that as the yetzir kapav, the handiwork of the Creator, always redeemable.

(Before the viduy we say: atta Yodeia razei olam ve'taalumot sitrei kol hai, atta hofes kol hadrei vaten, u-vohen kelayot va-lev, You, O God, know the mysteries of the universe, the secrets within the depths of every living creature, you search the innermost recesses of man's heart and mind. We recite this as an introduction to our confession of sins: You know how corrupt we are, u-ve'khen, therefore we might as well admit it.

But I would interpret that just a bit differently: Atta Yodeia razei olam, You, Almighty God, know our soul to its very depths, and You know therefore that despite all our wrongdoing and our shameful deeds, we are still worthy of being redeemed, that all is not lost, that there still resides within us the spark of Godliness. Therefore, u-ve'khen, armed with this awareness of our innate value and our spiritual potential despite our evil, we shall confess our wrongs so that we may be forgiven. For only one who is worth forgiving may ask for it by confessing.)

These, then, are the thoughts that course through our minds and pulsate in our hearts at this time of bitter-sweet memories. Our oath of loyal remembrance to those whom we have loved and revered and are no longer among the living, is not just maudlin sentiment. It is a rousing affirmation that no human being simply evaporates from memory, because if no one else remembers, God does: for each human being is uniquely significant. And we affirm as well that no living Jew is beyond salvaging. In the uttermost recesses of our heart, in the

deepest folds of our being, there lies the gem of Jewish loyalty.

When we acknowledge the sanctity of individual lives, we ask Yizkor Elokim, that God remember. When we speak of the religious and spiritual riches that lie unmined in Jewish hearts, God asks that we remember, and that we dedicate ourselves to fulfilling and realizing that potential for the good of our children and ourselves, our fellow Jews, and all the world.

(Alternate Ending):

There is yet one more important consequence of this doctrine of the significance of the individual which we affirm in the Yizkor. It tells us that, as we have said, each individual life is sacred, and that each human being harbors within his heart holy potentialities. But from these there flows a third teaching: not only can we be redeemed ourselves, but we can redeem others as well -- indeed, the entire world!

The teachers of Musar never tired of stressing this theme. Every person can, by his own merit, save the world; and conversely, by his own shortcomings contribute to its destruction. That sounds somewhat naive in the context of modern society with its facelessness and its anonymity, and with the individual suffering from feelings of alienation and helplessness. Yet Judaism teaches us that the laws of the spirit are not the same as the laws of society. The Creator judges individual acts; He employs no poll-takers and opinion-samplers and sociological researchers. Every averah pollutes the entire universe; every mitzvah purifies all the cosmos. Just as we are individually important, so are we socially effective -- for good and for bad.

The Talmud (Sanh. 98b) implied this same idea in an unusual passage. Speaking of the Messiah, it asks: mah shemoh, "what is his name?" The answers are even more amazing. De'bei Rabbi Shila, in the school of R. Shila, the answer was given that the name of the Messiah was Shiloh, and the proper verse was offered in support. Then

de'bei Rabbi Yannai, in the school of R. Yannai, the answer was given as the name of the Messiah being Yanon, and then again a supporting text was found. Finally, the school of R. Haninah maintained that Haninah shemo, his name was Haninah.

What is so unusual is that each Rabbi averred that the Messiah would have his own name! R. Shila thought that the name of the Messiah is Shiloh; R. Yannai called the Messiah Yanon; and R. Haninah believed that the Messiah's name would be Haninah!

What they meant to say, I believe, was that there is a little bit of Messiah in every person. Every individual has something in his soul, something uniquely individual to him, that he has to contribute to Messiah and the age of Messiah. Messiah is a man of many names; it depends upon each of us to offer our name to Him. What they meant to say, then, was that the Messiah would not be a miraculous interloper from Heaven with no relation to us, but one who would be brought to the world by our own effort, by each of us giving his own characteristic and individual strength to the collectivity of Israel, and that this will bring the Messiah on.

It is good to remember this Talmudic assessment of our latent powers in this cold and impersonal world. We are not ciphers, nobodies, ineffectual and faceless nonentities. Each of us can bring happiness to the heart of a friend, joy to a neighbor; each of us can raise the level of Jewish education and study of Torah; each of us can

contribute to the security of Israel and to the peace of all the world. We each have names; and if we but make the effort, we can add a spark of that name, the symbol of our individual uniqueness, to that of the Messiah Himself.

Let this, then, be our determination on this holiest of holy days. As we recite the Yizkor, we affirm that each individual is the immortal concern of the eternal Creator; that every one possesses vast spiritual potentialities that make him worthy of forgiveness; and that we each are endowed with the power to employ our distinctiveness, our uniqueness in ushering in the age of redemption for Israel and for all the world.

U-va le'tziyon go'el, amen.