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“Remembering What Truly Was”

It was a dreary, gray Chicago afternoon – the afternoon my parents brought me back to their childhood neighborhood. The entire family had gathered back in Chicago for a relative’s funeral. And when *shiva* ended, we returned to life by revisiting the backdrop to my parents’ youth. My brother and I were fully grown men by then, and we certainly had our own associations with the sights we were seeing. I’ll never forget pulling up at my grandparents’ old house on Talman Avenue on the north side of the city. Instantly, all those comforting mental snapshots of my early childhood appeared before my eyes, and an easy smile came to my face.

We all got out of the car and cautiously approached the two-story, red-brick house, hopeful that its current residents would indulge our sentimental journey. But they weren’t home, so the best we could do was peer in a window or two, canvass the front and back yards, and examine the surroundings carefully, searching for substantiation of the old photographs with the white borders that were lodged in our minds.

But the investigation proved to be more unsettling than confirming. The house on Talman Avenue that I remembered was much, much bigger than this apparently built-to-scale replica. It always seemed to have plenty of space for all of the family, but looking at it now, I couldn’t see how. I could see the same layout, the same custom moldings of the doorway leading into the kitchen – it all just seemed to be a tired-looking miniature. From outside the kitchen window looking in, it was impossible to imagine that the magnificent smells of my grandmother’s cooking had ever managed to overwhelm the dank mildew of this place. And when I turned back to the street, where I had remembered riding my bike and playing some of my earliest games of catch, I suddenly noticed that both the sidewalk and street seemed strangely cramped in a way I had never noticed before.

Funny thing, memory. It has a way of sculpting the truths as we wish – or are ready – for them to be. I had remembered the elegance of my experiences in that old house and neighborhood so vividly that the passing years left nothing but the elegance. The rest had been stripped away, as if it had never been. But it had been, and now it was missing from me.

This afternoon, we’re all here, united by the sacred act of remembering. Our hearts are brimming with recollections of those we miss the most – the way they looked when we beheld them, the way they felt when we embraced them, the way they spoke when we most needed to listen. We can still smell the favorite perfume, the holiday delicacies... still hear the sound of that unique laugh and the inimitable voice. So much of them is still here, residing in us, and our very presence in this sanctuary is a testament to our unwillingness

to surrender them. But it's hard not to wonder, especially at this hour of *Yizkor*, whether the people we remember are, in fact, the truest reflection of the people who lived. That is to say, have our memories sculpted the truths about our loved ones as we wish – or are ready – for them to be? And if so, what have we lost of them in the process?

I've shared privately with quite a number of you an old Talmudic teaching: "Just as the dead shall be called to account, so shall the eulogizers be called to account." Why? Because swiping away any part of the story, either the bitter or the sweet, would diminish its power to guide us. No matter what was left out, remembering less would leave us with less.

It's hard to be that honest when we're remembering the people whose actions, inactions and departures have done so much to make us who we are. There's a tendency always to leave something out. Frequently, it's the bitterness that we choose not to taste. Our loved ones take on a mythic quality. Their faults are dissolved, their virtues inflated. We cleave to images of beloved role models who never raised their voices, never were uncaring, never lost their faith or their courage or resolve. We do this, of course, out of love, not because we're dishonest. But we do ourselves no favors – after all, how can one go on without someone so flawless, so pure? The memory might be inspirational, but the loss becomes immeasurable, and there's no room for life in the aftermath ever to be good again. The Book of Ecclesiastes warns us: "Do not say, 'How was it that former times were better than these?' For that is a question not prompted by wisdom." Indeed, even those we most treasured were imperfect, and there's so much more to be learned from the totality of their stories. Perhaps the full picture would release us from the hopeless bonds of perpetual mourning. Perhaps we could rise again, knowing that yesterday, while beautiful, need not eclipse the beauty that tomorrow could bring.

Yes, it is important to taste the bitter. But there are those who taste only the bitter, leaving no room for that which was sweet, and can be sweet again. We who remain shackled by the unceasing ache from the illness that took our loved one's life. We whose memories are besieged by feelings of guilt over things we could have done or said differently. We who can only remember the weaknesses and failures in one who hurt us deeply. We who never sought forgiveness before it was too late. We who never gave forgiveness before it was too late. We whose memories are never: "Thank God" – they're always: "If only..."

When our remembering leaves no taste of the sweet, we become slaves to the bitter. The Talmud tells the story of the great scholar, Resh Lakish. His early years were rather undignified – he'd been a circus attendant and a thief. It was only when he came under the guidance of the great Rabbi Yochanan that Resh Lakish managed to transform himself into one of our tradition's greatest Torah teachers. It's hard even to imagine how proud Resh Lakish must have been when he joined his mentor, Rabbi Yochanan, as a respected colleague in the same academy.

One day, the Talmud recounts that Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish got into a bitter argument over a particular point of Jewish law. And before long, the dispute boiled over, revealing some deep-seated hostility that must have been lingering beneath the surface between these two great friends and colleagues. And in the heat of the fight, Rabbi Yochanan blurted out: "Oh yeah, someone who was once a thief would say that!"

Resh Lakish responded: "Don't think for a second that you did me such a favor by rescuing me from my past. For I was as respected by my peers when I was a thief as I appear to be as a rabbi!"

The falling-out made Resh Lakish ill. It consumed his spirit. It tore him up inside. The two men never again saw one another or spoke to one another. And later, when Resh Lakish died, Rabbi Yochanan was overtaken by severe grief. According to the Talmud, he refused to be consoled, languishing in the deepest guilt and pain until he himself died.

A legend perhaps – but one that too many of us live. Rabbi Yochanan's memories were only of the big mistake, the failure he'd never rectified. Gone were his recollections of the special relationship he'd formed with his prized pupil before the ending turned sour. And so it is with us when there is unfinished business with those we mourn. We yearn for that lost opportunity to set things right.

*Yizkor* affirms that the opportunity can still be before us. For our relationships don't die – only we do. Our relationships, blessedly, transcend our time together in this world. We can still be shaped by those who are no longer here. This, we have experienced, sometimes painfully – we who have loved and lost. We know that to remember people is to tell a story that's still happening – that will always still be happening. And so that story should include it all – the virtues and the vices, the apology and the forgiveness, the joys and the sadnesses. Our memories shouldn't sculpt the truths. The truths – all of them – should sculpt the memories, for that's how the real, live, varied people we recall today can journey on with us.

The hour of *Yizkor* is here. Let us see it all, feel it all, tell it all. And then let us carry it all... carrying them with us into the new year.