The Legacy We Leave
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When I was in rabbinical school, our homiletics professor–that's the teacher who taught us how to write bulletin articles, plan out adult education classes, write sermons, and deliver eulogies–gifted each student a binder. Each page contained an opening to a eulogy, complete with a Jewish text, value, or framework. And at the top of each page was a title: *Eshet Chayil*/The Woman of Valor, the Scholar Father, the Dedicated Parent, the Incredible Balabusta, the Difficult Parent, the Loving Grandparent… you get the picture. When I received this gift, I couldn't imagine utilizing it. After all, how could our professor–a seasoned congregational rabbi from New Jersey–predict the kinds of eulogies I would one day write in Virginia and Connecticut? Isn't every person unique throughout their life and after their death?

The answer is, of course, yes. We are all unique. But all human beings have one major thing in common: Each of us hopes to leave behind a meaningful legacy after our death.

Today, as a core part of Yom Kippur service, we will turn to the prayers of Yizkor in honor and memory of those we loved so much and whom we miss terribly. Many of us will call to mind the ways they shaped us, their love for us, our love for them, how painful it was when they died. Some of us may have harder remembrances today, of those who hurt us, whose death brought a degree of relief. All of these remembrances are part of their legacy.

On this sacred day, when the Gates of Prayer and the Book of Life are wide open, when we ask *Who will live and who will die*?, when we muster the courage to face our own mortality, the question of our own legacy rises to the surface. This is deeper than who we want to be in this new year. This is about how we want to be remembered. When the book of our lives is closed, what will remain of us?

A beloved account in the Talmud[1] speaks directly to this question.

[1] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 23a

One day, Choni the Circle-Drawer was walking along the road. He noticed a man digging in the earth, carefully planting a carob tree.

Choni stopped and asked him, “How long will it take until this tree bears fruit?”

The man replied, “Seventy years.”

Choni was puzzled. “Do you really expect to live another seventy years and eat from it?”

The man smiled and said, “I found carob trees in the world when I was born. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so I plant for my children and grandchildren.”

Choni sat down under the tree, pondering those words. As the story goes, he fell into a deep sleep that lasted seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a young man gathering carobs from the very tree.

Choni asked him, “Are you the one who planted this tree?”

The man answered, “No, I am his grandson.”

Choni realized the truth of the planter’s words: what we do in our lives is not only for ourselves, but for those who will come after us.

Our ancestors were adamant that wealth and possessions we might amass do not add up to a legacy, although to be sure, these may enable our loved ones or beloved institutions to thrive long after our death. Our tradition insists that our most meaningful legacy is our relationships, the values we hold, and the work we have done.

The book of Proverbs teaches[2] that “A good name–*shem tov*–is more desirable than great riches.”

“When a person departs from this world”--the Rabbis taught[3]–”neither silver nor gold nor precious stones accompany them, but only Torah and good deeds.”

[2] Proverbs 22:1
[3] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot 17a

A good name, the Torah each of us teaches–the life lessons, the values we hold dear–these are indeed what we cling to, what we hope our loved ones will honor when we are no longer alive.

The Tanach, the Bible itself is deeply concerned with legacy, as it encourages us to study and convey its teachings to our children and grandchildren, our friends and our students. *Veshinantam l'vanecha*–"teach these words to your children", says the Shma, and indeed we recite it twice each day.

Within the Tanach, we read of our ancestors building their legacies, not only for their contemporaries and children, but for us as well.

Avraham & Sarah built a burgeoning community dedicated to the belief in one God. As we know, they struggled mightily to bring a child into the world who could inherit and then pass on their legacy. Eventually they did. We can imagine the care with which they introduced Yitzchak to the idea of God, through love and play and conversation. They also shared their message with the many individuals they invited into their open tent–Avraham converting the men and Sarah converting the women, according to the Midrash[4] on the book of Genesis. The rabbis imagined not a large communal setting, but more intimate work, one cup of coffee or mint tea at a time. Their work ensured that this new covenant with God would endure.

Ruth, too, gifted the Jewish people and the world a precious legacy, through her passionate loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi and through her dedication to the Israelite religion, even after her husband's death. More than all the individuals in our Bible, Ruth is remembered for her kindness and her tenderness–she is a model of *chesed*, lovingkindness, that we aspire to.

And of course we look to Moses, perhaps our ancestor most concerned with legacy. From the Exodus all the way until his death at the end of Deuteronomy, he prioritized helping the Israelites acquire the tools they will need to thrive without him in the Promised Land. He led them for 40 years–2 generations' worth of Israelites–and truly established B'nei Yisrael, the people of Israel. The entire book of Deuteronomy, *Sefer Devarim*, is Moshe's last will and testament, and at long last, he passes the mantle of leadership to Joshua. After his death, he is remembered as Moshe Rabeinu, Moses our Teacher, and the Torah does indeed stand the test of time. What an inspiration for community building and institutional change.

[4] Bereshit Rabbah 39:14

From biblical figures to our modern world, legacy is built over time, through countless small acts of care, teaching, and devotion. In our own Beth El community, there are so many people whose impact continues to be felt today, from generations past, some of whom we know, many of whom you knew, but I never got to know. I want to highlight one person, and I'd love to hear about other people I should know about too! This one wasn't a prophet. He was just someone whose daily actions made a huge difference, who is still missed. Although he died just over 4 years ago, many still refer to the little room next to my office as "Harry's office". And on Tuesday mornings at morning minyan, Marvin continues to invite someone to read the psalm of the day, "Harry's psalm". Our newer members never got to meet Harry Morgenthaler, which is a shame, because you're missing out on a monthly phone call letting you know it's time to buy more Shoprite or Stop & Shop cards. Harry never missed a service. Harry was always reciting Mourner's Kaddish for someone who had died and who might not have anyone saying Kaddish for them. Harry was passionate about the financial well-being of our shul, which is what motivated him not only to make those phone calls, but to deliver the food cards to people's homes–he used to leave mine under the door mat outside my kitchen. As I shared at his funeral in 2021, when I think of Harry, a very particular image comes to mind: green jacket over button-down shirt, brown pants, baseball cap, head bowed ever so slightly, tote bag slung over his shoulder, a sense of urgency in his rushed walk. And his cell phone sitting in his shirt pocket, waiting for a customer to ring. He was always on the move, always doing something for or someone else, and usually for the synagogue. All who knew Harry are blessed, and his legacy continues to resonate.

Nobody creates a legacy overnight. Avraham & Sarah, Ruth, Moshe–they built their impact over time, day by day, conversation by conversation, by showing up as their full selves and sharing their passions. Some legacies, perhaps like Harry's, come into full view only after a person dies. Whether one takes on this opportunity consciously, or it just happens–either way is ok.

That's how we do it, too.

We create our legacy in the everyday ways we touch the people around us~~– in how we raise our children or care for our friends, in how we teach the next generation, in how we show up for community. Our legacy also lives~~ in the values we carry into daily life~~: kindness, generosity, a sense of responsibility beyond ourselves.~~ And, especially on this day, we remember that our legacy is shaped by the choices of the

spirit–by turning back when we've gone astray, by opening our hearts in prayer, and by giving of ourselves to others. These are the things that endure long after we are gone.

Yizkor is not only about remembering those who came before us–it is also a mirror, reflecting back the question of what kind of legacy we ourselves are creating. As we sit with memory today, I invite each of us to think of one value, one act of kindness, one lesson we received from someone we are remembering. And then, to commit to carrying that gift forward in the year ahead. If a person you're remembering today had a profoundly negative impact on you, try to let yourself be inspired to do things differently, not to perpetuate the flaws they could not overcome. In these ways, memory becomes more than looking back; it becomes the seed of the future we will plant.

May the memories of those we remember today envelop us with warmth, love, and compassion. May the examples of Avraham & Sarah, Ruth, Moses, and Harry inspire us with the courage, loyalty, and devotion that endure across generations. May our lives, too, become blessings worthy of remembrance when future generations rise for Yizkor. And may our actions this year honor all those who came before us—planting seeds of kindness, faith, and love that will flourish for generations to come.