

Memory

“Remember...Don't forget” (Deuteronomy 25:17&19).

Yizkor, The Memorial Prayer, is a very popular custom, if I may use an inappropriate word, mainly in the Ashkenazi world. On the last day of each of the three Biblically ordained Pilgrim Festivals, *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sucot*, we add memorial prayers for departed parents or other lost relatives. Although remembering the dead goes back a long way, the custom of having specific community prayers developed (despite opposition) in Medieval Europe when community after community fell victim to crusaders and generations of fanatics who believed that Jews were inherently evil and that it was a meritorious thing to forcibly convert or rape and pillage or simply exterminate the Jews. This was common practice then and still lurks beneath and above the surface in many places.

Nowadays *Yizkor* is often expanded to include Holocaust victims, but other regular prayers remember our martyrs such as the *Av HaRachamim* prayer that is said on most Shabbat. Yet it is such a popular tradition that many Jews only come to synagogue for *Yizkor*. My father was highly critical of the custom to walk out of the synagogue when *Yizkor* was being said if one had not lost a parent. He said it would be better to stay inside and silently thank the Almighty that they were still alive! And that was the rule at Carmel. I do remember and thank God every day for the lives of my parents. So that I find the three times a year ceremony rather superfluous.

My father was such a powerful, overwhelming, majestic figure, that inevitably he dominates memories. There is a very short clip of him in “The Trial of Adolph Eichmann” now showing on Netflix. He was interviewed in 1961 by the BBC and his controversial responses caused a stir. Some 18 minutes into the film you can see him briefly but even so, he comes across so powerfully it is quite startling. I have tried to ask the BBC for a copy of the whole interview with no success, so if anyone reading this has any pull, please use it for me! I'd be grateful.

Although my father attracted most of the attention my mother, in her way was every bit as remarkable as he was. Her father, M.J.Cohen, was a strong-willed, argumentative man who had come over as a youngster from Kibnitz in Ukraine to Tredegar in the Welsh Valleys. And from being a young peddler built up a significant business as a wholesaler. He married Annie Bornstein and established himself in Cardiff and they had four children. My mother was the eldest. He was strictly orthodox and yet a man of his times. His modern, substantial house was elegant with Bauhaus furniture, a tennis court, and a kitchen garden. His sons received a rigorous yeshiva and secular education. His daughters were given a good education too and sent to finishing school in Switzerland where they became keen skiers and fluent in French.

My mother was a student at Cardiff University when she invited my father, the handsome young bachelor rabbi in Manchester, to come for a Shabbat to speak to the students. They fell in love. She gave up her studies, married, and

devoted herself totally to my father's career. Like so many unsung heroines of the rabbinate, she gave of her time and soul to the community, day, and night, without remuneration but at least in her case, with appreciation. She was an important part of my father's success and wherever they went together she was loved and admired for her beauty, her intelligence, and her devotion.

From Manchester, they moved to Glasgow when my father was appointed Communal Rabbi. Two years later they moved again to London when he became the Principal Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues. In 1948 my father left the rabbinate to found Carmel. They sold their comfortable home in Hampstead and moved into an apartment in the main school building at Greenham Common near Newbury.

My mother found herself acting as catering supervisor, occasional cook, matron, bursar, social secretary, public relations officer, and fundraiser. And all this while raising two and later three lively and demanding sons. Their daughter didn't come for another eight years. The early years were very difficult. Money was always a major problem. In 1952 they had to move from Newbury to Mongewell Park, near Wallingford, where they lived in cramped rooms with little privacy, right in the middle of the residential block of a boy's boarding school.

I'm sure she must have been in tears, close to despair a lot of the time. But all I recall is my father excusing her on one occasion saying that she was 'a little aggravated'. And the only time I ever heard him raise his voice to her was when she misread the map when we were touring in Cornwall and got lost.

Slowly the school prospered, at least relatively, and in 1959 they were able to move into a house of their own on the estate, away from the main school buildings overlooking the river Thames. There they had the semblance of a normal married life together. Two years later my father had an accident. He missed his footing jumping from a motor launch onto the concrete pier. He landed heavily and broke his shoulder, some ribs, and his leg and was hospitalized. He never completely recovered. He declined, contracted leukemia, and died in 1962.

My mother's life changed completely. From being a vital cog in the school she helped found, she was excluded. She poured her energies into founding a Girls' School. She went back to school, graduated from Oxford University, and got a Diploma of Education. She worked hard, got support, and a building started to rise, but then the headmaster who succeeded my father intervened and she was forced out of her beloved Carmel College. She dabbled with several career possibilities but finally decided to devote herself to her children and then her father and moved with him from London to Israel.

Life was not easy. She was financially constrained and lonely for years as she shepherded her children towards their own lives and families. Eventually, she remarried and then spent the next twenty years of her life in comfort with a good man. If her dreams of making her mark as an educationalist in her own right did not succeed, she did become a valued member of an important Anglo-American religious social circle in Jerusalem. There are so many different criteria for success.

I believe that most of the normal human standards of judging success are illusional. Her success on this earth lay in adjusting, coping, and giving of her best and her love in every situation whether good or bad to the families she was part of. It is a legacy passed on to nearly seventy great-grandchildren who venerate her memory and maintain her traditions.

Its stranger that the Torah says "Remember, do not forget." When one word should have been enough. One is positive, the other is negative. Not forgetting can be no more than a computer reminding one of date. But remembering means much more.

I don't need a prayer to remember either of my parents.