

From Loss to Sacred Memory

Martin Tannenbaum Yizkor Drash – October 5, 2022

I remember all too clearly the day my brother died. It was a Sunday – Larry’s 24th day in the ICU following a complex surgery. He was still on a ventilator and there were wires attached to several parts of his body. A monitor gently recorded his vitals. I was talking to him and stroking his forehead. He would smile at me, and I told myself that he knew I was with him – but honestly, I wasn’t sure. And then it happened. The monitor went crazy; the room filled with doctors and nurses. And suddenly a chaplain was glued to my side. I told him that he was the last person I wanted to see – not because he wasn’t a rabbi, but because I sensed why he was there. And then Larry was gone.... And then came the unbearable sadness of telling his daughter Sara Rose and then our parents. Not Larry! Not when he had so much more life to live!

In the almost **14 years** since Larry’s death, I’ve seldom summoned this memory. But somehow here, today, it feels important to share this memory, the **launching point** of my journey of remembering Larry.

Before we close the books on Yom Kippur, we are commanded to observe Yizkor – “to remember.” And so, we are each here...

As we each seek to build a bridge between the pain of loss and the sweet tenderness of memory, we are each, no doubt, at many different points in our journey. Some are raw with emotion, new to mourning – perhaps in the midst of a recent death, the grief almost unbearable. Others are remembering a loss from many years ago. And others, somewhere in-between.

Many, too, may be feeling the accumulation of loss – losses in our community, among our families and friends, and in a world of pandemic, violence, and injustice.

From our losses, we hope to fashion memories.

To *remember* is an essential act of our tradition. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “To us, recollection is a holy act; we sanctify the present by remembering the past.”

Just prior to being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the Dalai Lama met with six Jewish scholars. As the leader of a displaced people, he wanted to learn the “Jewish secret” of surviving in exile. After all, he reasoned, we had the expertise: 2,000 years of living in the Diaspora, all the while preserving a distinct culture, heritage, and religion. Surely the Tibetan people could benefit from our experience. After hours of questioning, the Dalai Lama thought he had finally grasped our secret. Echoing Heschel, he summed it up this way: “Always remember. And turn that memory into something sacred.”

And so, **we** remember those we have lost. We hold onto precious possessions. We tell stories about their lives. We try to live in a way that honors their legacy. And in remembering them, we weave their memory into our lives, into something sacred.

For me, Broadway musicals are also Torah. Some of you may know “Hamilton,” which burst onto the stage in 2015. It tells the story of Alexander Hamilton and many of our nation’s foremothers and forefathers. But “Hamilton” the show is not just a musical, not just a biography, not just a history – it’s an act of re-telling – an act of remembering.

From my first hearing, one song has haunted me. It’s the final song of the play that asks us, “**Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?**” The answer is sung by Hamilton’s wife, Eliza, almost 50 years after her husband’s death. First, she examines memories of the past: her husband’s writings, the men who fought alongside him in battle. But then she asks herself, what would he have done had he “**had more time?**” She finds her answer in her own acts that turn memory into legacy, loss into something sacred: she speaks out against slavery and injustice: she creates the first private orphanage. She tells us “I get to see them growing up...and In their eyes I see **you**... I see you **every time.**” “When my time is up,” she asks, “will I have done enough? Will they tell your story?”

Our tradition teaches us that people die twice – once when the body expires, a second time when no one says their name. We have a responsibility to remember those we have lost and to **tell their story.**

So let me say his name: **Larry Tannenbaum.** And let me tell you how I keep his memory alive.

On dressy occasions, I wear Larry’s watch. In order to keep the right time, just prior to daylight savings time, I go to a fancy watch store so that they can move the hands forward or back 1 hour. I’m sure Larry knew how to operate his own watch. I don’t. And I like this ritual of remembering him at the changing of seasons.

I sometimes wear Larry’s shirts – and feel his embrace.

When I want to share something important with Larry, I write a letter, read it out loud, and tuck it away.

Larry took great joy in eating chicken – actually, not just chicken, but also chicken bones. We mark his birthday and his yahrzeit with chicken and I’m reasonably certain that he helps with the bones.

Larry joins us for Shabbat. This started just after shloshim, the first 30 days of mourning, when our rabbi suggested that my parents light Friday night candles as they did when we were little boys – and use that moment to remember Larry. When my father died, it became a weekly practice for my mom and Larry’s daughter, Sara. And now, with my Mom’s death, Alex and I light Shabbat candles with Sara and her partner, Christina – and we remember Larry.

I find so much of Larry in his daughter, Sara. She radiates with kindness and curiosity. She’s brilliant and modest and deeply committed to a more just world. She’s the enhanced version of Larry. (Of course, she has also benefited from better therapy.) And I’m always here for Sara – just as Larry always was.

Like Hamilton’s wife, Eliza, I think about what Larry would have done with **more time.** Like us, he would have created a fund at Jewish Family and Children’s Services to underwrite Jewish Service Learning for teens. Several of our Sha’ar Zahav kids have participated.

We also underwrite Klezmer Shabbat in Larry's memory. This was the last event he attended before his death. It was a joyous evening. So now, each Klezmer Shabbat when music fills the sanctuary and lifts us in dance, we feel Larry's presence.

According to our mystics, when the body dies, the soul moves on; but the soul never forgets us or stops loving us. And when we perform good deeds on behalf of departed loved ones, we elevate **their** soul. In return, they watch over us, bless us and intercede on our behalf with G!d. I don't know if I believe this, but I love the concept that **we** are not alone; that **they** are not alone.

Your death, like your life, Larry, has been a blessing. You have brought out a better me and encouraged tzedakah and many good deeds. You've helped me build a bridge between the pain of loss and the sweet tenderness of your memory.

May each of you find a way to build that bridge ... to sanctify the present by remembering your loved ones... to tell their story ... and, of course, to weave their memory into something sacred.

G'mar Chatimah Tova