

We are here today at Yizkor to remember our loved ones. While we are in a large community, we will stand as individuals and recall personal relationships with parents, siblings, children and spouses. Maybe we are here today to remember our Mom. Or we are here to remember our Dad. Or, our brother. Or, a sister. A child. Even if time has passed, perhaps we are here to shed a tear as we remember the Great Love of our Life.

On this day when we don't eat or drink, our day is made even more difficult, remembering our loved ones who have passed.

If they left us this year,
back when we were children,
or any time in between,
Yizkor brings up memories and often tears.

While we gather as individuals, look around, right now this expanded room is the fullest it will be all year. We join as one community to share our grief and pain.

As part of an even larger community we said goodbye to so many people this year who left their mark on the national and international stage

First lady Nancy Reagan, Justice Antonin Scalia, Muhammad Ali, Arnold Palmer, and people in the arts like Gene Wilder (who I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah), Alan Rickman and Harper Lee.

Included in this list are two specific Jewish men I want us to remember this morning; two men who represent two models of Jewish renewal and resilience. One became American, and built a moral message for Jews and for the world. The other built the Jewish State. The world, and the Jewish people in particular, lost both Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres this year,
Zichronam L'vracha, and the world is poorer for it.

The next generation will never have the opportunity to learn first hand from their wisdom, like so many of us could during their lives.

In Unetane Tokef we read "mi bkitzo umi lo b'kitzo" Who in the fullness of years and who before? At ages 87 and 93, Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres lived a fullness of years, but our world is now bereft because they have passed into the World to Come.

Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres lived very different lives.

One started his life in Transylvania which is now Romania, the other began in Poland which is now Belarus.

One lived through the Shoah and documented his experience in a slim volume called Night. The other escaped early enough, but members of his family were burned to death, while locked in a synagogue.

About 100 people attended one of the funerals, across the river in Manhattan. Elie Weisel was laid to rest in Westchester.

Shimon Peres' funeral attracted leaders from 70 nations and he was laid to rest at Mt Herzl in Jerusalem, in the Great Leaders of the Nation section between former Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Yitzhak Shamir.

Shimon Peres and Elie Wiesel knew each other. In 2013, one of these men presented Israel's Presidential Medal of Distinction, while the other received it.

When Shimon Peres put the decoration on Elie Wiesel he praised him and said: "This is a great honor and privilege for me to bestow upon you the President's Medal. The Holocaust taught us that killing isn't done just with guns and weapons, but also with apathy, and you Elie, are saving the world from that apathy. You are waving the flag of humanity, preventing bloodshed and challenging racism and anti-Semitism, as well as preventing war. You personally went through the most atrocious horrors of humanity, and as a Holocaust survivor you chose to dedicate your life to deliver the message – never again."

Elie Wiesel thanked Shimon Peres and responded trembling: "I'm completely overwhelmed. Israel is in the center of my life, and even though I don't live in Israel, Israel lives within me. I now see myself as an honorary Israeli. Life is composed of moments, not only years, and this moment is worth an entire life."

Both men loved Israel.

Along the way, both men followed in the footsteps of Theodore Roosevelt, Lester B Pearson and Dr Martin Luther King Jr and were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

And, both men were singled out by name last week by President Obama in his final Rosh HaShana address.

Think about how sad we were when these legendary men passed away. And we did not even know them personally.

They were not giant public Jewish figures.

Both Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres were fathers, husbands and grandfathers.

We so often remember changemakers by eulogies made by equally famous people. But we really get to know a person by the words and thoughts of their immediate family.

When Elisha Wiesel, son of Elie Wiesel was asked by Tablet Magazine, what did your father want his legacy to the world to be? This is how he responded:

He wanted to be thought of as a good Jew. That was the only standard by which he measured himself. In most conversations, it wasn't about which president he met or any of that—all of which was meaningful to him; he valued that he had grown to play a role on the world stage.

But he looked at himself as his mother and father and grandparents would have evaluated him. That was always in his mind, what would they think of him and his life and what he had made of it.

For him, the guiding principle that governed that lens was always, "Have I been a good Jew?"

That meant many different things to him. If you unpacked what a good Jew was, it meant being a good human being and a good father; a leader in the community when leadership was needed; a good husband; someone who respected and brought respect to the memory and traditions and name of his ancestors; someone who was humbled by the concept of man's place in the universe but still felt mandated to fix the world; and someone who, when approached by people, would make time to talk with them and make them feel welcomed and listened to.

You came to shul today for Yizkor. You will recite the words "in loving testimony to their lives, I pledge tzedakah to help perpetuate the ideals important to them."

Can you also stand and recite the prayers with confidence that you are a "good Jew," employing Elie Wiesel's definition. Are you a good human being? Have you been a leader when leadership was needed? Are your actions worthy of respect? How have you brought respect to the memory and traditions and names of your ancestors? How do you think your parents or grandparents would evaluate you and your relationship to Judaism? How do you perpetuate the ideas that are important to them?

Moments before a young Shimon Peres - then Shimon Persky - departed with his family to their new life in Palestine from the Bagdanov station, he faced his grandfather Zvi Meltzer for the last time. The Old Man cast a deep look into his grandson's face and with emotion he uttered his last words to the boy. They were "Be a Jew, forever."

At Shimon Peres' funeral, Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton spoke, as did the author Amos Oz, Israeli current President Rivlin and Prime Minister Netanyahu. We got to know the real Shimon through the words of his children who publicly said farewell to their father.

In his eulogy, Chemi Peres, his youngest child said:
You kept your promise to your beloved grandfather, when you bid him farewell on your first stop on the way to the Land of Israel. You never forgot what it means to be a Jew. And I promise you that neither will I.

Ellie Wiesel's message: Be a good Jew.
Shimon Peres' message: Be a Jew.

Momentarily, sifrei Torah will be held in the arms of two of our Board Members and we will all stand as we recite the memorial prayers. Do we know what is written in the Torah that will be held at this moment? Can we enter into conversation with our loved ones that have passed and bring with us the messages of Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres' grandfather. Are we good Jews?

Are we Jews everyday and every minute of the day or only when we walk into this synagogue?

Later in the Tablet Magazine interview, Elisha Wiesel said that his father saw assimilation as a very significant threat to the Jewish people. He always felt he was at a crux because he was at the end of a line. It was his job to continue it and to make sure that he was not the last. He felt a connection to the fact that for thousands of years, Jews had been transmitting information down the generations in a certain way with certain values. I think he was very concerned that the line would end with him.

Will the line of Judaism end with you? Will your children or grandchildren know how to enter a synagogue, open a machzor from the right direction and know what is inside the sefer Torah?

Will someone say Yizkor for you?

How can you be sure your children or the next generation will be engaged in Jewish tradition and culture once you are gone?

Somehow you received the message to say kaddish for your parents or spouse or siblings or children. Have you shared that message?

Yizkor is only recited 4 time a year. Today, and the final days of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. Only 4 days of the year are tasked with ritually remembering the past.

The rest of Judaism is about perpetuating our future.

Be a Jew every day. Not just on Yom Kippur.

When we conclude Yizkor, take with you the lessons that your parents, children, spouse and siblings taught you. Take the best of them with you when you exit this sacred room and then

שְׁנַנְתֶּם לְבָנֵיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִקְוֹתְךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:

Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up

Just as the entire Jewish people, and the entire world can learn from the lives of Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres, and take their best values with them, so too must you do that with those who are gone that you will be saying kaddish for....

In Yoni Peres's eulogy for his father, he shared the following:

When asked what he would like to have inscribed on his tombstone after death, Shimon Peres said, without hesitation, "He was too young to die." Think about that for a moment.

All the people we are saying kaddish for today died to young. Zichronam livracha.