

Rabbi Gibson's Yizkor Sermon for Yom Kippur 5767  
"Still Warm"  
October 4, 2006

Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins quotes the legendary storyteller Shlomo Carlebach:

"Many years ago, a little seven-year old boy and his family were about to leave their native Poland. The day before their departure, the father took the little boy to the town where the Rebbe lived so he could receive the Rebbe's blessings. They remained overnight in the home of the Rebbe, and the little boy slept in the Rebbe's study.

Staring at all the holy books, the little boy could not sleep. In the middle of the night he saw the Rebbe enter the room, and he pretended that he was asleep. The Rebbe whispered "Such a sweet child!" Thinking the child might be cold, the Rebbe took off his coat and placed it lovingly on the sleeping boy.

Many years later, when the little boy became an old man of eighty years, when asked what the source of his kindness and comfort was, he said that seventy-three years ago the Rebbe showed him love and comfort, and placed his coat on him to keep him warm. 'I am still warm from that coat,' said the 80 year old man."

Rabbi Elkins comments, "The Yizkor...that we recite reminds us that at many occasions in our lives, many people put their warm coats on us, touched us, loved us, comforted us. Their coats still provide warmth for us today - whether they are living or not - and will continue to do so. From these coats we are still warm, and we thank them for their love and warmth. May their memory be for a blessing."

As the October winds begin to blow, we take this holy moment and think of those who gave us warmth, not just once, but dozens of times, hundreds of times throughout their lives. Warmth without which we would not be sitting here today; warmth that has made our lives possible, livable, and lovable, meaningful and fulfilling.

During World War II, my mother's brother Stuart served in the military and died in a plane accident. For years she kept his long, brown officer's coat. When I discovered it, she told me the story of my uncle, who I never met. I asked if I could keep the coat and use it for myself. She agreed and I wore it for many years, through college and beyond. I remember the soft felt of the inner, zip out lining, the big brown buttons at the end of the sleeves and the clasp at the throat to protect against winter's cold. In college, in the anti-military atmosphere of the Vietnam War, others made fun of the officer's coat. Until they heard the story, after which they would say, "That's okay. Can I try it on?"

I remember that it was so long on me that it almost trailed in the dirt. But I loved wearing it and always thought of the sepia colored picture of Uncle Stuart when I went

out with it on. Stuart, the uncle I never met, who died ten years before I was born, kept me warm for years with his officer's coat.

The memory has kept me warm for even more years than I wore it. How? Remembering Uncle Stuart's coat has caused me to reflect on the kind of person he was, his kindness, his shyness, his willingness to leave the safe confines of his family and go away to college, his courage to put on the uniform, like 500,000 other Jewish men and women more than 65 years ago and serve. My unmet uncle expands my life through his legacy, though it was cut short, far too short.

Whose legacy, whose life has warmed you throughout the years? That is who we honor this Yizkor of Yom Kippur. We honor them through daring to bring them to mind, by any means necessary or possible. We actively sit and hope to remember the specific, the tangible, even the aroma of those who were dearer to us than words can express.

Do you remember the scarf or the gloves or the hat? Do you remember the sweater, the socks or the shoes or even the eyeglasses? Did you ever try on your Zayde's vest or your Bubbi's housecoat? What about your brother's baseball glove or sister's pink cardigan? Have you ever golfed with your father's clubs or sewn with your mother's kit or put on her apron while in the kitchen?

Have you run your fingers through the pleats of your daughter's skirt or felt the stiff dried hood of your son's winter coat? We dare to call up those memories now even as the Yom Kippur is slowly drawing to its close. Yes, we will cry. But it is better to remember the feel, the touch, the grip, the unforgettable caress than to shut these memories into the closet of lost thought and forgetting. Our tears, those holy drops of sorrow, taste rich and real, as rich and real as the lives of those we honor by shedding them.

Never during the year do we feel so alone and so connected at the same time. At no other time do we feel that we are truly more touched by the presence of the dead than by sitting amongst the living that surround us by the hundreds.

And all to what purpose? Of course, we cannot bring them back. But at Yizkor, we allow full memory to flood through us. It is more than all right. Our remembering is an act of keeping faith with them, of being true to those whose essence now lies within us.

Albert Einstein once wrote, "Strange is our situation on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet...there is one thing we know definitively: that we are here for the sake of each other. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labor of others, and how earnestly I must exert...in order to give in return as much as I have received *and am still receiving*."

Remembering allows us to connect each of our short visits together to create a universe beyond any one of our ability to imagine.

There is a danger in Yizkor, however. It is being entranced by the sweet warmth of the past and preferring our present tears to tomorrow's toil. It is our sacred task to rekindle the warmth of memory here at Yizkor in order to pass that closeness on. To pass it on to those who will mourn our passing in years to come. Memory does not stop with us. Yizkor is not all about us, but rather our duty to connect past love with today's crying need.

Today we cry alone. Tomorrow we live together. Warmth dissipates over time; it cannot go on without sustained contact, without effort, affection and commitment.

To whom will you give your warmth? Who will remember the love you have created in your lifetime?

Shed your tears here. Pass on your warmth outside. The days are growing cold and we need it.

My grandmother, the mother of my Uncle Stuart, was a woman named Helen Kestenbaum. She was remarkable in her way, for her time. She had the strength to leave an Orthodox background and insist on joining a Reform congregation where she could be treated as a religious equal. She raised two children through the Depression. She lost her husband when he had barely turned 60 to brain cancer.

For ten years she mourned in place, staying in the old house in Albany, New York, guarding the memories like mothballs guard sweaters in a drawer. She watched as her friends and family died or drifted away to Florida. But then, after a decade, she pulled herself together to move cross country to Minneapolis to her own new apartment there.

I had never really appreciated what that must have taken until having lived here in Pittsburgh going on 19 years, watching families, root and branch. At 70 years old she undertook to move and start over again, to have to make new friends and find new favorite everythings, from beauty shops to delis to dress shops. She rediscovered her grandchildren, who saw her most every week. She created new warmth through everything from her baking, which was wonderful, to her jokes, which were not so wonderful.

It is the warmth that I feel when I remember her on Yizkor day. And if I remember one grandmother so vividly, how strong must your memories be, with the power and warmth of your own remembrances!

It is warmth that protects us as we grow old. We need it, not only to ward off the cold of winter, but the chill of loneliness that leads to despair. Yizkor memory is a perpetual fire that goes out only if we let it. Yizkor memory kindles our spirit and courage to go back out and give, create, love and do with all who cross our path. The warmth and kindness we create is just as real as the warmth and kindness we remember.

“Warmth, warmth, more warmth! For we are dying of cold and not of darkness. It is not the night that kills, but the frost,” cries the poet (Miguel de Unamuno, 1864-1936). As we take warmth in loving memory today, so shall we make such remembrances for others to be warm, each day, each moment, for as long as we are blessed to draw breath.