

As Jews, our perspective on time is essential to our religious and cultural identity. Beyond holidays, great importance has been placed on time from the very origins of our people. Our first commandment as a nation redeemed from slavery was to distinguish time—to set our holidays on the calendar. This methodology of discerning the sacred days would continue evolving until we identified every minute's significance.

The opening word of the Talmud is *Mayaymatay*. From what time?

מאימתי קורין את שמע בערבין

From when, that is, from what time, does one recite Shema in the evening?

The timing of when we begin reciting prayers, when we light candles, and when we conclude fasts is essential for our halakhic practices. So when a rabbi asked his students the practical question, "How do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?" He asked them to answer the earliest Jewish question—how can we tell when time ends and begins?

There are prayers, rites, and rituals that can only be performed at night, and there are prayers, rites, and rituals that belong only to the day. So, knowing how to tell when night has ended and the day has begun is crucial.

So the first and brightest of the students offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I look out at the fields, and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A second student offered his answer: "Rabbi, when I look from the fields, and I see a house, and I can tell that it's my house and not the house of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A third student offered another answer: "Rabbi, when I see an animal in the distance, and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether a cow or a horse or a sheep, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun."

Then, a fourth student offered yet another answer: "Rabbi, when I see a flower, and I can make out its colors, whether they are red or yellow or blue, that's when night has ended and the day has begun."

Each answer brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi's face. Until finally, he shouted, "No! None of you understand! You only divide! You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor's field; you distinguish one kind of animal from another, and you separate one color from all the others. Is that all we can do? Divide, separate, and split the world into pieces? Isn't the world broken enough? Isn't the world split into enough fragments? Is that what the Torah is for? No, my dear students, it's not that way, not that way at all."

The shocked students looked into the sad face of their rabbi. "Then, Rabbi, tell us: How do we know that night has ended and day has begun?"

The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students, and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he responded: "When you look into the face of the person who is beside you, and you can see that person is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun."

The easily identifiable fact about the human family is that we individuals are separated by geography, language, social customs, religion, culture, and much more. Yet, there are universal similarities that link all humans into one global community—a common foundation.

Each of us is born of a parent. We all reach out for love and acceptance and crave human connection. But the most vital unifying commonality may be that all of us have felt the sharp pain of loss—we are siblings in sorrow.

Are there any of us who have not cried tears of longing? Who has never craved a hug from someone no longer here?

Bitterness doesn't neglect any of us because we shower the world with kindness, we are/were successful in business, we love in our relationships, and we are generous in our nature. Educated or not, giving or not, loving or not, we each will experience sorrow. This is our shared destiny.

We each lay earth on a loved one's final resting place, adorned with torn fabric, and sit low during Shiva.

The brilliant Rabbi Morris Adler, z"l, the former leading spokesperson of the Detroit Jewish Community, wrote:

A patient came to a physician in Naples. He complained of debilitating melancholia. The physician said, "I advise you to visit the theater where the incomparable Carlini is appearing. The great comedian convulses large crowds with laughter daily. By all means, go see Carlini. His hilarity will drive away your sorrow."

At these words, the patient burst into tears and sobbed, "But Doctor, *I* am Carlini."

How can *we* face sorrow? Because we know that we cannot evade it.

Our Jewish mourning practices are intentional - generations of development led to how we wrestle with goodbye.

Setting all else aside allows us to concentrate exclusively on our loss—mirrors, shaving, new clothing, music—to honor those who leave behind an empty chair at the break of the fast meal

and in our sanctuary. Each recognition of their absence can bring with it the ultimate expression of pain: our tears.

Those are heavy tears—tears that emerge from the innermost depths of our beings. Even as we fight back the waters of our souls, they escape. They are uncontainable. Each droplet holds a cacophony of emotions, memories, and thoughts within it.

What are those emotions? What are those memories? What are those thoughts?

We so very often look at our history to illustrate, to give expression to, and to understand how we feel. To better comprehend that with which we wrestle. We are Yisrael, after all - those who wrestle.

We plum from the depths of our biblical tradition powerful imagery. We know our biblical ancestors' stories, struggles, and pain because we read them religiously each week. We name our children after them, recite their names in our daily blessings, and they are resources.

Therefore, we ask.... Who cries? Who cries from their most profound depths. And for what are they crying?

We know that Abraham cries when he loses his wife, Sarah:

(1) And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. (2) And Sarah died in Kiriatharba...and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to cry for her.¹

Joseph cries when he loses his father, Jacob:

Jacob breathed his last breath and was gathered to his people, Joseph flung himself upon his father's face and wept over him and kissed him.²

King David cries for Jonathan, his brother-in-law, whom David indeed considers his brother.

Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them; and all the men who were with him did the same. They mourned and wept, and fasted until evening for Saul and for his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.³

We walk alongside our biblical ancestors, and they walk alongside us. They mourned, and we mourn; they lost, and we lose; they cried, and we cry.

¹ Genesis 23:1-2

² Gen. 50:1

³ Samuel 2:11-12

But it is not just humans who cry; God cries, too. The Talmud teaches that God wails out throughout the night, every night, for the loss of God's children:

*R. Isaac b. Samuel says in the name of Rab: The night has three watches, and at each watch, the Holy One, blessed be God, sits and roars like a lion and says: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world.*⁴

What do our tears represent? To what does each droplet testify, signify, or express? Are my tears different from yours? Does our crying change as we move through the stages of the mourning process: loss, burial, shiva, sheloshim, the first 11 months, unveiling, yartzeit, yizkor?

We are brothers and sisters in sorrow. Seeking reunification with our loved one.

The psychological logic behind the Jewish funeral and Shiva rituals is unmistakable: having just experienced a loss, we conjure whatever precious imprint we have to hang onto the person who has died. At the funeral, we listen to eulogies; during shiva, we share photos and stories to solidify our impressions of our loved ones.

Yizkor works differently. It is not intended as a time to sharpen our memories, for others' recollections provide no corrective physical evidence or balance.

This focus on communal memory makes the Yizkor ceremony all the more striking. Yizkor is the one moment in the Jewish liturgical calendar when what matters is not communal but individual memory, each of us standing personally consumed by singular memories of relatives and friends who have died. Unlike a funeral or shiva, where personal memories are shared publicly to fashion a collective mosaic of the person being remembered,

Yizkor provides a communal space for inward memorializing. Why does Judaism, a religion so thoroughly dedicated to communal memory, make this regular exception when it comes to Yizkor?

Rabbi Shoshana Boyd Gelfand writes:

Yizkor encourages an evolution of our own private ongoing relationship. Each time we recite Yizkor and remember, we deepen the parts of that relationship that sustain us, while forgetting those characteristics that do not.

⁴ Talmud Berakhot

In other words, when we are most vulnerable, we have an opportunity to reconnect with those we mourn, seeing them not for each one of their mistakes or wrong words but as the best possible version of themselves.

20th-century poet, Hugh Robert Orr

*They are not dead who live
In hearts, they leave behind.
In those whom they have blessed
They live a life again,
And shall live through the years
Eternal life, and grow
Each day, more beautiful
As time declares their good,
Forgets the rest and proves
Their immortality.*

So, even though we can no longer physically bond with the people we have lost, we can have a dynamic and changing relationship with them through our memories of them. In this way, our memories of our loved ones keep them alive.

The Israeli poet, Moti Hammer echoes this sentiment in his poem *A Single Human Tissue*.

Which has earned its place in song form as the anthem of Yom HaZikaron (Israel's Memorial Day) in Israel:

*When I die, something from me
will die within you
When you die, something from you in me,
Will die with you.
Because all of us
We are a single living human tissue
And if one of us leaves us
Something dies within us—
and something remains with the other.*

In other words, we live in a world where two lives can be bound together by a tie more potent than death. And we do so together - brothers and sisters in sorrow who seek to be rejoined with the best version of our loved ones.

It is our understanding of the world to divide and classify, to divide night from day, each minute from minute.

Just when we think we are most divided, most separated from those who have left us. Furthest apart - there is comfort even the slightest bit - in understanding that our souls are inextricably bound for all of eternity.

When it seems as though we live in distinct worlds, when we are in the day, and they are in the night, there are moments in which we rejoin one another. As the rabbi taught his students, there are significant times when our faces are obscured from one another. Then the darkness and the light meet, revealing our presence and theirs, our faces and theirs, and our mutual and enduring love for one another.

There is darkness and light, and this moment, our Yizkor service...the in-between.