

Photographs and the Power of Memory
Rabbi Daniel Gropper
Community Synagogue of Rye
Yizkor 5775

My grandparents house had a wall of photographs. Composites of my dad and his siblings at different ages and stages; pictures of grandchildren, nieces and nephews. I would sit and endlessly stare at them. "Tell me about this one," I would ask my Grammie. It was in black and white. A family dressed in their best outfits; parents sitting as their children stood around them; their immigrant status given away by the man's untrimmed beard. It was a picture of my great-great grandparents, Yitzhak Lyas and Tova Kissman. While I was drawn to the photograph, it was their stories that drew me in. Of those who were among the living whose photos hung on the wall - my dad, my aunts and uncles, my cousins and siblings - I didn't need to hear their story. My life was intertwined with theirs. Their story was my own. Of the dead, I wanted to learn their tale, to see how my story would be linked with theirs.

There was a time, before selfies and Instagram, when people took very few photos. They were sacred. Those pictures created a living record. Now, when you know your snapchat photo will disappear, where is the sacredness in capturing a moment that leads to a memory, a memory that leads to eternity? If we are constantly recording, is there ever a time for reviewing? Is there ever a time for remembering?

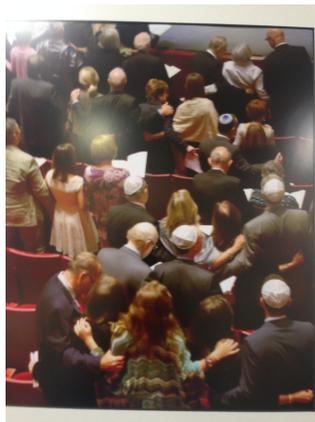
This time, right now, is that time. It is the time to recall our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers, our husbands and wives, our sons and our daughters. It is a time to recall grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends who no longer live but whose memory still permeates our very existence. It is a time to recall special foods

they cooked, a song they sang, a piece of jewelry they once wore. Here, in this darkened space, in the depths of this day when our bellies are empty, will fill our memories with the scent of their perfume, with a look or a glance or a word from our child reminding us of something they would do or say.

And, of course, we take time to go back to the photos, even the ones that exist in our mind's eye - to look at someone as they once were, to touch, to feel, to stand in the presence of the one we loved and still love. We do so because photographs are tangible records of life's afterglow. They create a permanent memory. And memory confers immortality upon those we love, as Rabbi Sidney Greenberg wrote, "death has no dominion where memory rules."

Knowing how photographs can hold and tell stories, I approached Rhoda Levine, an extraordinary member of our congregation to help create that record for our community. I asked her to take on a project called, "A Year in The Life..." It wasn't an original idea. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/s?k=A+Year+in+the+Life) lists 18,840 results for "A Year in the Life." But I didn't want someone else's memories. I wanted us to have and to share our own.

The photographs grace our main hallway at 200 Forest Ave. There is a picture of children being surrounded by a Torah scroll as they begin their religious studies. A picture of food being harvested to donate to those in need. Pictures of hands working and building, planting and reaping, kissing and blessing and reaching. And then there is my favorite, taken right here, in this space, on these days. [Allow me to share it with you..\)](#)



What do you see here? I see love and blessing and connection. There are the Rosenfeld's with their daughters Rheana, now a little taller. The Bakers, the Blooms, Paul Elliot and his son James, the Cohen's amidst others... This picture tells our story in ways no words can match. And of all the families memorialized in this photo, one always captures my eye. There, in the top right corner stand the Millers. On the far right is Jonathan. Marilyn stands to the left of her son and Sidney, now deceased stands to their left, arms extended, embracing, holding, loving.

Like Sel Hubert who also died this year, Sidney served as president of this congregation. He saw this place through some tough times and celebrated the good. And while, for the past few years he and Marilyn wintered in Florida, he was a huge cheerleader for Community Synagogue. That passion never left him. Sidney died last December. I often stop and stare at this photo as I walk the hall of our shul. I look at Sidney. I remember him fondly. I think of his legacy. And because we are here and you are here, he, and Sel and other congregants and relatives of congregants who died this past year are also here.

Ecclesiastes was right when he said that "the eye never has its fill of seeing." The photos are there. They capture a moment in time but they are insufficient. They are, as Susan Sontag wrote, "memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." How true. Oh how we wish our loved ones were here for another challenge in our lives, another joy, another precious moment. And so, while we acknowledge that a photograph testifies to our mortality - we will never look that young, that vibrant, that alive again - we love photos

for they allow us to hold onto a sliver of life, to embrace it with all of our hearts and to construct for ourselves a sacred memory.

And photographs allow us to somehow relive that precise moment as well; to fall, as Harry Potter did through the pensive, into that space, into that time, to find ourselves once again with that person. This is the power of memory. In fact, at the neurological level, the act of remembering involves re-actualizing. Every time we recall a memory, we are actively re-engaging that memory at the level of the neuron and re-contextualizing it ever so slightly in light of who we are in the present.

That, my friends, is the point of Yizkor. Not to return to the past, not to live in the past but to remember the past in order to contextualize it in light of who we are in the present. The Hebrew Bible contains no word for history. It does contain a word for memory. Zakhor. Someone else's story is important but my story, my memory, my photographs are significant. Much more than being the "People of the Book" we remain the "People of Memory." How important is this concept in Judaism? Well, if number count is an indication, very. Zakhor is found the Torah 169 times!

In his book by that title (http://smile.amazon.com/Zakhor-Jewish-History-Lectures-Studies/dp/0295975199/ref=smi_www_rcolv2_go_smi?_encoding=UTF8&*Version*=1&*entries*=0), Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, argues that we are the only people on earth who elevated the act of remembering to a religious imperative. We are commanded constantly to remember this, remember that, don't forget this, don't forget that; not to remain glued to the past but to learn from it, to make us more aware, more thoughtful, more identified with who we are to ensure that our past informs our present and ideally, our future.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Britain teaches that Judaism gave two majestic ideas their greatest religious expression: memory and hope. "Memory is our living connection to those who came before us," he says. Hope is what we hand on to the generations yet to come." (<http://yizkor.ort.org:8081/html/iarticle01.shtml>) Those we remember live on in us: in words, gestures, a smile here, an act of kindness there that we would not have done had that person not left their mark on our lives. That is what Yizkor is: memory as a religious act of thanksgiving for a life that was, and that still sends its echoes and reverberations into the life that is. For when we remember, we do so for the future, the place where, if we are faithful to it, the past never dies. So, let us look then, to our photographs as mirrors of our past and as windows to our future. As we remember...