

Moments and the Passing of Moments... That is Life
Yizkor 5779
Community Synagogue of Rye
Rabbi Daniel Gropper



My name is Menashe ben Micahel. My father is Michael ben Natan. His father is Natan ben Menashe. His father was Menashe ben Micahel. My dad and I always assumed his father was Michael ben Natan and from there, the pattern continued back in time... at least it did in our imagination.

Imagine how surprised I was when I learned that my grandfather was named, not for his great grandfather, but for an uncle who died way too young.

This summer, while doing research on my family tree, I came across a name and a picture. The name was Nathan Gropper, my grandfather's name. The picture, a headstone from a cemetery in Montreal. In both Hebrew and English the headstone read, "Nathan Gropper, died January 2, 1910, aged 15 years, 3 months." That's it. No birthday. No final epitaph. Just a name, date of death and a heartbreaking awareness that Nathan's parents - my great great grandparents Micahel and Mariam - had to bury a teenage son.

Upon finding this name and this picture, I sent a quick email to my dad. "did great-grandpa Max have a brother named Nathan?" "Not as far as I know," came the reply. "It's probably a mistake. The name Gropper in Romania is like Johnson in the U.S. But I'll ask Grammie." A moment later another email came, this time from my grandmother, the centenarian. "Yes. There was a Nathan Gropper. He died as a teenager around age 16. Your father, Natie, was named for him." This Nathan Gropper died in 1910. My Grandpa Natie was born in 1914. My dad is almost 76 and only now did he learn for whom his father was named.

We know nothing about this Nathan Gropper, my grandpa's namesake. Nothing about his voyage to Canada, how he handled those Montreal winters, what his voice sounded like at his Bar Mitzvah, if he rooted for the Canadiens or the Montreal Wanderers in the inaugural season of the National Hockey League. Sadly, we know nothing of the moments that made up young Nathan Gropper's life. All the more reason why we should tell our children and our grandchildren the stories of our ancestors. All the more reason why quiet contemplative moments of Yizkor can turn into teachable opportunities when this day is done. Imagine the conversation at break fast if you turned to your children or grandchildren and said, "let me tell you a little about my namesake and what I want you to remember about him or her."

Ecclesiastes writes, "Life is fleeting, the passing of moments upon moments. Moments of birth, moments of death; moments of planting, moments of uprooting; moments of mourning, moments of dancing; moments of silence, moments of speech; moments of war, moments of peace. Moments and the passing of moments - this is life." (Eccl. 3)¹ This is how we live.

¹ "Moments," in *Finding Joy and Contentment in the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* by Rami Shapiro. p. 130.

Moment to moment to moment. When we come to Yizkor, when we come to remember our fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and friends, what do we recall about them? Their biographies? The citations awarded, the races run, the business deals completed? I tend to remember moments - the times we danced in the kitchen, the food fights at the kitchen table, the walks in the woods, the concerts where we sang at the top of our lungs, the sitting up late at night listening to and comforting each other. Emily Dickinson wrote, "Forever is composed of moments."² On this day in particular we remember the moments we spent with loved ones around these holidays: the meals together, a walk on Yom Kippur afternoon, the break-fast. This is what we hold on to. Yizkor gives us a pause to reconnect with those moments. Somehow, they sustain us. "Moments and the passing of moments - this is life."

There is a poem called "The Dash," by Linda Ellis that I have sent to many of you. It reads:

I read of a man who stood to speak at a funeral of a friend.

He referred to the dates on the tombstone from the beginning...to the end.

He noted that first came the date of birth and spoke of the following date with tears,
but said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years.

For that dash represents all the time they spent alive on earth
and now only those who loved them know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not, how much we own, the cars..the house...the cash.
What matters is how we lived and loved and how we spend our dash.

So when your eulogy is being read, with your life's actions to rehash,

² Quoted in Millman, Dan, "The Four Purposes of Life," <http://www.peacefulwarrior.com/the-four-purposes-of-life/>
The original line is "Forever - is composed of Nows - (690)" Full text can be found at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52202/forever-is-composed-of-nows-690>

would you be proud of the things they say about how you lived your dash³?

I know nothing about my great, great uncle Nathan's dash. He doesn't even have a dash on his headstone, just a date of death and his age. Fifteen years, nine months. I wonder how he lived his dash? I wonder about how he lived, moment to moment to moment. I will never know but I can imagine.

So create those memories now. Ask your parents and grandparents about those who have gone before them. Who was I named after? Who were you named after? Tell me about them. Tell me about their dash.

We, who sit here this afternoon at this moment, in this moment of memory, we don't have to imagine. We bring to mind people we knew, people who touched our lives. Our newly formatted Book of Remembrance makes clear who each of us remembers on this day - and every day. As we sit here, let us recall those moments we spent with them, the stories we heard about them, even the stories they posted on Facebook and Instagram that we had the good fortune to witness and to make a part of our memory. Let us recall them with fondness. And then, when this day is done, let us be sure to share their stories, so that their lives will continue to live on in the life of another. Moment and the passing of moments - all refracted in a little dash - that is life.

³ "The Dash" by Linda Ellis - <https://www.linda-ellis.com/the-dash-the-dash-poem-by-linda-ellis-.html>