

Yizkor 5782 - Re-remembering Naomi  
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I've often thought about the word re-member. Its origin is Latin. From *re*, expressing intensive force and *memor*, meaning mindful. To remember is to be intensively mindful. It is about putting pieces back together.

Here we are at yizkor. It is that opportunity, one of four times in our Jewish calendar where we are asked to be intensively mindful, where we are asked to re-member, to re-assemble pieces of another's life, now dead and gone, in order to make sense for us what their life meant and simply, so that they should never be forgotten.

With that as an introduction, I want to speak personally this afternoon, remembering my sister Naomi who died on June 23, 2005. Not so much to talk about her but to share with you how, 16 years since her death, I was still grieving this precious relationship and how, perhaps, it can serve as a mirror for you to reflect on your own losses and to find your way to wholeness and healing.

When Naomi died, I went through all the mourning rituals. I observed shiva for 7 days, even taking the requisite walk around the block at the end. For the rest of Sheloshim, that 30 day period I attended a minyan to say Kaddish. I said Kaddish for her every Shabbat, said the yizkor prayers, attended her first yahrzeit, participated in an unveiling. I checked all the boxes. But was I grieving? Probably not the way I needed to. I was concerned about my parents, our children were little, and maybe I thought, if I tag all the bases, that will be sufficient. It wasn't.

I continued to think of Naomi. We named our daughter Noa after her. I thought of my sister pretty much all the time, especially when I saw a dragonfly, the insects that flew and flitted outside as we prayed during shiva. But did I grieve? Did I really grieve? Did I allow myself to go through that process of truly saying goodbye? Not really. We rabbis - like other first responders - are really good at being there for others. We are lousy at being there for ourselves, especially when it comes to issues of heartbreak. I guess it's something we learn on the job so that we can be present, so the grief does not wash us away.

My therapist suggested that I needed to unpack Naomi's death. In fact, she was puzzled that I hadn't willingly gone there. She told me I was ducking. That not really grieving Naomi was getting in the way of my being able to move ahead with other things. Tamara agreed. Something this past spring told me it was time. Maybe it was the accumulated grief of COVID, of having walked through this valley of deathly shadows for so long.

Using a form of psychotherapy called [EMDR](#), standing for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, that enables people to heal from the symptoms and emotional distress that are

the result of disturbing life experiences we processed a particularly traumatic event in my life that included Naomi.

Allowing my eyes to follow a light that tracked back and forth along a light bar, I held different aspects of that particular event in my mind and began to process the memory and the disturbing feelings associated with it. Then the most amazing thing happened. Like other traumatic moments I had processed, in my mind, this one began to transform.

In my mind, I saw myself with Naomi. We were both in middle school and a tempest was swarming around us. Yet, instead of my sitting in silence so as to hide from the storm - as I had in the original event while Naomi cried - I stood up and shielded her. I was no longer 12. Now I was 53, standing at my full height, having a little more self assuredness that comes with age. With arms spread wide and a Tallit, of all things in my hands, I shielded Naomi from the slings and arrows that were being thrown her way.

At one point I said, "let's go outside." The storm was still raging but I didn't mind. I was now inhabiting my own adult body, not that of a twelve year old. I felt empowered.

Pretty soon we were outside. The sky was blue, the color of sapphire. We were at the base of a ski hill, a happy place for me and Naomi. You could smell the sunscreen that you seem to only be able to smell on ski hills. The feeling in the air was one of joy. In an instant, Naomi was her adult self, the way I knew her last at age 34. She smiled at me and said, "Daniel, I know you have my best interest at heart. I know you wanted to protect me when we were kids, even if it was hard. I know you feel badly for not standing up for me. It's ok. I forgive you. I also know you want to keep protecting me now, but you don't have to. I'm safe here."

Then she said the most amazing thing, "I also want you to know that here, in this place where I am, there are many many people who come to me and say, 'your brother made such a difference in my life. His words and his actions and his presence really allowed me to pass from one life to this one. If you ever see him, please tell him.'"

Then she looked at me and said, "I am going to go now," and she began to fade from my view.

"Don't go!" I said. "I'm not ready for this. I'm not ready to let you go."

And she replied, "Daniel, I have to go but that doesn't mean I will be gone from you. You can visit me whenever you want. I will be right here, in this place, in this form. But I do have to go."

Then she said, "I want you to do something for me. Turn around."

"Promise you won't leave without saying goodbye?"

"I won't"

I turned. And in my mind, in that place of snow and sky and trees, standing before me were all sorts of people in my life who matter. Tamara, our children, our parents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles. You.

“What do you see?” Asked Naomi

“I see all these people.”

“And what does it mean to you?”

“It means that wherever I am, I am not alone. Even if I am not physically with these people, they are here, with me, in my life.”

“See,” she said, I can leave.

And as I turned around, Naomi began to fade from view, not a complete fade but a partial one, as though her outline was still there, but more ghostlike, the way they like to portray the spirits of the dead in movies. I could still see her. I could still sense her.

“I will miss you,” I said.

“I will still be here,” she replied,

“Good bye.”

“And three, two, one, stop,” my therapist said, counting me back into the present.

“Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Tell me what you experienced.”

I told her everything I just told you, about the tempest, our going outside, Naomi saying she had to go, about all those people being there.

“And how do you feel?” She asked.

I paused. Took a deep breath. And then the tears came. They flowed like they hadn't flowed in years. I sobbed. I grieved. Between the tears I said, “I miss her so much, so much.” And there, in the safety of my therapist's office, I cried until there were no more tears.

And she asked me, what do you think allowed for the tears? I thought. Because I finally stood up for my sister. And I was finally able to say goodbye. She is still there. I can still visit her. I just know now, at least in my memory, that I healed that tear, I told her I was sorry. She forgave me. I told her I loved her. She responded the same. I could say goodbye and she could say goodbye, knowing that the past had been healed. I guess that's what good grief is, when you can say goodbye and the past hurts no longer get in the way.

Now, whenever I stand at the grave with a family, as we are about to place earth, like an eternal blanket over the body of a loved one, I say, “often, at the time of death, there are things left unsaid, feelings that still linger, past hurts unresolved. I believe that the spirit of our loved ones hang around, not only to ensure that this vessel of a body that once housed their soul is respectfully buried but also, so that they may hear the final words we need to say to them. And so, if there is something you need to say, some forgiveness you want to ask for and some that you want to give, I encourage you to offer those words, out loud if you like, softly under your breath or just from your heart. I truly believe that your loved one can hear you.”

There might be a timeline for mourning but there isn't one for grief. It can come at any time. There is no statute of limitations on processing our feelings of sadness and loss. In my case it took 16 years and a caring therapist.

As a rabbi I understand the power of religious rituals. They were designed, not only to move us from loss back into life but also, so that time would be given to us to sit with our memories and to see what comes up.

In this moment of Yizkor then, I invite you to sit quietly. Close your eyes if you like. Bring to mind the image of a loved one who is no longer alive but who is very much with you each and every day. And In this space have a conversation with them. What still needs to be said? For what do you need to ask for forgiveness? For what do you need to forgive? And if it's not that, perhaps just saying I love you and I miss you is sufficient. Or just sit quietly in their presence.

The place you choose to meet is your place. You can return there and there you can meet the one whose presence still fills your life.

May your memories bring you healing.