

## **Yizkor Sermon**

I do a lot of funerals and shiva prayers in my job and I often think, when I am standing there, sometimes at the worst moment in someone's life, that it really doesn't matter what I say. The words are not really the point. The purpose is to provide a ritual moment that allows people to gather. That allows people to show up and be there for the person left behind.

This quality of showing up and being there is a very Jewish thing. It means that even if you don't know the person very well, maybe you've sat next to them in shul a few times, or you've had a few chats but you've never been to their house, if something terrible happens to them, and you don't know what to say, you just show up. You come to the funeral or the shiva and just by being there, you're saying that you care. We are a religion that is all about community, all about being there for each other.

There's a wonderful story in the Mishna, which was written two thousand years ago and is the basis of much of our Jewish law today. It takes place in the Temple in Jerusalem where thousands of people would make a pilgrimage three times a year. And it says everyone who entered came in on the right hand side and went out on the left. Except for somebody to whom something had happened. If something's happened to you – either a bereavement or something

else that has caused you to be estranged from the community – you enter on the left and you walk in the opposite direction to everyone else, so in fact you are facing everyone. That person is inevitably asked – why do you go around this way? And if they say I am a mourner the community replies, May God comfort you. If they've felt cut off from their community, people say May you be embraced by community again.

Imagine what that must have looked like. People ask this broken-hearted person, who they know is broken-hearted because they're walking in a different direction, what happened to you? And they would say, I just lost my mother, or I just got divorced, or I just got some bad news from my doctor. And everyone who passes, offers them words of comfort.

This story was written about 100 years **after** the Temple was destroyed, when the Rabbis were trying to work out what Judaism should look like in this new world and what they constructed, was a system where if you are suffering, you show up, you don't hide away, but also you don't have to pretend that you're OK. When I lost my parents, each time I decided to tear an item of clothing, a scarf for my dad, a shirt for my mum, and wear it for the whole of the shiva week. I felt torn on the inside and so I wore a sign that showed I was also torn on the outside. The torn clothes reflected how I felt in my

heart. It was one of the most powerful things I did in my journey of grief and loss.

It's the principle that lies behind turning up to say Kaddish for someone, or our healing prayer that we do every Shabbat morning, or letting us know that you're not well, so that we can see what we can do to help. It's the principle behind the yahrzeit letters and the invitation to have an aliyah on the anniversary of a loved one's death. We're all hurting, we all carry pain in different ways, but if you are part of a community, then we can see each other and we know we are not alone.

Of course to do that we have to feel that we are part of a community. Kol Chai has always been proud of being a community rather than just a synagogue. We are of course a community by nature of being Progressive Jews that live in roughly the same part of the world. But if we don't know each other, then it's hard to show up when you're hurting. You may have heard of the Engagement Project that is now an ongoing feature of Kol Chai life. It began as an attempt to broaden the base of people who would stand for leadership positions in the community. But it became obvious that nobody is going to want to lead anything in a community when they don't know many people, when they don't feel involved. So the focus has shifted to asking people to help out a bit according to your interests and skills. Because by doing something for the community, you get to

know other people, it's much more effective than just sitting next to them once a year. By helping out, you are not only showing up, but by getting to know other people, we build relationships and are in a better place to help each other when it really matters.

And that applies to good things as well as bad. If something great happens, your child has got into university, you've just become a grandparent, it's much more joyful when it's shared. One of the things that brings me greatest joy in our community is when I'm at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and of course the family and friends are proud of the young person. But then I look at all the people who have turned up not because they really know this young person, although they may have seen them in shul, but because this is their community and it's Shabbat morning. And they are just as proud. Your young person becomes everyone's young person. We become proud of the young people of our community and at that moment we are all much bigger than the sum of our parts. No matter where you are in your life, you get to take part in every life event under the sun. That's the joy of community. Scientific research backs this up – apparently **sharing** our joy may have even more impact than experiencing it in the first place. Something called Mirror neurons mean that when someone we love is in pain, we hurt too. And we can experience joy at someone else's joy or achievement – even if we are heartbroken.

The year after my father died, it felt like all my friend's children had their B'Nei Mitzvah. We were invited to party after party. So I took my broken heart and I went. I decided that I wasn't going to dance, and when anyone asked why, I said that my dad had died recently and I was in my year of mourning. But I showed up and as those young people headed off to university, I can say that I was at their B'Nei Mitzvah – but as a mourner. I went to the Temple, I joined the crowd, but I walked the wrong way, so that everyone knew I was a little broken, and so they could offer me words of consolation.

I wish for all those of you who have come here tonight with sorrowing hearts, that you will always be at the heart of our community, that you will always feel your place is right here. And as we come towards the end of this day of atonement, this holiest day of the Jewish year, I invite everyone to spend the next year showing up for this amazing community of ours. Bring your joy. Bring your tears. Bring your unique and imperfect self. Let's share our joy with each other as well as our sad times, because relationships are at the heart of all our lives, and this network of relationships that we call our community, is full of love. That's why we show up for each other. That's why this community was built. That's why, tonight, you have come home.

Please turn to page 540 and please stand.

