

Searching for Place:

My Great-Grandmother's Grave on the Mount of Olives

Yizkor reflection – 5781 / 2020 – Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker – Mount Zion Temple

Yom Kippur *Yizkor* may be the most solemn occasion of the entire year for our community. It is the moment of mystery, when past blends with present, when we are reunited with our dear departed: parents, husbands, wives, children, grandparents, loved ones, dearest friends.

This year our personal loss feels the weight of our communal pandemic that has claimed over 900,000 souls around the world.

We feel unmoored, the grounding in our lives unsteady.

In Judaism, it is at times of loss that we call God, HaMakom, the place.

We long for feeling steady, for feeling grounded.

We provided a rock in our high holy day gift bag this year with the word *Zachor* in Hebrew and in English, remember.

The rock is tangible, it reminds us of place, haMakom.

We are told to remember, *zachor*, 169 times in the Torah – to tell the stories of our loved ones and our ancestors and to keep alive their spirits through recitation.

The repetition of the command to remember attests to its challenge. If you have that rock, hold it in the palm of your hand and hold it tight.

No matter how connected we are in this moment to the grief of our loss; no matter how well versed we are with the stories of our loved one's lives in our hearts, no matter how much we see our own selves intertwined in the narrative of their lives, it takes effort to hold on tight to memory. Unless we consciously tell their life stories, share their favorite sayings, cook their recipes or mix their drinks as they did, recount the lessons they learned through hardship and struggle and we pray, through times of ease and simcha, we will slowly witness their impact in this world fade and we will lose our sense of place.

When we hold on tight, feel the memory of their presence, and share their stories, the narrative of the lives may yet tell a part of a larger story, be part of our people's wanderings through history, or touch a descendant in unexpected ways.

Over a decade ago for a Yizkor service, I shared how shortly before my grandmother's death in 1990, I spent a meaningful afternoon with her, the first and only time in my adult years. My family had never lived close to each other and the stories about relatives who were no longer alive were few. But on that afternoon, my grandmother opened up in a way that I had never heard her before, in ways that she never had even with her son, my father. She told me about her mother, a pioneering woman who had a vision of helping the Jewish people settle the land of Palestine. She made aliyah and lived in Mea Shearim in Jerusalem and when she died in 1935, was buried on the Mount of Olives. My grandmother's stories peaked my interest and I longed to learn more, but after that one afternoon I never got the chance.

A couple months later my grandmother died unexpectedly, and with her, the stories I would never know vanished.

During my family's sabbatical time in Jerusalem in 2008, just a week before we returned to St Paul, a confluence of events allowed me to reconnect to my grandmother, and more specifically to her mother, my great-grandmother. My father had just received information from distant relatives about where my great-grandmother was buried on the Mount of Olives.

We had always assumed her grave had been destroyed in the '48 Israeli Independence war or during its subsequent control by Jordan and I had not thought too much about it. I even spoke about her grave's destruction on Yom Kippur five years ago from this pulpit. During my time in Jerusalem, I visited the seven arches hotel built by Jordan on top of part of the cemetery, with many desecrated markers used as building material.

You have to understand as well, that even with some location information, there are tens of thousands of graves and many go search and never find their relative's grave.

A week before we left Israel, I set out by myself on a blistering hot day to the Mount of Olives. Many conversations later—through the generous help of several—I found myself alone on the East Jerusalem side of the mountain, looking over toward the Dead Sea in one direction and the Temple Mount of the Old City in the other, standing in a sea of white, sun-scorched graves stretching out in all directions, many markers broken in a pile of rocks, others remarkably whole. After several hours of looking, I took out my cell phone and tried again the number of the Chevra Kadisha, the burial society that cared for this section of the cemetery and this time, a man answered the phone. I told him I was looking for the grave of Bluma Penn, my great-grandmother.

And then I heard his voice say, "yes, I know your great-grandmother's grave." I couldn't believe it.

He asked me to tell him the names on the markers in front of me. I did and then he directed me to walk forward four rows. I read another marker and he sent me south ten paces; read another and another until he had me standing in front of long, decently-kept grave. I made out the worn Hebrew letters and realized that I was reading the name Bluma Penn, my great-grandmother.

Moments later I realized that my phone was wet with my tears.

I thanked the man who helped me and just stood there alone in the heat of the day and very much not alone, connected in a way to the land of Israel in a way I never thought possible, connected to generations of our people who had walked those very hills, connected to my family even without its stories,

to my first reasons for making Judaism a meaningful part of my life as a way to see myself as part of a larger narrative, a larger family and people across time. Bluma Penn's grave had the date she died, the epithet "A righteous woman" – what tales lay behind that description – and years later, a great-grandson she never met had a makom, a place, that grounds my life to this day.

A few days later, with Rachel and our kids, we brought rocks that we had collected in the Negev, along the paths that Abraham and Sarah walked.

We held tightly onto those rocks as we placed them on the grave, their red sandstone sharply contrasting to the sparkling white.

"No tombstones need be erected on the graves of the righteous," the Jewish sage Gamliel insisted. "Their deeds, their words are their monuments." Today, in this moment so connected to memory, I am thankful to physical monuments, to makom.

But we need not such a physical space. A makom can come from our stories.

I pray that you can share the stories of the loved ones you hold in your heart this afternoon to someone today even if by phone, even if by zoom.

Talk of them, remember, share, recount – keep their spirits alive through recitation and action, even as you feel their loss, even as you work through your grief, even as you remember.

Y'hi zichronam baruch – May the memories of our loved ones be a blessing to us and to those who come after us through their stories, from generation to generation.