

Yom Kippur Morning
5772

Yom Kippur and Yizkor- A Time To Remember- A Time To Support

Shabbat Shalom, my friends. Gemar Hatimah Tovah. A short time from now, we as a community will approach that most sensitive hour of Yom Kippur: *Yizkor*. *Yizkor* provides a time for personal prayers and memorials for those no longer with us. *Yizkor* provides sacred time and fragile space for us to reflect, to renew our memories, to recall those who have left this world. But at the same time *Yizkor* also provides US the opportunity to ask God to inscribe US in the book of life so that we can continue doing God's will in the world through acts of charity and kindness in their memory.

Our sages teach us that Yom Kippur is our day of atonement when we experience what it means to be God's angelic beings. And ultimately, tonight when the Shofar is sounded at the conclusion of Neilah, we are reminded that we are to return to the world that God has created for us. We return with a soul strengthened and deepened; we return with a new mission to become better people by making God's world a healthier and more stable one. But if it were not for those who taught us, those who came before us, those who we remember at this *Yizkor* hour - we would not be who we are today.

As we prepare for *Yizkor*, I would like to share with you a beautiful story. It's author, Paul Villard, reminds us of the fragility of life and the preciousness of every day. The story is a little long, but please bear with me. I know you'll agree that it is worth the time.

When I was quite young, my family had one of the first telephones in our

neighborhood. I remember well the polished oak case fastened to the wall on the lower stair landing. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I even remembered the number - 105. I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother talked into it. Once she lifted me up to speak to my father, who was away on business. Magic! Then I discovered that somewhere inside that wonderful device lived an amazing person - her name was "Information Please" and there was nothing that she did not know. My mother could ask her for anybody's number and when our clock ran down, Information Please immediately supplied the correct time.

My first personal experience with this genie-in-the-receiver came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there didn't seem to be of much use crying because there was no one home to offer sympathy. I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway. The telephone! Quickly, I ran for the footstool in the parlor and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up, I unhooked the receiver and held it to my ear. "Information Please," I said into the mouthpiece just above my head. A click or two, and a small clear voice spoke into my ear. "Information." "I hurt my fingerrr-" I wailed into the phone. The tears came readily enough now that I had an audience. "Isn't your mother home?" came the question. "Nobody's at home but me," I blubbered. "Are you bleeding?". "No", I replied. "I hit it with the hammer and it hurts". "Can you open your icebox?" she asked. I said I could. "Then chip off a little piece of ice and hold it on your finger. That will stop the hurt. Be careful when you use the ice pick," she admonished. "And don't cry. You'll be alright".

After that, I called Information Please for everything. I asked for help with my Geography and she told me where Philadelphia was, and the Orinoco--the romantic river I was going to explore when I grew up. She helped me with my Arithmetic, and she told me that a pet chipmunk--I had

caught him in the park just that day before--would eat fruits and nuts. And there was the time that Petey, our pet canary, died. I called Information Please and told her the sad story. She listened, then said the usual things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was unconsolated. Why was it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to whole families, only to end as a heap of feathers feet up, on the bottom of a cage? She must have sensed my deep concern, for she quietly said, "Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in." Somehow, I felt better.

Another day I was at the telephone. "Information," said the now familiar voice. "How do you spell fix?" F-I-X." At that instant my sister, who took unholy joy in scaring me, jumped off the stairs at me with a shriek-"Yaaaaaaaaaaaa!" I fell off the stool, pulling the receiver out of the box by its roots. We were both terrified--Information Please was no longer there, and I was not at all sure that I hadn't hurt her when I pulled the receiver out. Minutes later, there was a man on the porch. "I'm a telephone repairman. I was working down the street and the operator said there might be some trouble at this number." He reached for the receiver in my hand. "What happened?" I told him. "Well, we can fix that in a minute or two." He opened the telephone box exposing a maze of wires and coils, and fiddled for a while with the end of the receiver cord, tightened things with a small screwdriver. He jiggled the hook up and down a few times, then spoke into the phone. "Hi, this is Pete. Everything's under control at 105. The kid's sister scared him and he pulled the cord out of the box." He hung up, smiled, gave me a pat on the head and walked out the door.

All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. Then, when I was nine years old, we moved across the country to Boston--and I missed my mentor acutely. Information Please belonged in that old wooden box back at home, and I somehow never thought of trying the tall, skinny new phone that sat on the small table in the hall. Yet, as I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left me;

often in moments of doubt and perplexity I would recall the serene sense of security I had when I knew that I could call Information Please and get the right answer. I appreciated now how very patient, understanding and kind she was to have wasted her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on my way back to college, my plane put down in Seattle. I had about half an hour between plane connections, and I spent 15 minutes or so on the phone with my sister who lived there now, happily mellowed by marriage and motherhood. Then, really without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said, "Information Please." Miraculously, I heard again the small, clear voice that I knew so well: "Information." I hadn't planned this, but I heard myself saying, "Could you tell me, please, how to spell the word 'fix'?" There was a long pause. Then came the softly spoken answer. "I guess," said Information Please, "that your finger must have healed by now." I laughed. "So it's really still you. I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during all that time..." "I wonder," she replied, "if you know how much you meant to me? I never had any children, and I used to look forward to your calls. Silly, wasn't it?" It didn't seem silly, but I didn't say so. Instead I told her how often I had thought of her over the years, and I asked if I could call her again when I come back to visit my sister when the semester was over. "Please do. Just ask for Sally." "Goodbye Sally." It sounded strange for Information Please to have a name. "If I run into any chipmunks, I'll tell them to eat fruits and nuts." "Do that," she said. "And I expect one of these days you'll be off for the Orinoco. Well, good-bye."

Just three months later, I was back again at the Seattle airport. A different voice answered, "Information," and I asked for Sally. "Are you a friend?" "Yes," I said. "An old friend." "Then I'm sorry to have to tell you. Sally had only been working part-time in the last few years because she was ill. She died five weeks ago." But before I could hang up, she said, "Wait a minute. Did you say your name was Villard?" "Yes." "Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down." "What

was it?" I asked, almost knowing in advance what it would be. "Here it is, I'll read it--'Tell him I still say there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean.'"

I thanked her and hung up. I **did** know what Sally meant.

As we recite *Yizkor* we will recall with affection and love those no longer with us who served as our "information please" people. How many of us were fortunate enough to have a special someone in our lives to comfort us when we hit our finger with the hammer? How many of us were fortunate enough to have a special someone in our lives to help us with geography, and arithmetic? How many of us were fortunate enough to have a special someone in our lives to console us when the pet canary died? At *Yizkor* we take the time to remember them and the "information" they provided for us. At *Yizkor* we vow in their memories and to their souls that we will support what they stood for by giving Tzedakah and by performing acts of loving kindness. At *Yizkor* we do all this as a reminder that the information and blessings they have provided are not forgotten.

My friends, I also submit to you that Yom Kippur and *Yizkor* are also for US to comprehend and fulfill our role as "information please" individuals to others. In our special and intimate relationships we provide information that is priceless, wisdom that is cherished and advice that we deem to be holy.

Our Rabbis teach us that Yom Kippur is supposed to feel like the day of our death. We do not eat, we do not drink, we converse with God all day. We yearn for souls to be redeemed with great divine strength from God. It is on Yom Kippur that we are to fully

appreciate and accept our role in being God's Klei Kodesh, God's holy vessels, carrying God's Torah. We do so with love and care by teaching, by guiding, by learning and living and hallowing this sacred, eternal possession.

At this time of remembering those loved ones no longer with us, we must also remember the values that they have provided and the strength that they have given to us. We do so by humbling ourselves today and by striving to live out those values with abundant strength. We do so by striving to be the generation to bring everlasting stability to our world, leading to a time of eternal peace. May our actions and our words give the world the holy "information" it needs. Amen.