

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5779/2018  
Wisdom of Rabbis Panken and Panken  
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Among the many people who died this past year I'm thinking of one man in particular. Those who knew and loved him were heartbroken. He was a loving husband, father, son, brother and friend. At his funeral it was said that... He loved his wife unconditionally; she was his best friend. He was so appreciative of how much she supported him, not just personally, but in his work. He lived in the suburbs and commuted an hour or so to the city for work. Often his job took him on other travels across the country and the globe. His love for his children was unending, they were "the jewels that adorned his heart."<sup>i</sup> He was a devoted son, who called his parents almost every day, no matter where he was in the world.<sup>ii</sup> From the time he and his sister were little, they made each other laugh. He was endeared to her husband, and he was an adoring uncle to her children, with whom he loved to play.<sup>iii</sup> His love extended to in-laws and other relatives. He was a loyal and thoughtful friend. He regularly asked his friends how all of their families were doing. When he came as a visitor to someone else's home, he was always a gracious guest. He was humble, he was kind, he was smart, he had a great sense of humor.

Who was this man? Perhaps you are thinking of a person in your life who is or was like this man. It could be any number of ordinary individuals. And indeed he was ordinary, extra-ordinary, that is. Or as we say, extraordinary. The man about whom I speak was all that was mentioned earlier and so much more. The man about whom I speak was also a teacher, a scholar, a mentor, a role model, a leader, a mensch. When he died last May, in a fatal accident, he was only in his 50s, and a large part of the Jewish community mourned with his family. Today I am thinking about Rabbi Aaron Panken, z"l, President of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

At his funeral many people from family to friends, officials and colleagues offered beautiful eulogies, which one can still read or hear. Indeed, Aaron Panken was an extraordinary mensch, who touched hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people's lives, including mine. As we discussed relationships on *Rosh HaShanah*, on this *Yom Kippur Yizkor*, the first one following his death, let us focus on the relationships that Aaron Panken had with those closest to him. Indeed, he was a role model. His relationships were extra-ordinary and extraordinary.

And for those of us who are sitting in this Sanctuary for this *Yom Kippur Yizkor* service,

we too, are thinking of similar relationships that we have had throughout our lives. We are thinking of our parents, our grandparents, our spouses, our siblings, or even our children or grandchildren. We think of our other relatives, our friends, our companions, our co-workers. They, also, are extra-ordinary and extraordinary.

During *Yizkor* we ask God to remember these loved ones. And it is Rabbi Aaron Panken, ironically, who offers comfort to us at this time, and guides us as to what it means when we ask God to remember our loved ones. His passage in our *Yom Kippur machzor* (on page 572) explains:

When we ask God to remember the souls of our departed at Yizkor, we request more than a mere mental act. We pray implicitly that by focusing on our loved ones' souls, God will take action on their behalf and save them from whatever pain they may be suffering, wherever they may be. At the same time, the implication is that this act of remembrance also constitutes a guarantee of Jewish continuity—well beyond just those we remember, and far beyond us as well. In remembering and in asking for God's remembrance, we request divine help in continuing our people's trajectory beyond ourselves, to achieve the ultimate aims of our people's history. *Yizkor* is, in the end, not a prayer for the dead, but a promise by the living.<sup>iv</sup>

Rabbi Aaron Panken teaches us in this passage that our being here right now, for this *Yizkor* prayer service is more than recalling memory. *Yizkor* is an expression that extends the values and traditions of the Jewish people into the future. We turn to God to help us. We look to God to give us the fortitude we need. Even as we mourn the loss of the dead, we seek to live our lives in ways that would not only make our loved ones proud, but also ensures the future of the Jewish people. Being here for *Yizkor* might not be easy, but it's important. We may be sad, reluctant. We acknowledge that we're not the same people since our loved ones have died, whether it was this past year or years ago. *Yizkor* is about us living our lives into the future.

We need to start anew.

The following words of Rabbi Aaron Panken's sister, Rabbi Melinda Panken, the one with whom he used to laugh, might comfort us at this time of memory as we continue to mourn those whom we loved and lost. Rabbi Melinda Panken wrote these words following her brother's death, but they can speak to many of us as well, bringing us comfort, as we remember those extra-ordinary, extraordinary people in our lives, who are now gone from this earth. Rabbi Melinda Panken writes:

With every death  
we become someone new.  
Defined and changed by loss and absence.

Once married.  
Once a parent.  
Once a sibling.  
Once a child.  
Once a friend.

Now single.  
Now childless.  
Now only.  
Now orphaned.  
Now friendless.  
Remade permanently,  
by illness or accident,  
over the course of years, or months,  
or even seconds.  
Left with grief,  
and the horrible realization  
that we are now forced to become  
someone new,  
against our wishes,  
without those we love.

They die, and we are left the sacred challenge  
of being born.<sup>v</sup>

May the words of both Rabbis Panken inspire us and comfort us as we recall the memories of the extraordinary people in each of our lives, commit to the continuing our people's path into the far future and understand that we can and will be able to start anew.

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<sup>i</sup> Rabbi Sarah Messinger

<sup>ii</sup> Peter Panken

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Melinda Panken

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<sup>iv</sup> Mishkan HaNefesh for Yom Kippur, p. 572

<sup>v</sup> Rabbi Melinda Panken (originally seen on her FB page, May 10, 2018)