

*We Are Not Alone – Yizkor*  
*September 15, 2021 – 10 Tishrei 5782*  
*Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester*  
*Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith*

We lost so many people this year. So many congregants. So many of their loved ones. To COVID and cancer and heart attacks and old age and dementia and car accidents and failures of the frail body that we are blessed to have until it breaks down or is shut down by disease or age or trauma. The losses for our congregation, like the losses in our society, in our world, are staggering. When we read the numbers in the newspaper, we can numb ourselves to them. We can leave them as numbers, a statistic like a disappointing batting average or a remote number that is intellectually interesting or even intellectually disturbing, but intellectual nonetheless. But it was hard, it was impossible, to feel that way about the barrage of bereavement notices from our congregation.

We regret to inform you of the passing of So Many, grandparent, husband, wife, son, daughter, brother, sister, cousin, aunt, uncle of one of us, of a precious member of our congregation.

The funeral will be on zoom, graveside, private, at a later date. The family will sit shiva on zoom, in the backyard, at a later date. You may send condolences.

Donations in their memory may be sent to the organization that works to end the disease, to the charity they cared most about, to the temple.

Zichronam Livracha, May their memory be a blessing.

Over and over again, the temple sent them out. From December to May we sent practically one a week. And each of us received notices from other's as well: our clubs, our camps, our schools, our charities, our friends, our Facebook feed. And while we could mute or blunt the statistics in the newspaper, these notices hit home every time. They pulled at our heartstrings. Even when we did not know the person who died, the few degrees of separation made the loss feel real, feel close, feel like a, well, like a loss.

We all know people who died this past year, a year when our mourning rituals were largely put on a shelf to gather dust leaving us without the comfort that they bring – or at least the predictability of what they bring. Beyond the notices, grief became so private – between you and your closest family and maybe me or another family rabbi. Grief became so private as to become isolating when, at the depths of COVID, we could not even hug one another at the graveside as we buried our loved ones. Families standing apart, afraid for their lives as they marked the end of a life – so often a life taken too soon.

I suppose, in many ways, grief is always, ultimately private. We each mourn the unique relationship that we had with a loved one. When our friends go home and the house is quiet and the lights are out we are left alone with our feelings and our grief. That may always be the case, but COVID made it so much worse.

And so today I want to promise you something. I promise you that you are not alone. It may feel that way sometimes – in the quiet of night – but you are not alone. Look around this sanctuary, if you are at home watching then take in the congregation when the camera pulls back. For this hour we are a congregation of mourners. Those here know the pain of loss and the pain isolating loss. The community here is as real as the tears that roll down your cheek, as real as the tightness in your chest when you miss your beloved. We are here and God is here and that will not end when this service concludes. COVID be damned, you are not alone.

Each of us brings a light. When our mourning is most intense that light feels dim. But it is there. In that light we carry our love for our dearly departed. And in that light their spirit lives on. Seven members of our congregation will make that light glow from our menorah during our yizkor service. And, this year, a year of so much loss, all are welcome to come forward and add their light by illuminating a candle at the foot of our bimah. You may come forward at any time and use the long tapers to kindle the tealights. Please light the inside candles first. It is symbolic. And it is real. Each candle will bring more light, more warmth into this hour of memory. Each light will remind us that in spite of our loss, in spite of everything, we are not alone.

Our Yizkor service, page 541.