

Four Stacked Chairs – Yom Kippur Yizkor
October 5, 2022 – 10 Tishrei 5783
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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Until just after Labor Day, there were four chairs stacked in the middle of our social hall. Until just after Labor Day, there were about 6 round tables with some chairs and a podium near the windows. From the beginning August until just after Labor Day, we all walked past the tables and those four stacked chairs on our way to and from the kitchen. From the beginning of August until just after Labor Day, in that room, time stood still, a room after an event. Not set up. Not broken down. Tables and chairs and a podium. And four chairs that Oscar stacked on August first before he died.

For that whole month, we did not discuss the chairs or the room. August is a busy month at the temple getting ready for the High Holy Days but there is little foot traffic, no events to speak of. And so, we did not need to set the room up for anything else. And so, it stayed as it was, frozen, just as Oscar had left it before he tragically died while taking care of our temple, while taking care of us. And each time I passed by, each time I went to the kitchen or paced the room while on the phone, I looked at the four chairs, stacked right where Oscar had left them. Not a monument or a memorial, but a moment in time that none of us could bring ourselves to move past. They were Oscar's chairs to put away, he had stacked them, who were we to move them?

All of our loved ones who have died leave chairs stacked. The half a glass of water on the bedside table. The crossword puzzle just begun. The tube of toothpaste not quite finished. Perhaps more than the funeral or the shiva, these speak to us in their everyday solidity and say, "Your loved one lived and is no more. Your loved one lived as we all do with tooth paste and water and past times and tasks as yet unfinished." These things we need to clean and arrange once shiva is done are as real and as painful as the sound of earth landing on the casket.

Of course, our loved ones leave things undone that are not things at all. Stories half told, memoirs unwritten, hopes and dreams realized - but part way. The intended walk not taken or that kind word left unsaid. In tragic circumstance the undone breaks the heart – Oscar's darling Leah who will not know her father, young parents or, God forbid, children. But even people blessed with years look back in their final moments and wonder at how fast it went, at all they did and all that they could not finish.

Our liturgy reads *l'dor vador*, from generation to generation. The wisdom of our tradition teaches that the values and things and tasks and traditions and dreams of one generation goes to the next. In the moment of *bar mitzvah* we pass the Torah and celebrate the life of this deep notion. Under the *chuppah* a couple embodies the hope of this idea. But in moments of memorial, moments like this one, we face the truth that what we receive from the generation before our own is always incomplete, and what we pass on, too, will be undone. There are always four stacked chairs.

Right after Labor Day our religious school teachers and their teen assistants had their first meeting of the year. And so, the chairs were moved, the tables rearranged, the podium put away, a screen setup and food put out. The room, after all, is not a memorial, it is a space for living and

learning and celebration and making meaning. Oscar helped us do those things at Emanu-El and now it is up to us to make them happen still. Our loved ones who live no more, our loved ones who nurtured us with hopes and dreams, they too leave us the task of realizing those dreams, of creating the world that they hoped for. We come together to mourn this afternoon so that we remember, remember the four chairs our loved ones left in a stack. We remember and then can once again take up the best parts of their legacies, weave them with our own hopes and dreams and then create a life of meaning and celebration, and learning and living.

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