

Remembers Like – Yom Kippur Yizkor
October 2, 2025 – 10 Tishrei 5786
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith

My daughter took geometry and needed a compass. Not the direction kind – the circle kind. The one for arcs and measuring distance, for producing shapes and copying a segment from one place to the next. Amazon wouldn't do when I knew what I had in my desk. I pulled out the black case with faded lettering on the front that reads *Schola E. O. Richter & Co.* I slid the metal catch and opened it. Inside, set in black felt, was a full compass set of nickel-plated brass, used by my grandfather in his school days. And on the inside lid, a white label with his name: Fritz Grubel, umlaut over the *u*. One hundred years after my grandfather made circles and measured in Leipzig, Germany, his great-granddaughter would use the same tools. This was not just a compass – it was a conduit not only for math and knowledge, but for story, meaning, and of course, memory.

Certain objects powerfully convey memory. They keep alive people who are long dead, and keep present people we have only recently lost. A cashmere shawl that still smells of her perfume. The silverware they used for festival meals. His favorite chair. When we take the book of fairy tales into our hands, it is as if he is sitting next to us. When we pull out that recipe card, we are cooking with her once again. These lovingly preserved artifacts not only remind us of those we loved and lost – they manifest their presence, keeping them in our lives in ways beautiful, heartbreaking, and full of love.

In his book *Everything is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer writes: “Jews have six senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing, memory. While [others] experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews, memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or a silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It's only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to make sure that Isaac would feel no pain – the Jew was able to know why it hurts. When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks, ‘What does it remember like?’”

And so it is with those we remember today. Our memory is not “a second-order means of interpreting” the world. Our memory informs all that we do, all that we are. The giggle of little children remembers like them. The cologne we smell walking down the sidewalk remembers like them. Wearing their fine overcoat remembers like them. The footfall echo on the office stairs remembers like them. Football mums remember like them. Hearing that song on the radio remembers like them. The nickname on the license plate remembers like them. Each one remembers like our loved one. Each one carries us to another place and time. Each one revives our loved one for a moment, or, when we are lucky, for a span that cannot be measured – who can measure eternity?

This service, too, remembers like. Remembers like being ushered out of the sanctuary on the Upper West Side for Yizkor, because only those who had lost a parent could remain for those hallowed prayers. Remembers like the feel of grandpa's tallis during endless Yom Kippur services – the faint smell of mint Binaca in the air. Remembers like a grand choir, an old chazzen, the hard pews, the little black prayer book. Remembers like salty tears and a jagged breath and the relief of a good cry. Remembers like a love that cannot be felt or tasted or seen or smelled or heard – love that remembers like eternity, like divinity, like holiness, like kindness and compassion and joy, and also the mixed bag of every real relationship.

But perhaps, for today, this service remembers mostly like love: warm, embracing, tinged with sadness, yet filled with joy. It brings recognition of blessings too many to count, too hard to measure – even with the finest compass.

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