

## **Speak No Evil – of the Dead and Living**

Yom Kippur Memorial Service  
Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander  
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim  
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(With gratitude to my colleagues Rabbi Jack Riemer and Abraham J. Karp whose messages were of great inspiration in writing this sermon.)

Allow me to begin our service this afternoon with a profound observation: It's not easy to be a leader of Jews. (I know – hard to believe, but true.) We know it to be true in synagogues. We observe it in Jewish communal organizations throughout America and the world. And we see it in Israel, as well. So many Prime Ministers of Israel have left office by force or under duress. David Ben Gurion resigned in a huff and went off to exile in the Negev. Moshe Sharett was pushed out of office and so were Shimon Peres, Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin, the first time. Menachem Begin died in total isolation.

But consider what happened to Levi Eshkol, Israel's third Prime Minister. Today, Eshkol is remembered fondly in Israel, but in his time, he was much mocked and maligned. He was nearly replaced on the eve of the Six Day War because he was considered too ineffectual to lead the people in such a time of crisis. He was ridiculed by the opposition, who called him a pedant because he had a background in accounting. And he was ridiculed by the native born because he had an Eastern European mentality.

And then he died while in office, succumbing to a heart attack in February of 1969 at age 73. The radio, the newspapers, the magazines – all were full of very moving tributes. The leaders of the government and the people who had worked with him over the years lavished great praise on his memory. The man, who only a month before had been mocked by so many, was now described with the most glowing of eulogies.

Ephraim Kishon was one of the great humorists of Israel, but when he saw this enormous outpouring of public grief – such a tidal wave of tributes from the leaders of every political party – he was moved to write a column that was deeply serious. This is what he said:

“The funeral is over; the flags have gone up the mast again; the crowds have dispersed; the nation has paid its respects to its leader for the last time. And I have the feeling that it was not only for the last time, but for the first time as well.

“Ever since last Wednesday, we feel as though we had never known this man, Levi Eshkol. From the pages of the press that used to ridicule him, we now receive a convincing, moving description of a leader who was endowed with all the gifts of statesmanship and an iron resolve. People who just yesterday dismissed Levi Eshkol with a sneer now write about him with trembling pens and say that he was their ideal leader.

“And we must ask, with bewilderment, why, for heaven’s sake, did you keep your admiration of him secret until now? ... What a strange and cruel habit it is to harass a man all his life, to go for him, tooth and claw, continually, and then, when he leaves us, to shed so many tears? ... There is not one public figure amongst us whom we have not managed to reduce to utter frustration. At the end of their days, our leaders are lonely and bitter because of the treatment that they receive. And then the Angel of Death comes and turns them, with one stroke, into the idols and heroes of their friends, their countrymen, and even their critics. We don’t just forgive our dead. We love them. What we can’t stand are the living.

“It is only the dead that we let live. If we really have such a high opinion of the deceased, if we really think that they had such noble qualities, then please, let us say so while they are still alive. Three minutes of appreciation given to a person on this side of the grave are worth a thousand stirring tributes paid to him at Mount Herzl. Let us pay our respects to living people. Let us try to respect them as long as they are still amongst us and then we won’t need this rush of eulogies, discharged with heavy consciences, beside the open grave.”

Of course, we should praise the dead. For their sakes and for ours, we should pay tribute so that we may learn by emulating their good qualities. But, in addition to thanking them and praising them when they are gone, we have to do so while they are still alive, as well. If you have someone to love, do so now; if you have someone to thank, do so now; if you have someone you can praise, do so now, while they can still hear and appreciate it. For the days fly by so fast, and afterwards it is too late.

Rabbi Abraham J. Karp writes that he sees members of a family come from all corners of this vast land to attend a funeral, but they were too busy to come to a wedding or bar mitzvah, and he wonders, “Why not for the living?” He observed two brothers and a sister, long “on the outs” (which hurt their mother terribly), make up at their mother’s funeral and he wondered, “Why not for the living?” He watches more and more of our nation’s budget being spent fashioning weapons of destruction, at the expense of aid to education, and he wonders, “Why not for the living?” He notes how during war, to aid the war effort, we are ready and anxious to sacrifice so much wealth, time, and even prejudice – but in peace we go back to self-interest, lust for luxury, and our petty resentments, and he wonders, “Why not for the living?”

Each one of us who sits in the sanctuary here today, does so carrying the memory of a loved one with whom we so desperately wish we could share another meaningful moment, another kind word, another laugh or embrace. Let their memories inspire us to do just that ... with the living.

As Merrit Malloy has captured, in words that touch so many of us:

When I die give what’s left of me away  
to children and old men that wait to die.  
And if you need to cry,  
cry for your brother walking the street beside you.  
And when you need me, put your arms around anyone  
and give them what you need to give me.

I want to leave you something,  
something better than words or sounds.  
Look for me in the people I've known or loved,  
and if you cannot give me away,  
at least let me live in your eyes and not in your mind.

You can love me best by letting hands touch hands,  
and by letting go of children that need to be free.  
Love doesn't die, people do.  
So, when all that's left of me is love,  
Give me away...

... to the living. May our memories inspire us to do just that. And let us say: Amen.