

Facing Forward

Yizkor Remarks

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim

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Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander

(With much gratitude to my colleague, Rabbi Jack Riemer)

In the Hebrew Bible there's a nameless woman, known only as Lot's wife, whose story is most mysterious. In Genesis we're told that Lot, his wife, and their children were rescued from Sodom and Gemorrah by angels and spared the terrible destruction that befell the rest of their townspeople. The angels issued only one instruction: Don't look back. Yet, for whatever reason, Lot's wife did just that – and upon looking back she promptly turned into a pillar of salt.

It's a cryptic story, and Lot's wife is an obscure character—but neither are wholly unrecognizable. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, a well-known doctor, counselor and author, tells the following story about an older woman named Enid, whose husband had died unexpectedly two years before coming to see Dr. Remen:

Withdrawn and distant, she had not cried or spoken of his death to anyone in all that time. She no longer cooked or looked after her garden or her house. Most of the time she sat in her bathrobe in the living room, looking out the window at nothing at all. She had been given antidepressants by her doctor but they had not made much difference, and after a while, she had simply stopped taking them. "They won't bring him back," she had said. She had been brought to see me by one of her daughters, who told me, "I lost *both* of my parents the day my father died."

At first, Enid and I sat and looked at each other in silence. She was a lovely woman in her early seventies, but she seemed as lifeless as the chair she sat on, as if she were only the wrapper that had once enclosed a life. She seemed so fragile that I wondered if she would have enough strength to stay the full hour.

I opened the conversation by asking her why she had come. "My husband died," she replied, turning her head from me to look out the window. "My daughters would like me to talk about it, but I don't think I care to." When I gently asked her to say more about this, she said simply, "Talking seems a waste of time. No one could possibly understand."

I nodded in agreement. "Yes, of course," I said. "You have lost your life. Only your husband could understand what you have lost. Only he knew what your life together was like." At this, she turned back to look at me. Her eyes were gray, like her hair. There was no light in them. I nodded again and asked, "If he were here, Enid, what would you tell him?"

She considered me for a long moment. Then she closed her eyes and began to speak to her husband aloud, telling him what life was like without him. She told him about going to their special places alone, walking their dog alone, sleeping in their bed alone. She told him about needing to learn how to do the little things he had always taken care of, things she had never known about. She reminded him of times that only he would remember, old memories that no one else had shared. And then, for the first time since he died, she began to cry. She cried for a long time.

When her tears stopped, I asked her if there was anything else she had not said. Hesitantly, she told me how angry she was with him for abandoning her to grow old alone. She felt as if he had broken a promise to her. She missed him terribly and all that he had brought into her life.

“He was a teacher of love for me,” she told me. The child of rigid and suspicious parents, she had been amazed at her husband’s selflessness, his readiness to extend his hand to others, even to strangers. She told me story after story of his generosity, his kindness, her eyes looking beyond me into the past. “Herbert always went the extra mile,” she said. “So many people loved him.”

I was deeply touched by Herbert and by the woman he had loved. “Enid,” I asked her, “if Herbert were here, what would he say to you about the way you’ve lived these last two years?”

She looked startled. “Why, he would say, ‘Enid, why have you built a monument of pain in memory of me? My whole life was about love, not pain.’” She paused. Then, for the first time I saw the hint of a smile. “Perhaps there are other ways to remember him,” she said.

Afterward, she told me that she felt that if she let go of her pain, she would be betraying Herbert’s memory and would be diminishing the value of his life. Now she saw that she had indeed betrayed him by holding on to her pain and keeping her heart so tightly locked. She never came back to see me again. Herbert had told her everything she needed to hear.

Dr. Remen tells us what she learned from this encounter with Enid. She learned that every great loss in our lives requires that we re-choose life all over again. We need to grieve first, no doubt of that. The pain we have not grieved over will forever stand between us and life, if we do not face it and work it out. When we don’t wring out our grief and sorrow, a part of us will be caught in the past, frozen, paralyzed, unable to move, looking backwards forever.

Lot’s wife, like Enid, reminds us of the dangers we risk in only looking backwards and never facing forwards. Dr. Remen teaches that grief is a sorting process that enables us, not to forget the past, but to remember the past with love and gratitude, not only with pain. It’s a process by which we let go of the things that are gone—the trinkets, the souvenirs, the mementoes, the status, the self-definition—and mourning for them as we

should. And then, one by one, taking hold of the things we still have and the things we still are, the things that have become a part of us, and using them to build again.

Rabbi Jack Riemer notes that Lot's wife stands to this day in Israel's Negev desert. Tour guides point out the pillar of salt to all who come to see. But Lot's wife lives, not only in the Negev. She lives in every synagogue and every community. Lot's wife is sometimes a widow, sometimes a widower; sometimes a child, sometimes a parent. Lot's wife is sometimes a woman who has gone through a mastectomy, sometimes a man who has gone through the amputation of a limb. Lot's wife is anyone and everyone who has suffered a grievous loss, and who feels that the right way to pay honor to that loss is by living in it; who thinks that to live again and to love again is to betray; who does not understand that living again and loving again is not a betrayal of love, but a celebration and continuation of that love.

And so let this be the lesson of Yizkor. We come here today, not to wallow in our sorrow, not to indulge in self pity, not to wish and yearn for what can no longer be. We come here today to remember all that was good and sweet and joyous in the life that we had, and to resolve to honor that love by facing forward and living—for as long as life is ours to live.