

## My Rock and My Redeemer

Rabbi Dan Slipakoff

Last month, on Labor Day, my family had a lovely day at the beach. As we were sitting in the sand, my two sons explored the various shells and stones which were washed up and smoothed over by the tides. We left the beach with this rock. A pretty, but also unassuming, one in a million rock. A rock my children named “The Uncle Bus Rock”. Let me explain. Uncle Bus is a sweet family nickname for my wife’s uncle, Dr. William Schlaff. Uncle Bus died this past January after a yearlong bout with an inoperable cancer. Bus was a larger-than-life presence befitting his automotive nickname. He was a renowned leader in the field of Reproductive Endocrinology, a beloved mentor, an avid baseball fan, and crossword enthusiast. He gave the best hugs and backrubs and had a world-class sweet tooth. When Alison was in labor with our first child, he turned breach around 4am, requiring an emergency C-section. Ali wanted me to call Bus, who at the time was the hospital’s Chairman of Obstetrics and Gynecology. I hesitated, she persisted, and as it turns out the woman in active labor is always right. To my surprise, Bus answered the phone. I told him the scenario and waited for some authoritative intervention - a plan to make things right, and to return to what we had expected. Instead, Bill calmly said, “These things happen. It is what it is, and you’re in good hands.” It was frustratingly succinct then, funny in hindsight, and really, really poignant right now. Dr. Schlaff, Bus, Billy, lived a full life - but not a complete one. It feels like he should be here now.

Neuroscientist Mary-Frances O'Connor describes the neurobiology of grief with the premise that someone has stolen your dining room table. She explains: “Imagine waking up thirsty in the middle of the night and heading to the kitchen to get a glass of water. You cross the dark dining room toward the kitchen. At the moment that your hip should bump into the hard corner of the dining room table, you feel... nothing. And you are suddenly aware that you don’t feel anything in that spot at the height of your hip. That is what you are aware of—not feeling something specific. The absence of something is what has drawn your attention.”<sup>1</sup> Tonight, we make time to feel the absence of loved ones who once shared our lives, perhaps our tables. It’s not just that they are gone; it’s that their absence fills the space they once held. Like the missing table, their absence draws our attention and pulls us back to moments when they were here.

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<sup>1</sup> O'Connor, Mary-Frances. *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn From Love and Loss*. First edition. New York, NY, HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2022.

I still don't know why my kids decided that this rock was Uncle Bus, and at this point, I don't want to know; may it remain a beautiful mystery. Because every time they interact with the rock, something magical happens. They speak to Uncle Bus Rock, and hold it up to their ears to hear his responses. Uncle Bus has told them that he loved the ocean, which gave us a chance to tell the boys about the deep-sea fishing trips Bus used to go on. Uncle Bus Rock knows the importance of sharing. Some of the most peaceful play we've had over the past few months is taking turns speaking with the rock. One time, Uncle Bus Rock told the kids that he was eroding. I gasped and tensed up in the front seat of the car, but sighed as he continued, "Not for another 17,000 years." And this, my friends, is one of the reasons we use stones to mark our visits to a grave. Unlike flowers, which wither and fade, stones endure. Stones serve as witnesses; we place them on headstones to show that the deceased is loved and remembered. And unlike flowers, the rocks have longevity, staying power.

In the biblical world, stones were often used to build monuments. When Jacob left Beersheba for Haran, he stopped along the way to spend the night in a seemingly deserted place. Soon, he is visited by God and the angels, transcending the space between heaven and earth. As the story goes, Jacob sets up and anoints a rock to mark this place, which he names Beth-El, the house of God.<sup>2</sup> A midrash relays that before he slept, Jacob gathered twelve stones together, and he placed them under and around where he would lie down. The twelve stones argued about which one would receive the honor of being Jacob's pillow for the night. In response to the bickering, God fused the stones together to become one.<sup>3</sup> Years later when Jacob was about to die, he called his twelve sons to his side.<sup>4</sup> They gathered around him, and the twelve, previously bickering individuals, became one unified soul. They said the Shema before their father, "*Shema, Yisrael*", and reassured him that the principles of serving God and recognizing God's Oneness would be lived and taught by them as well. One family, fused together with one heart. We long for what Jacob and his family had—the chance to gather together, to bless and be blessed, and to find rest in the presence of those we love, everything in its right place.

Yet, in our modern world, we and our loved ones are rarely granted this same experience. Many of us live apart from family, and goodbyes often come unexpectedly or from afar. We may carry regret, unresolved hurt. There may be words left unspoken, which deny us that "perfect closure." In one sense, Yizkor offers a space for what was left unfinished. It is not a final goodbye but a recurring opportunity to engage with those who have passed, to hold them in our thoughts, and to express what was left unspoken or reaffirm what we held true. Through the prayers and meditations of Yizkor, we give voice to our

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28:10-17

<sup>3</sup> Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 28:11

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 49

memories and to the emotions that do not disappear in the moment of our beloved's departure. We ask for peace upon their souls, but we also ask for peace within ourselves, a peace that comes from acknowledging that the relationship lives on, even in death. Yizkor is indeed a sacred time when we, as a Jewish community, come together as a different kind of family. Yizkor draws us close, uniting us in shared memory, grief, and love. Here, we find strength not only from our personal memories but also from the collective embrace of our community—a family bound together by faith, tradition, and the shared stories of those we have lost. As we remember together, we are reminded that we do not have to be alone in our grief. Every time we place a stone on a grave, light a candle, or recite Yizkor, we are renewing that connection, keeping memories alive a little longer.

But we know that one day, our own memories may fade, and someday, there may be no one left who remembers us or our loved ones. May it be in another 17,000 years or more. This is why we pray to God to remember as well. We ask that God holds these souls in the eternal memory of the Divine, so that even as we, in our human limitations, may someday be unable to recall, none of us is ever truly forgotten. We acknowledge that our lives and the lives of those who have passed are forever held in God's memory—a memory that does not fade, a light that does not dim.

We ask *Tzur Yisrael*, God, the Rock of Israel, the Comfort of Jacob, to remember, as we place our loved ones in a sacred and eternal place.