



## “VISITING AND MEMORY”

This past May, the author Philip Roth died. Prior to his death, Roth instructed that his funeral be devoid of Jewish ritual. This decision followed much that the famous author had said about Judaism, despite the significant presence of Jewish themes and ideas in his written work. Interestingly, in a 2006 interview, Terri Gross, host of NPR's Fresh Air, focused Philip Roth's attention towards questions of cemeteries, burial, and visits. Philip Roth said:

Yes, I do visit the gravesite of my mother and father. And yes, I do feel closer to - if not to the dead, to their memories when I'm there. I'm rather glad that my parents were buried...Gives me a place to go. I don't believe they're present. I know they're dead. But somehow, the place has a significance. It focuses your thinking. It allows you to be alone and uninterrupted. And you're thinking about them and your past with them and who they were. And I don't do it more than once a year. But I do do it regularly, and it does mean a great deal to me.

Gross then said:

I have the sense that cemeteries in their own way are almost outdated because people are so scattered all over the place geographically, friends and family. And they're not tied together in a physical community anymore. And cemeteries, I don't know, they seem like - you need to like take care of the neighborhood....

Roth replied:

Well, I feel differently.... recently... I visited the gravesite of my mother and father. And also buried there are many members of my mother's family, my grandmother, my grandfather on her side, their brothers and sisters.... So I wander around, and I find - to repeat what I said earlier - that my attention is focused by virtue of those gravestones and those dates that I see. They're very powerful. They're very powerful, those dates you see on a gravestone. It's just four numbers and a hyphen and four more numbers, but they pack a punch, you know.... (<https://www.npr.org/2018/05/25/614398904/fresh-air-remembers-novelist-philip-roth>)

I am biased, but I believe that it was unfortunate that Philip Roth was unwilling to be recognized with or have his loved ones comforted by Jewish traditions around death.

However, I do think that he understood the impulse behind cemeteries. They pack a punch. Jews don't visit cemeteries in the spirit of ancestor worship. We visit to "focus" our "attention." Baltimore Hebrew Congregation is blessed to have two beautiful cemeteries, and our cemetery committee, caretakers, and Jo Ann Windman, our Executive Director, take love care of them. As we visit loved ones there and elsewhere, we pay attention to them and thus clarify our memories, shared values, even our points of friction with them.

Actually, I think Roth's point about the value of cemeteries is even a wider answer to Terri Gross's hypothesis that cemeteries have lost their value with the spread of families and lives. Visiting a cemetery can focus your attention, even if you are not visiting one where your own family is buried. Walking amidst that stones and markers can draw your attention even when loved ones are buried in a different place, in a different state, even in a far off country.

If I didn't already understand this possibility, I have learned it from the honor of leading BHC's cemetery memorial services, be they on Mother's Day, Father's Day, or the Sunday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We have a large number of attendees whose families are buried elsewhere, many in the Former Soviet Union. Some come who have one family member buried here and another buried in another location. A place where one person is buried respectfully can bring to mind another place where your people are buried. You can sense the love and emotion in the faces and words of these cemetery visitors.

I believe that synagogue services can be a similar space in our memories and lives to those cemetery visits. This role is especially true for this Yizkor service. Gathering in prayer, we can focus our attention. Considering Jewish heritage and values can bring to mind the commitments and characteristics of our loved ones. It doesn't matter where our deceased are buried. It doesn't matter whether they were active Jews or Jewish at all. Just as one cemetery can stand in for another, our practice here can bring consideration and comfort towards any we remember. It can pack a punch.

As we read in our Yizkor prayers:

Our loved ones' acts of kindness and generosity are the inheritance they leave behind. We feel their absence; but the beauty of their lives abides among us.  
(Mishkan Hanefesh Yom Kippur, p. 596)

Feeling their absence, let us sense their presence. We can focus our love and attention at the special places we shared with others. We can draw upon that consideration at a cemetery, at a Yizkor service, or in any space that stands in for our connection. We can accomplish this alone, as our repentance prayers could be read in solitude. All the more so, may we remember in the presence of community. May we thus draw strength and love from our shared moments of consolation and respect. May we support each other, as we gather together. Zichronam L'vracha, may the memories of our loved ones be forever a blessing.