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### **Grasping Your Strawberry**

I was seven when my mom first got sick. It was breast cancer, and I distinctly remember two images – images that remain as vivid as the day they happened in 1976. One was of a visit with my mom, I think it was after her first surgery. She was lying in a hospital bed, a bit dazed, with the loose white gown ... I didn't quite understand the entire scene. The next was a few weeks later, when my parents walked into the kitchen, opened the freezer, and threw away all the popsicles. And then from the cupboard, there went all the sugary cereals. It was all so confusing to my young self, but clearly indicated a major change in our lives.

I imagine that each of us can recall times when our lives changed suddenly and dramatically. For me, moments like that don't really appear as images at all – more like feelings. I don't necessarily see them in my mind's eye, but feel them in an indistinct way. Memories are emotional.

Yizkor is probably the one moment during the High Holidays that I most miss being together in the Sanctuary. This moment when I can usually look into your eyes and see the aching of your own memories. The burden of trying to hold onto them. When we can all sit together, surrounded by the sweet souls of the people who meant the most to us. Feeling the immense weight that we share with one another, as we try to balance on our shoulders the endless memories – both joyous and painful – that bring us here, seeking consolation, seeking answers, seeking perhaps a glimpse of what we have lost.

This is not a moment to be separated – but, sadly, we are. Even so, we are united in the sacred purpose of remembrance. Simultaneously recalling the precious images of life gone by, and empathizing with others in our Temple community who are thinking about, picturing, agonizing over, or just missing their own loved ones.

A couple years after the popsicle incident, I first heard a story that would change my life – a story which has impacted many people facing similar challenging journeys. I'm not totally sure where my parents came across it, but I do know that soon after my mom's early treatments, they quickly joined what was known at the time as the Wellness Community. Doctors, patients, teachers ... all devoted to the budding principle that the way we live our lives can have a direct impact on our long-term health. A mind-body connection that may have been slightly outside the norms of prevailing medical opinions at the time, but which has become embraced and even standardized 40 years later.

Wellness is an approach to life, not only illness, and The Strawberry Story perfectly captures its essence. I'd like to share it with you today:

One day a man was walking across a field on a pleasant afternoon, when he heard a low growl. Turning around, he saw a tiger, who immediately started to chase him. He ran as fast as he could, but the field ended at a steep cliff. Peering down, he noticed a vine dangling over the edge – so he grabbed it, and scampered down the vine as the tiger paced above him. Half-way down the cliff, he looked below and, sure enough, there was another tiger walking in circles and waiting for him.

As he clung to the vine, trying to decide what to do or if he could wait for them to leave, he glanced above him and noticed two small mice, nibbling away at the vine.

Just then, he spotted a strawberry growing from the side of the cliff – it was the largest, most luscious strawberry he had ever seen. He reached out and plucked the strawberry ... how sweet it tasted!

For a cancer patient, the tiger that suddenly appears represents illness, and the tiger down below is recurrence. More broadly, we all have metaphoric tigers chasing us in one form or another – and there are always mice to provide a sense of urgency, and to remind us that life is finite.

It would be impossible to ignore the pressures and challenges of life – especially when they revolve around illness or loss. But there are moments when our only option is to turn our attention from the tigers and the mice, and simply taste the strawberry. To enjoy its sweetness. To find meaning in the moment, rather than worrying about what will happen next, or dwelling on what came before.

Yizkor is a time to memorialize our parents, siblings, children. Our grandparents, cousins, friends, or neighbors.

We do so by sharing stories, by looking at pictures; by lighting candles, and by saying prayers. But more than that, we honor our loved ones by living each day in ways that reflect the ways they lived theirs. Or as they wished they could have done. Or as they imagined one day they might again. We honor them through our actions even more than our words.

As we sit in the quiet of this moment, each of us holds on to a variety of people for whom we continue to grieve. But I suspect that for many of us, there is one person who stands at the front of our memories – one person whose death impacted us the most deeply. One person we think about when we are at our most vulnerable.

Whether you have one person in mind at this hour of Yizkor, or several ... take a moment to reflect on what animated them, what brought them a sense of purpose. What was their

strawberry? What was their joy – their sweetness – when they were at their most present? What would they do if they had just one, precious moment?

That moment of perfection is where memory resides. Memory that we, today, can reach out and grasp. Memory that we can hold onto and cherish ... in words, in tears, in prayers, and in deeds.

It can be painful to walk through holidays, special occasions, and joyful events without them – without the ones whose memories we embrace today. To want so badly for them to be with us. As Yizkor fades, I pray that each of us will find opportunities to take hold of our own strawberry, the one that is always in front of us ... and that we will do so in memory of those who helped shape the lives we live today.

When we do, their spirits are with us. Their spirits smile with us. And their spirits continue to be part of our journey through this life.

*Y'hi Zichronam Baruch ...* May all of their righteous memories be for a blessing!