

Rabi Nachman of Bratslav, one of the original Hassidic masters, was a great story teller and deeply influenced his followers. He was a man who had the ability to transform words into a celebration of the spirit, and that is the reason why his tales are some of the most recognised in Hassidic literature. He was a man capable of transcending even his own dreams and imagination, driven by an unquenchable nostalgia for the sacred, for wonder, and for the extraordinary.

Rabbi Nachman was the Tzadik of the Ukraine and his words were filled with optimism and joy. He reached such profound levels in holiness and wisdom that he occupies an important place in Jewish thought, and thanks to his charisma and spiritual force, he attracted - and continues to attract - many followers.

According to most Hassidic traditions, when a Master dies the followers appoint a new leader. But that wasn't the case with Rabi Nachman. His Hassidim refused to have a new leader and the chair that their rebbe sat on, became empty – it has remained that way since 1811.

Years passed and his followers dispersed throughout the world. Many of them established their community in Jerusalem, but they were unhappy with the fact that the chair of their revered master was still in a small synagogue in Ukraine. For that reason they created an ingenious plan: Some of the Hassidim that were still there dismantled the chair and sent it in pieces to Yerushalaim, where it was eventually rebuilt.

And today, when people visit the synagogue of the Braslaver Hassidim in Meah Shearim, it is possible to see the chair of the Master. The chair seems to be empty, but in some sense the followers feel Rabi Nachman is still there, telling his stories and sharing his wisdom with them.

The chair is empty, but Rabi Nachman's inspiration remains with almost the same intensity.

I think the message of Yizkor is precisely the same. Today we see the chair of our beloved ones, those who are no longer with us, as an “empty chair”, however we feel how the warmth of their love, their teachings, their values, still lives within us.

→The chair is therefore full of memories and reminiscences of our past.

There is a short passage in the Torah, in Chapter 48 of Genesis, which moves me every time I read it.

Our patriarch Jacob is on his deathbed and reviews his long life. At a time in history when most people never left their hometown, Jacob had lived in three different countries. He had won and lost fortunes. But from all that happened to him in life, the only memory that he had before his death, was about his beloved wife Rachel, who died when both were very young.

I read the tale of her departure and in my mind I add to it the words that I surmise Jacob had in *his* mind but didn't say: “Rachel died but somehow I survived her death, and every day since that moment I have remembered her, and by remembering she has been present with me until today”.

Only human beings can do this. Only human beings can defeat death by recalling the presence of those whom we loved but are not with us anymore, and still feel close to them.

When we are young we become close to religion and Judaism looking for meaning and advice in order to be successful and have our dreams fulfilled. When we attain maturity we try to find peace of mind and peace for the soul. But when we become older, we search in the tradition of our people looking for help in order to defeat death, ours and the ones we love.

We pray hoping the results of the surgery will be favorable, for a successful recovery and for the end of an illness, and when we reluctantly understand that God can't maintain our lives forever, no matter how good and pious we are, we ask him to teach us how to overcome death in another way: Giving us the blessing of memory.

Life is a collection of stories which together, compose history, and history is nothing but the struggle of memory against forgetting. Memory is what gives us power to defeat death,

allowing the person who is not with us anymore to be alive in our hearts. Memory is what gives us power over time itself, keeping the past in our present so it cannot vanish from us and steal what is precious to us.

In a sense life is limited by time, but in another sense it isn't, as a Spanish expression says: We all have yesterdays we can remember and tomorrows we can imagine.

That's why this morning of Yom Kippur we remember with sadness those who have passed away but who are still with us in our hearts and in our memories, together, with all our love.

Rabbi Nachman taught "Kol ha olam culo guesher tzar meod, ve haikar lo lefached klal" – "This world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to be afraid".

In Hebrew "Olam" means "world" but can also be translated as "eternity" ...

We don't have to fear death, but rather, to affirm that those whom we love but are no longer with us physically, are still with us in the bonds of eternal life.

In Izcor, we recognize they are living in us because they are now part of us, because we remember them... And they live on in our lives.

Izcor is when the magic and the mystery of recollection let us feel closer to our beloved ones. Their seat may be physically empty, but the memories of shared moments and the depth of those moments fills their chair forever.