

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5787 - Three Jewish Women Share Lessons on Grief and Love

The Tree of Life. The towering symbol of roots, branches, and leaves that has nourished and sustained our people throughout the generations. Its majesty awes us, its meaning directs us to look up and to choose life. But what happens when those leaves begin to become more brittle, like lives returning to the loving embrace of the divine.

The leaves slowly fall to the earth, offering sustenance to the grass, the flowers, and the roots buried deep between the soil. Those fragile leaves, we delicately hold them in our hands, so easily lost to us by a gust of wind if we do not protect them and nurture them. Like memories and grief, past loves and remnants of hope.

This afternoon we stand at the foot of the tree. We hold the delicate and fragile leaves in our palms, their memories and their lives become vivid and present to us, even if just for a little while. As we hold one another at the foot of the tree of life, I want to offer three stories. Three delicate leaves, three stories of life and of death, written recently by three brilliant Jewish women, Rabbi Sharon Brous, Rabbi Wendy Zierler, and Rachel Goldberg-Polin.

Sometimes a text speaks for itself; it is so moving and spot on, that it needs nothing more than to simply be offered and shared. Such are the three pieces I wish to share with you this afternoon. Each of these three writers moved me when I read their books. Lives remembered, fallen leaves. Each a personal story about loss, love, hope, and grief.

Rabbi Sharon Brous is Senior Rabbi of IKAR in Los Angeles. Rabbi Brous published her book “The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World,” in 2024. Brous’ book is filled with stories about real, human connection. Her book reminds us each of us are seen and that we are not alone.

Rabbi Wendy Zierler, who was Rabbi Marion and my professor of Hebrew literature at Hebrew Union College, published her book, “Going Out with Knots: My Two Kaddish Years with Hebrew Poetry,” in 2025. The book is a memoir about losing both her parents in the span of a year, and her teaching poetry in their beloved memories at her Modern Orthodox synagogue in Riverdale, New York.

Rachel Goldberg Polin is a name almost all of us have become familiar with. Rachel’s son, Hersh, was taken hostage by Hamas on October 7, 2023. Hersh and five other captives were executed after surviving 328 days in captivity. Rachel published her book “When We See You Again,” in 2026. The book is both a love letter and eulogy to Hersh.

This afternoon I’d like to share three passages, one from each of their recent books. Rachel’s painful lessons of grief after losing her son, Hersh. Brous’ recollections of mourning and dancing following the death of her cousin Lizzie to cancer. Zierler’s recollections of what it means to be entrusted with the past following the deaths of both her parents, David and Marion, in the span

of one year. Three leaves, fluttered from the branches of the Tree of Life. Three stories. Three incredible Jewish women. Three lessons on grief, and love.

Wendy Zierler

When loved ones die and the memory of their physical realness begins to fade, their belongings take on an almost talismanic power. So much depends on those objects you can clasp around your neck or thread through your ears and, thus fortified, go out in the world as if you're still physically connected to the person.

Among the pieces of jewelry my Mom entrusted me with when she was still alive - when I was a college student and had begun to show interest in old, good things - was a pair of antique engraved, teardrop earrings that used to belong to her mother, my Grandma Shirley. One day I went to put them on and discovered the gold wire on one earring was broken. The very next day I brought that broken earring to a local jeweler for repair, and a few days later, on my way home from a run, I picked them up from the shop, stuffing the jeweler's little plastic bag in my runner's fanny pack.

When I went through the fanny pack that evening, though, the earrings were gone. Just while running from the jewelry store to my house, I had undone a precious irreplaceable tie not only to my mother, but to her mother, too.

All night, I tossed and turned. I tried to tell myself these were just earrings: a sheyne reyne kapporeh (a good clean sacrifice), my mother used to say about things like this. But I couldn't fall asleep. I was angry and disappointed with myself. And I was so sad, simply overcome with the feeling that I hadn't just lost a pair of antique earrings, but a legacy that my mother had entrusted me to protect.

The next morning, I set out to shul, determined to retrace every part of the previous day's route and see if - hope against hope - I might find them after all. My eyes were glued to the sidewalk, but I saw nothing but concrete and grass. Convinced the earrings were lost to me forever, I sullenly and slowly crossed the street back in the direction of my house.

Then, suddenly, only a few feet away from the corner, I noticed, in a little crevice to left of the sidewalk, the transparent glint of a time plastic bag with two gold teardrop earrings! Posthaste those earrings were back in my hands, now tightly gripped.

At home, I threaded them into my ears, sighed, smiled, and prepared for the rest of my day, Retying knots.

Rabbi Sharin Brous

A few years ago, we were heading into a Hanukkah party when my cousin Len called from New York. He didn't generally call out of nowhere, so I was already a little apprehensive as I answered.

"Is everything okay?" I hope maybe he was planning a trip out west or a surprise party for Aunt Barbara.

Not really," he answered.

I'm always struck by those mundane moments that you'd never remember had they not coincided with some momentous, awful news. The instant the second plane hit the Towers, when we realized it had been no accident. The moment the glass windows were smashed at the Capitol on January 6. When Len told me my cousin Lizzie, his sister, had been diagnosed with a very aggressive colon cancer. I remember everything: where I was standing on the curb, the way the tag of my new sweater pressed into the back of my neck, the discord between the sound of laughter in the distance and the anguish in Len's voice.

Lizzie had just turned fifty-one. She was radiant, effervescent. We bless people that they should love deeply and be loved deeply. Lizzie did both. She was madly in love with her husband, Charlie, and their sweet boys, and with life itself. The diagnosis was shattering. She would fight, of course, but it was clear where this was heading.

The next year and a half saw endless progression of debilitating treatments, all of them ultimately failing to slow the spread of the cancer. Lizzie's main ambition, the last several months of her life, was to live long enough to witness her younger sister Nancy's wedding. She had waited for years to celebrate her little sister having found genuine love. We gathered under the full moon for an intimate ceremony on a New York City rooftop, caught in the complex web of love and loss as Nancy and her beloved, Kurt, approached the huppah. They looked longingly into one another's eyes, beautiful and broken, like the glass Kurt would shatter as the ceremony closed. Lizzie, with all her might, looked on with love. She was so frail. Moments after the ceremony, each of the cousins approached her one by one to say goodbye. We knew this was the last time we'd see her in this world.

And then Lizzie's husband wheeled her to the elevator, and she left. And the band began to play - it was still a wedding, after all. The cousins circled up for a shot of tequila and through our tears, started to dance. I've never danced like that in my life - it was hours of desperate, aching, heartfelt sorrow-joy. A knowing joy, fueled by the unflinching awareness of the fragility of it all.

Two weeks later, we flew back to New York for Lizzie's funeral.

Rachel Goldberg-Polin

Grief can change shape over time for people, but it will be ever-present. It nestles and entangles itself in for the long haul. It is an emotion that is doused over the closely bereaved, over and over. Our hair never dries.

We used to touch him, see him, hear his voice, smell, and yes, even taste him in our daily experience of him. That rope that tied him to us is still wound around us, like our tefillin, and it always will be...

Cherished friends of ours have a child who went for a “big trip” to South America when he finished his national service. After six months, do you think his parents missed him less? Of course not. They missed him *more*. They started to count down the days until they would see him again, hug him again, smell him again. They craved him *more*. So why would we be any different? Why would any bereaved parents miss their child less as the time passes? The time passing makes the thirst more frantic, more extreme. More desperate. *More*.

Every day I pick up the giant backpack of cumbersome, crippling starvation and confusion, and put it on. I adjust that weird waist-belt with the strong black clips to amortize the load, and I carry it through my day, through my life. Please, may we all get more mighty, all of us, we are forever thirsty, forever filled with desire for our children who are in the ground. May our children help us, from the World to Come, to pull up the straps of our backpacks, and make them less heavy on our weary frames.

It is a Tree of Life to those who hold fast to it. This afternoon we enter this sanctuary carrying a leaf in our palms, a life, fallen from the tree. Held delicately in our hand, their memory still so vivid in our fingertips, our grief still so vivid. Like Sharon, Wendy, and Rachel, we hold the lessons they taught us, the stories of their lives, and the lasting impact of their deaths. Together, in Yizkor, we stand, hand in hand, around the ancient tree. As we live, we too, remember. Forever memories and eternal lessons on grief, and love.