

The Joy of Yizkor

On Shemini Atzeret morning, the rabbi noticed little Moishe standing in the shul lobby staring up at a large plaque. The plaque was filled with names next to small American flags. The seven-year-old had been staring at the plaque for some time, when he noticed the rabbi beside him. Still focused, Moishe asked, “Rabbi, what is this?” The rabbi replied, “Moishele, it’s to remember the people who died in the service.”

Moishe continued to stare, and in a voice, barely audible and trembling with fear, he asked, “Which service, the hashkama or the main shul?”

On the face of it, the somberness of Yizkor, or *Hazkarat Neshamot* as it is traditionally called, seems to contradict the celebratory nature of Shemini Atzeret. Indeed, the simcha of Yom Tov precludes any outward signs of mourning (See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* no. 548). In fact, the joy associated with the month of Tishrei is such that, similar to Nisan, many do not recite the *Kail Maleh Rachamim* from Sukkot until the end of the month. While on Sukkot, the Torah adjures us: “*v’samachta b’chagecha*” — and you shall rejoice on your holiday,” the Talmud (*Sukkah* 48a) identifies Shemini Atzeret as a day of *ach sameiach* — of exclusive joy (*mikan l’rabot leilei yom tov ha’acharon l’simcha*).

The difficulty reconciling Yizkor on Yom Tov is exacerbated by the fact that there is no mention of Yizkor, per se, in the Talmud. The notion of remembering the names of the deceased in shul seems to originate as a communal response to the



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thousands of Jews massacred during the Crusades in the 11th and 12th centuries in Germany and Northern France and in the 14th century in the wake of the Black Plague. Many communities recorded the names of Jewish martyrs in books known as *sifrei zikaron* — books of remembrance. The names of those Jews, murdered *al kiddush HaShem* — in the sanctification of G-d’s name — would be read on designated shabbatot that were in close calendric proximity to those tragic events.

Over the next few centuries, this practice expanded throughout Eastern Europe where prominent members of the Jewish community were also memorialized through *sifrei zikaron*. As the legacy of these individuals was not necessarily associated with a specific historical event or even tragedy, Yom Kippur became the focal point for Yizkor. Rav Yosef Karo in the *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim* 621:6) relates the practice of pledging money to charity for the sake of the dead (*nahagu lidor tzedakot b’Yom HaKippurim ba’ad hameitim*). In his gloss on this halacha, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (ReMA) notes the practice of *Hazkarat Neshamot* on Yom Kippur was since “the deceased also receive atonement on Yom Kippur” (*d’hameitim gam ken yesh lahem*

kaparah b’Yom HaKippurim).

The integration of Yizkor on Yom Kippur makes intuitive sense. The Torah reading on Yom Kippur talks about the death of Nadav and Avihu, about which the Talmud (*Moed Katan* 28a) states, “The death of the righteous atones.” While the *Unetaneh Tokef* and *Asara Harugei Malchut* prayers during Musaf are not rabbinically mandated, they have come to represent emotionally evocative peaks of the liturgy. As such, Yizkor fits well within the other sobering and humbling thematic elements of martyrdom.

Tzedakah also fits within the teshuva motif. Rav Karo’s (*Beit Yosef* OC 621: “*Katav*”) source for pledging tzedakah on Yom Kippur is the Mordechai (*Yoma* no. 727) who cites a Midrash (*Tanchuma* on Devarim, 21:8) which expounds the verse: “Atone for Your nation Israel, whom You have redeemed.” “Atone for Your nation Yisrael” refers to the living. “That You redeemed” refers to the dead, and teaches that the dead also require an atonement.”¹ Explains the Midrash, “Therefore, our practice is to remember the deceased on Yom Kippur and pledge charity on their behalf.”² The Midrash goes on to assert that it is indeed the responsibility of the living to redeem the dead.

The Midrash puts forth the powerful theological premise that the acts of the living can elevate the souls of the deceased. Often, people do not fully actualize their spiritual potential during their lifetime. While a disembodied soul can no longer perform mitzvot, that soul can be elevated through prayer and mitzvos performed in its merit.

Logically, then, Yizkor should be limited to Yom Kippur. However, Rav Mordechai Yoffe, in his *Levush Ateret Zahav* (346:3), relates that “it is our custom to memorialize the dead even during festivals.”

On a day that is defined by exclusive joy, where we are otherwise forbidden from outward mourning or eulogizing, how is it permissible to recite Yizkor? How could the Jewish community accept a minhag that seemingly flies in the face of a biblical mandate?

I would like to humbly submit that there are three aspects of Yizkor that serve as impetus for simcha.

1. Tzedakah

The centerpiece of Yizkor is the commitment to give tzedakah. The notion of giving is central to the observance of the *Shalosh Regalim* — the three pilgrimage festivals.

The *Minhagei Yeshurun* no. 62, posits that the source for Yizkor on Yom Tov is found in the Torah portion we read on Sukkot and on the last day of Pesach and Shavuot in the Diaspora (Devarim 16:17), which states “*ish k’matnat yado*” — Each man (shall give) according to the gifts of his hand (to his financial ability).

Regarding the festivals, The Torah correlates one’s personal happiness with including those less advantaged

in one’s celebration:

וְשִׂמְחָתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ
וְאִמָּתְךָ וְהַלֵּל אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ וְהַגֵּר וְהַיְתוֹם
וְהָאֶלְמָנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה'
אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׂכְנוֹ שְׁמוֹ שָׁם.
דברים טז:יא

You shall rejoice before God your Lord on your festival together with your son and your daughter, your male and your female servants, the Levite, the convert, the orphan, and the widow that are in your midst in the place which God your Lord will choose to rest His name.

Devarim 16:11

Indeed, Rambam writes (*Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:18): that one who eats and drinks on yom tov and doesn’t share with the poor is merely engaging in “*simchat kreiso* — the rejoicing of his stomach.” The Rambam further develops this concept in *Hilchot Megillah* where he writes:

שֶׁאִין שֵׁם שְׂמֵחָה גְּדוּלָּה וּמְפֹאֶרָה אֲלָא לְשִׂמְחָה
לִב עֲנִיִּים וִיתוּמִים וְאַלְמָנוֹת וְגֵרִים, שֶׁהַמְשִׂמָּח
לִב הָאֲמֻלָּלִים הָאֵלּוּ דוֹמֶה לְשִׂכְיָנָה שְׁנֹאֲמַר
לְהַחֲיוֹת רוּחַ שְׁפִלִים וְלַהֲחִיּוֹת לִב נִדְכָּאִים.
רמב”ם הל’ מגילה ב:יז

For there is no greater and more glorified happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the converts. One who brings happiness to the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the Divine Presence, as it says (Isaiah 57:15) “to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive those with broken hearts.”

Rambam Hilchot Megillah 2:17

It would seem that Rambam is not merely providing a directive of tzedakah in *Hilchot Yom Tov*, but rather a definition of simcha, which involves giving to others less fortunate.

A plethora of research indicates that giving to others is associated with

an increase in one’s own level of happiness. When those reciting Yizkor commit themselves to give tzedakah in the memory and merit of their loved ones, they have the ability to achieve a *simcha shel mitzvah* — a satisfaction that emerges from knowledge that they have done something positive for the benefit of others. This joy is increased by knowing that they have also contributed to sustaining the values and legacy of their departed loved ones.

2. Consolidating Memories and Masorah

On Shemini Atzeret we read about the death of Moshe Rabbeinu, yet the motif of the day is not one of mourning Moshe’s death but rather one of celebrating the centerpiece of his life — *Toras Moshe*. The custom of singing, dancing, and celebrating our love of Torah thereby honors the life and accomplishments of our beloved master teacher. As soon as the Torah is completed, we immediately begin the Torah again, acknowledging that we will continue the message and mission of *Toras Moshe*. Every verse that is read, every mitzvah performed, elevates Moshe Rabbeinu’s soul and honors his legacy.

Over the past fifteen years, a significant amount of psychological research points to experiences as yielding more happiness than material goods. I would submit that the memories evoked on the *Shalosh Regalim* tend to focus on life, not death. While, no doubt, the recent passing of a parent is more likely to trigger feelings of sorrow,³ in the long term, memories tend to focus on the positive experiences of family relationships.

When we think back to our childhood, who doesn't recall our father or zaydie leading the Pesach seder? We remember the drama of hiding the afikoman, the elaborate negotiations surrounding its release, and struggling to stay awake to see if Eliyahu HaNavi — the prophet Elijah — would actually drink from his specially designated goblet. We reminisce about staying up all night on Shavuot and returning to our mother or Bubbie's delicious cheesecake after davening at sunrise. I smile when I think about riding on my father's shoulders on Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah, waving a flag crowned with a candied apple, and mischievous attempts to tie together the taleism of unwitting men on the bima!⁴

The research shows that even certain negative experiences have been shown to have a retrospectively positive impact once people have the opportunity to revisit them, and sometimes, reframe them. For instance, recollecting the aversive childhood experience of being banished to the kitchen for the remainder of the Pesach seder after hiding the afikoman in the chometz-storage closet becomes a delightful story years later.

Therefore, the *Shalosh Regalim* are especially fitting for contemplating the lives of our dearly departed, since they represent a repository of endearing family experiences where Jewish tradition is conveyed.

3. Precariousness and Preciousness of Life

Yizkor serves as a subtle reminder of our own mortality.

The Talmud relates:

אמרו ליה רבנן לרב המנונא זוטי בהלולא דמר

בריה דרבינא לישרי לן מר אמר להו ווי לן דמיתנן ווי לן דמיתנן.
ברכות לא.

The Rabbis said to R. Hamnuna Zuti at the wedding of Mar the son of Ravina: please sing us something. He said to them: Woe to us that we are to die!
Berachos 31a

Given the obligation to rejoice with the bride and groom at a wedding, why would Rav Hamnuna Zuti sing such a seemingly morbid dirge?

Arguably, our greatest existential fear is death. We often act as if death will not affect us. We seek distractions to avoid acknowledging the inevitable. Within this context, contemplating our own death causes us sadness and angst.

After surveying the newly created world, the Torah tells us:

וַיֵּרָא אֶל-לְקִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה, וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד.
בראשית א:לא

God saw all that He created and behold, it was very good.
Genesis 1:31

The Midrash (*Bereishis Rabba* 9:5) comments on the word “*me’od* — very”: Rabbi Meir said: it was very good refers to death.

How is death very good? Because it is the reality of death that makes life valuable.

If the time in our lives were infinite, what motivation would we have to work towards anything substantial? We would always have more time. Awareness of our mortality reminds us of the preciousness of every moment.

At 53-years of age, Eugene O’Kelly was full of life. As the chairman and CEO of KPMG, one of the largest U.S. accounting firms, O’Kelly was

Why do those who do not recite Yizkor leave for its recitation?

R. Ephraim Zalman Maruglies, *Shaarei Ephraim, Pitchei Shearim* 10:35, provides two suggestions:

1) It is not appropriate to sit quietly while everyone else is praying (*Berachot* 20b). As such, those who are not reciting Yizkor leave.

2) The Gemara, *Yevamot* 106a, indicates that there is jealousy (*ayin hara*) when one boasts that one’s parents are alive. Therefore, those who are not reciting Yizkor leave so as not to evoke jealousy.

Some communities have the practice of first reciting the communal “*Keil Malei*” prayers such as the prayer to memorialize Holocaust victims and the prayer to memorialize fallen soldiers of IDF and only then do those who are not reciting Yizkor exit the sanctuary.

the consummate global jet-setter. His successful career brought him into the presence of Warren Buffet and other business giants. Gene spent days, nights, and weekends planning the firm’s continued success. He described himself as feeling, “vigorous, indefatigable, and ... near immortal.”

That same year, Gene was diagnosed with late-stage brain cancer and given three months to live. With this sudden and shocking diagnosis, Gene had to quickly determine how he would spend his remaining 100 days on earth.

In a sense, Gene O’Kelly became acutely aware of Rav Hamnuna Zuti’s song.

Gene made an immediate decision to make every minute of his life count. He wanted “every calculated step to be filled with truth of purpose.” Gene struggled to live in the moment as he began a process he called “unwinding.” Bidding farewell to friends and loved ones not only spurred Gene to recall happy memories, “but they kept my focus on life, not death. They guaranteed that I was almost always thinking about what mattered.”

Gene did one more thing in those last three months — he wrote a book. Gene’s book, *Chasing Daylight*, is a moving and humbling narrative of humanity and courage. It is, in a sense, a *zikaron* — an ethical will, describing Gene’s search for a better way to die. Gene spent many precious hours writing his book fully cognizant of his fundamental limitation — he would be unable to write the final chapter.

In finishing the book that her husband began, Corrine O’Kelly reflected on how Gene was so concerned about how to say goodbye to their 14-year-old daughter:

He worked so hard to find the perfect trip or gesture or gift for her to have the rest of her life... but how is that ever possible? How do you unwind a relationship with your child who is only 14 years old?

In those final days, Gene had one profound regret:

Had I known then what I knew now, almost certainly I would have been more creative in figuring out a way to live a more balanced life, to spend more time with my family.

I believe that Rav Hamnuna’s song was not a dirge, but rather an exhilarating challenge to the newlyweds to enhance their true simcha; for the path to genuine simcha is to not

take anything or anyone for granted. To realize that nothing — not even life itself — is an entitlement. This awareness of death generates an exhilarating incentive to appreciate the potential of every breathing moment.

The story of Rav Hamnuna Zuti’s song continues:

אמר לי ליה אגן מה נעני בתוך א"ל הי תורה
והי מצוה דמגנו עלן.

*“They (the sages) said to him: ‘How shall we respond to you (in song)?’
He said to them: ‘The Torah and the commandments shall protect us!’”*

Our task in this world is to receive, cultivate and transmit the most important set of standards the world has ever known — G-d’s Torah.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l explains that many mitzvot have both a fulfilling purpose (“*kiyyum*”) and a performing action (“*maaseh*”). Parents are obligated to pass the beauty and heritage of the Torah on to their children and grandchildren. When parents and grandparents see their children and especially their grandchildren observing the Yom Tov and its respective mitzvos, they can rest assured in the knowledge that they have succeeded in their primary life mission. Although the action of Yizkor may evoke mourning, its fulfilling purpose is one of inner joy. As such, says The Rav, it is appropriate to recite Yizkor on Yom Tov.⁵

We exist as Jews today because of parents and grandparents who ensured that Torah was both revered and celebrated. By remembering and adhering to “*mussar avicha*” and “*Torat imecha*”⁶ — the guidance and lessons of our progenitors, we elevate their spiritual state and legacy. Moreover, we serve as living proof that their

mission was accomplished.

Yizkor beckons us to become both protégés and mentors. To seek the wisdom and appreciate the values of those who preceded us. Those who developed the repository of knowledge, experience, and commitment that sustained us as Jews. We, in turn, must seek to sustain and grow the enterprise of Torah, to strengthen our affiliation and our commitment to the only corporate entity that is guaranteed to last forever.

To live such a life ensures that we will leave behind people who understand our beliefs and who will uphold our values.

May we merit to live a life worthy of remembrance and blessing.

Notes:

1. The *Ba’er Hayteiv* cites the MaHaRIV, who says the name Yom Kippurim is plural, thereby indicating that it is a day of atonement for both the living and the dead.
2. Perhaps another relationship is found in the Talmud in *Berachos* (6b) which teaches: “The merit of a fast day lies in the charity dispensed.”
3. *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* maintains that Yizkor is not recited during the year of *aveilut* following the death of a parent. *Orchot Chayim* maintains that Yizkor is omitted during *aveilut* because of the likelihood it will bring tears and emotional pain.
4. This occurred prior to the author becoming aware of the melacha of *keshira*. Nevertheless, the knots were always fastened by way of “*al m’nat l’hatir*.”
5. R. Aharon Ziegler, *Halakhic Positions of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Vol. II, chapter 13.
6. According to The Rav, “*mussar avicha* — the heritage of your father” encompasses the skill and discipline of Torah study and compliance while “*Torat Imecha* — the guidance of your mother” refers to the experience of Torah living.