

## *What You Can Do In the Memory of a Departed Love One*

*Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ*

(Below, the presentation given on Synaplex Shabbat, January 17, 2015)

The loss of a loved one is one of the most traumatic events we will ever face. Is death an end of our connection to our loved ones, and our opportunity to help?

In today's presentation titled ***What You Can Do In the Memory of a Departed Love One***, I hope to share insights demonstrating that we have the power to do something very meaningful. We can not only do things that help us to keep the connection with our departed loved ones, but undertake activities that actually benefit them.. Our actions can give our departed loved ones a powerful *aliyah* (elevation). Our connection to our loved ones doesn't have to end, but can continue on in an everlasting bond.

Here is the outline for today's presentation

One) What happens after death?

Two) What can we do for the departed?

- 1) Mitzvah acts
- 2) Prayers
- 3) Yartzheit
- 4) The Righteous Path

### ***One) What happens after death?***

At the beginning of creation, the Almighty created two realms; the physical realm, and the spiritual realm.

The physical realm consists of all things that can be touched, felt and measured. The four elements of the physical realm -- earth, ruach (often translated as 'spirit', or 'wind'), water and fire are the building blocks of all things terrestrial and astronomical. Less easily recognized but no less real is the spiritual realm. The spiritual realm consists of various spiritual entities, many whom we refer to generically as angels.

Many are surprised to learn that Judaism believes in angels. And while we don't believe in angels similar to Clarence (remember "It's a Wonderful Life"?), the Torah is filled with various descriptions of angels. On Friday evening we sing "Shalom aleichem", a song welcoming our ministering angels. But most elevated among all spiritual entities is the *neshama* -- the human soul.

In the beginning of Genesis (2:7), the Torah describes the creation of man: .

*Then the LORD G-d formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life ('nishmat chaim'), and the man became a living being.*

This combination of the spiritual (the neshama) and physical (dust of the ground) is a human being; we consist of a body and a soul.

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But more than 'having a soul', we *are* a soul. The soul is given to us at birth in a pure, pristine condition. Our task (minimally) is to return it at the end of our lives in that same state. If we don't, a purification following death takes place over a period of time lasting as long as twelve months. This purification is a *din v'cheshbon* -- a judgement and accounting -- for the life we lived in this world. A fundamental principle of Judaism is that G-d rewards us for our good deeds and punishes us for our sins. And even the most righteous aren't free of sin.

The departed experiences great anguish during this purification, also suffering from the realization that he can no longer perform good deeds himself to gain merit.

But the good news is that the living can supply merit to the deceased, which will offer him protection, comfort and pleasure, and help his soul rise higher and higher in Heaven. As long as the deceased left behind relatives or friends who are moved to provide help, it is never too late. A child's actions are viewed like the actions of the parent himself, thus lessening the purification and helping a parent rise to an even greater spiritual level.

And as was stated, this idea extends to other relatives, and even friends.

Summarizing this point, we can assist both the departed and ourselves by performing good deeds on their behalf. We can dramatically improve our loved one's situation and at the same time attain a measure of comfort for ourselves. Let us now discuss what we can do on behalf of the departed.

### ***Two) What can we do for the departed?***

#### **1) Mitzvah acts**

There are four 'mitzvah acts' of great benefit for the neshama.

##### *A) Tzedaka*

In our prayers on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we say, *tshuva, tefila v'tzedaka ma'avirin es ro'ah ha'gezirah* -- repentance, prayer, and tzedaka avert the evil decree. Concerning the power of tzedaka our tradition states:

*"Even if - G-d forbid - a departed soul is in the midst of experiencing purification in the Afterlife, nevertheless, when a tzedaka pledge is made on his behalf, he is removed from Gehinnom with the speed of an arrow shot forth from its bow ....he is immediately cleansed and purified, as if he were a newborn .."*

Such is the benefit of tzedaka, that even a *pledge* has the ability to confer great benefit to the neshama!

When a child gives tzedakah, it is considered to a certain extent as if the departed parent is actually involved in the fulfillment of this mitzvah. The departed may have had a direct hand in the funds given. But even if not, the parent still receives benefit from all mitzvos and good deeds performed by their children since children are the 'ripple effects' of their parents. The way we were raised and the values instilled in us are in large part due to our parent's influence.

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To whom should the money be given?

Supporting Torah scholars and institutions is a high priority. The story is told that the Chofetz Chaim was once asked if a person living outside Israel should spend money to arrange their own (eventual) burial in Israel. He said that while burial in the land of Israel is a very important matter, better that the funds be used to support Torah and yeshivos.

Other deserving recipients of tzedaka: redeeming captives, providing for the needs of a poor bride, assisting poor people in ill health, and contributing to the needs of a synagogue.

One should also consider giving tzedaka to a *gemach* -- a free loan fund -- or personally creating a *gemach*. Each time someone borrows from it, another mitzvah act is performed to benefit the departed. A gift of \$100 to a *gemach*, lent out and repaid monthly, could be used to lend \$1200 within the span of one year, and thereby generate many mitzvos

*B) Donating Sefarim (Books)*

Aside from money, there are tangible items that can be donated for the benefit of the neshama.

Torah books for public use, particularly *siddurim* and *Chumashim* (prayer books, Pentateuchs) can be a great benefit for the neshama. Inside the donated books there should be an inscription stating that they have been donated in memory of a departed loved one. Throughout the years whenever someone makes use of these books (*sefarim*), the neshama will benefit from their use. Ideally, it is best to find out what books your synagogue or other institutions need before making a donation.

If a person has the choice between using two books -- one of which belonged to someone who passed away -- use the book of the departed person. It is a benefit for the departed who will then pray on behalf of the person making use of their book! If you have books of the departed among your possessions, it's a good idea to donate these sefarim to a place of communal learning that will benefit his soul.

And if one has the means to do so, donating a Sefer Torah (Torah Scroll) is an enormous benefit to the neshama of a departed loved one.

*C) Adopting a mitzvah*

A mourner is advised to choose a specific mitzvah to designate as his or her personal 'project.' In other words, regarding this particular mitzvah -- whichever one chosen -- the mourner would devote his energies toward its scrupulous fulfillment with all its details. Beginning with an effort to learn more about the mitzvah one would like to adopt, a focus on the practical observances of the mitzvah with a plan to implement observance in small steps will lead to a great *aliyas ha'neshama* (spiritual elevation).

How can one best decide what mitzvah to choose?

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-- A mitzvah that provides a positive benefit for the general public, e.g. writing a Sefer Torah, collecting siddurim and sefarim in a shul at the end of services or the end of the day, serving lunch at a school cafeteria, volunteering in some capacity at a worthy Jewish or non-profit institution.

-- Select a mitzvah you personally need to improve upon.

-- Consider the departed, himself; it would be appropriate to engage in a mitzva that the departed was known to excel at or took a particular interest in during his or her lifetime.

Adopting a mitzvah is a particularly worthy choice for those who may not have the option of saying Kaddish, leading the davening, etc. -- namely, daughters, wife, grandchildren -- but who nevertheless want to provide an aliya for the neshama of the departed.

### *D) Learning Torah*

Any form of Torah learning has a powerful impact on the departed neshama. The study of the mishna is particularly beneficial; the words *mishna* and *neshama* have the same Hebrew letters.

Torah study in the shiva house is particularly appropriate, being studied between *mincha* and *ma'ariv* (the afternoon and evening prayer services). Many individuals seek to make a *siyum* during the 30 days following the death of a loved one. A *siyum* refers to the completion of any unit of Torah study, or book of the Mishna or Talmud. A *siyum* is often followed by a celebratory meal, or *seudas mitzva*, in tribute and honor to the deceased.

Beyond the 30 day (*shloshim*) mishna study, and all forms of Torah study can continue for the benefit of the neshama. A Yartzheit offers a special opportunity upon which a siyum can be made. One can also sponsor Torah study in a synagogue, yeshiva or Jewish school.

## **2) Prayer**

Prayer is a powerful way to help the neshama once it has departed. Let us discuss four different types of prayers.

### *A) Kaddish*

Kaddish is a prayer with power to shield the neshama from the purifications of Gehenom, as well as to elevate the neshama. That isn't to say, though, that Kaddish itself is a prayer asking Hashem to have mercy on the departed and save him from suffering. The text of Kaddish makes no reference to the neshama. Kaddish has at its essence the fulfillment of the mitzvah of *Kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of the Name of G-d). By publicly declaring that Hashem's Great Name be exalted and sanctified (*yisgadal v'yiskadash.*) and especially by leading the congregation to respond *Amein! Y'hei shmei ...*, the departed's offspring performs a tremendous Kiddish Hashem.

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How does Kaddish work?

By doing a mitzvah (like giving tzadaka, etc.) one creates merit accredited to the departed loved one and helps him in his station in the Afterlife. In addition, the recitation of Kaddish is an acceptance of Hashem's judgement, an act that itself constitutes a profound Kiddush Hashem. In fact, the name Kaddish comes from the root of this mitzvah, Kiddush Hashem.

Families or individuals who have difficulty meeting the commitment to say Kaddish during the first year of mourning or on the Yartzheit can make arrangements to have it said through their synagogue.

### *B) Leading the Davening*

This helps the soul of the departed even more than Kaddish recital. *Kaddish Yasom* (Orphan's Kaddish) was really instituted for boys who were too young to lead the davening. The main way to benefit the neshama is through the leading of the services and reciting the Kaddishim that are part of the main service.

Special emphasis is placed upon leading Ma'ariv at the conclusion of Shabbos. That is the time when the reprieve from Gehinnom -- which the neshamos enjoyed over Shabbos -- comes to an end. This period is particularly troubling for the neshama, who is need of extra merit, which the tefilos provide. Also, reciting Maftir on the Shabbos before the Yartzheit is a great benefit for the neshama.

### *C) Yizkor*

Yizkor is a prayer where we recall and mention the neshamos.

Yizkor is said on four days; The last day of Pesach, the second day of Shavous, Shmini Atzeres, and Yom Kippur. On the first three of these days we read a Torah passage that mentions pledging to tzedaka ("Each person according to his ability" Deut. 16:17) It has become customary to make tzedaka pledges on these days. Once people are involved in the mitzvah of pledging to tzedaka, we invoke the memory of the departed, asking Hashem to remember them favorably. It is this reason that Yizkor is recited on these three dates.

Yom Kippur is a particularly opportune time to beseech Hashem to favorably recall the neshomas of the departed, even though the Torah section on pledging isn't read. *Yom Ha'Kippurim* -- the name of the Yom Tov that appears in the Torah -- literally means 'A day of atonements.' Yom Kippur is a day of atonement for the living and for the dead.

Why do we say Yizkor and how does it 'work'?

Mentioning the name of the departed does a great amount for the neshama, more so in or during an auspicious place or time. The neshama is intertwined with a person's name, as a person's name reflects their essence. A Kabbalistic passage states: "Through the mention of the name, the soul becomes renewed." Therefore, when reciting Yizkor it's very important to mention the departed's name with the proper intention and focus (*kavanah*).

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Also, Yizkor helps by praying on the departed's behalf through the recitation of the Yizkor prayer, and by providing merit through the mitzvah of tzedaka. Just pledging accomplishes a great deal. Of course, the money has to be given -- immediately after Yom Tov if possible.

### *D) Visiting the Grave*

"It brings pleasure to the deceased when their loved ones visit their place of burial, and pray for the welfare of their departed souls." (Sefer Chassidim)

A visit to the grave site of a departed loved one brings a tremendous benefit to both the living and the deceased. In addition to maintaining a sense of connection with the departed, the real and meaningful activities and prayers that occur at this time afford pleasure to the departed, as well as to the mourner.

One of the main functions of a visit to the grave is to pray. It must be noted that we don't pray *TO* the dead or ask them to pray for us. We pray directly to Hashem to have mercy on the departed, and pray for ourselves in the merit of the righteous who are buried in and near the vicinity.

The atmosphere in a cemetery is one of intense holiness due to the fact that it is the resting place of tzadikim whose spirits dwell within. The cemetery, to a certain extent, possesses the qualities of the Holy Temple -- the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) rests on the site where tzadikim are buried. Because of the holiness of the place and the merit of the righteous buried there, prayers in a cemetery are readily accepted.

It is customary to offer the following prayers when visiting a cemetery. Tehillim (Psalms): 33, 16, 17, 72, 91, 104, 130, and selected verses from 119

It is customary to visit a grave upon:

- Completion of shiva
- Completion of shloshim
- Yartzheit
- On any occasion of personal or communal distress, as well as to pray there on behalf of someone suffering from a serious illness
- Tisha B'Av
- Erev Rosh Hashana, before Yom Kippur, and during the month of Elul

### **3) Yartzheit**

A yartzheit is a time of great opportunity for the neshama; in a sense, it becomes "eligible for promotion" on this day to be afforded a new and more exalted place in Heaven. Though a yartzheit contains many elements of the two categories I have discussed until now ('Mitzvah Acts' and 'Prayer'), since the yartzheit is so important and multifaceted, I present it as a separate category in our discussion of things we can do for the departed.

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The Ari z"l noted an important difference between the twelve month period of mourning, and the yartzheit. During the mourning period, efforts made on behalf of the soul are aimed at sparing it from the purifications of Gehinnom and delivering it to Gan Eden. On the yartzheit, the neshama is already in Gan Eden. The efforts are geared toward allowing the neshama to move on to the upper levels of Gan Eden -- its 'promotion.'

The following are 6 categories of activities to be undertaken on the yartzheit.

### *1. Prayers*

On the Shabbos before yartzheit, it is desirable to receive an aliya (or preferably, maftir), lead musaf, recite a Keil Malei, and lead the prayers on motzei Shabbos.

On the day of the yartzheit, one should recite kaddish during services, lead davening, receive an aliyah to the Torah (or on the day of the next-closest Torah reading preceding the yartzheit), and recite a Keil Malei.

### *2. Torah/Mishna Study*

One should endeavor to learn an extra amount of Torah on a yartzheit -- preferably mishnayos. As was mentioned, mishna contains the same letter as neshama. One should make a siyum, and/or sponsor Torah learning.

### *3. Gatherings and Se'euda (meal)*

Upon making a siyum, many have the custom to serve a meal, with additional learning taking place at this event. The *divrei Torah* (Torah thoughts) of the departed and his good qualities should be related. The son of the departed should lead *bentching* (grace after meals)

### *4. Acts Performed on Behalf of Departed*

Before any act on behalf of the departed, ideally one should say, "in order to give merit to \_\_\_"

Among the many mitzvah acts to be performed on the yartzheit are the giving of tzedaka (in generous amounts), recitation of Tehillim (Psalms), and a *tikun* -- food, drink and schnapps following shachris.

Also, a yartzheit candle (24 hour candle) should be lit by each of the surviving children. The lighting of a candle in memory of the departed (throughout shiva, on yizkor, and annually on the yartzheit) is more than a mere symbolic act. Candles lit on behalf of the neshama provide the departed's neshama with honor and benefit. "*A man's soul is Hashem's candle*" (Proverbs 20:27) The neshama shares a common thread with the candle. Although the neshama is spiritual while a flame is physical, the neshama's essence -- like the candle - is one of light (a pristine and spiritual light). The neshama is therefore drawn to the candle's flame and derives tremendous delight from the splendor of its light.



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In its most simple and practical sense, the candle serves to keep the departed in the forefront of the mourner's focus, and to remind them to fulfill the various aspects of the yartzheit (or mourning).

### *5. Visiting the Grave*

The procedure in visiting the grave is the same as at other times (see 'Prayer' # 4, "Visiting the Grave"). If one lives a considerable distance from the cemetery of the relative's grave, one may consider making a sizable donation to tzedaka in place of undertaking an expensive travel arrangement.

### *6. Observed Restrictions*

Many have the custom to fast on a yartzheit. However, those unable to fully function while fasting may 'redeem' the fast by giving to tzedaka the approximate value of the food one consumes on the yartzheit. Some refrain from eating meat and drinking wine on a yartzheit. In sense, the feeling one should have on a parent's yartzheit is like that of Rosh Hashana; simultaneously rejoicing and trembling (*gila b'rida*). We rejoice at the opportunity to honor our parents (and dear relatives and friends) through the observances of the yartzheit, yet tremble in awe at the seriousness of our obligations.

### **4) Walking in the Righteous Path**

The greatest act a child can do for the benefit of departed parents -- more than davening, Kaddish, etc -- is simply to maintain a lifestyle of sterling character traits and good deeds.

This in no way should be taken to minimize all that has been said to benefit the neshama of the departed (Kaddish, etc.). However, every mitzvah has its own influence and benefit. This idea is beautifully expressed in the words of a famous rabbi, written in 1905 -- words that provide a fitting conclusion to our entire presentation:

*"I have recorded these comments, so they will serve as a constant reminder to me. A reminder -- for the rest of my life -- that I should never bring shame upon my father (through my actions). Instead, I must constantly strive to improve my conduct, my thoughts and my feelings. This memoir will help me keep one thing at the forefront of my focus, something that will guide my actions for the rest of my life: that my parents -- in Gan Eden -- should always be proud of and pleased with their son."*

There are many things that can be done in the memory of the departed. May the neshamos of all our dear departed loved ones have an aliya.