

THE HISTORY AND MYSTERY OF YIZKOR

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EARLIEST REFERENCES TO PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

1. JUDAH MACCABEE AND HIS COMPANIONS SACRIFICE TO REDEEM THE DEAD

Judah and his companions went to gather bodies of the fallen and bury them with their kindred in their ancestral tombs.... But under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. So it was clear to all that this was why these men had fallen... They therefore praised the ways of the Lord... And he took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection in mind; if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. II Maccabees 12:39-44

2. THE DEAD INTERCEDE ON BEHALF OF THE LIVING

.Raba said: Caleb held aloof from the plan of the spies and went and prostrated himself upon the graves of the patriarchs, saying to them, '*My fathers, pray on my behalf that I may be delivered from the plan of the spies.*' BT Soṭah 34b

3. PRAYING TO THE DEAD FOR INTERCESSION

Why do they go to the cemetery? — R. Hanina. In order that the dead should intercede for mercy on our behalf. Ta'anit 16a

4. REDEMPTION OF DEAD FROM GEHENNA ON YOM KIPPUR

"Atone for your people' - *those are the living*; 'that You have redeemed' - *those are the dead*. From here, we learn that the living redeem the dead." Hence we are accustomed to mention the dead on Yom Kippur and to distribute charity for their sake...[Hence] we learn to say, 'that You have redeemed.'" From here, we learn that when we distribute charity for their sake, we take them out of Gehenna and bring them up like an arrow from the bow. -Midrash Tanhuma, Haazinu, c. 9-10th cent. CE

5. CEMETERY PRAYERS TO ZADDIKIM

When the Children of Israel go visit graves of *zaddikim* they come in repentance before the Holy Blessed One fasting and with a broken heart, in order that those holy souls [of the *zaddikim*] may plead for mercy for them before the Holy Blessed One. And the Holy Blessed One has pity on the world because of them.. [ZOHAR III:71B]

HISTORICAL STAGES IN EVOLUTION OF YIZKOR LITURGY

6. RESPONSE TO THE BLACK PLAGUE - 1348 - 6,000 JEWS MASSACRED IN EUROPE

Therefore all the house of Israel is in duty bound to remember them (*lehazkiram*) between Passover and Shavuot, on the Sabbath nearest to Shavuot and also a second time on the Sabbath between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av, on the Sabbath nearest the 9th of Av, the Sabbath that we call 'the Black Sabbath' (*Shabbat Shakhor*). Memorbuch/Sefer Zikharon c. 14th cent.

7. COMMUNITY LEADERS AND BENEFACTORS MEMORIALIZED ON YOM KIPPUR

Adonai spoke to Moses after death of two of Aaron's sons...Lev. 16:1

The merit of a fast day lies in the charity dispensed. BT Ber. 6b

The dead were redeemed through giving of Tzedakah, Yom Kippur was a day of fasting and a time to give Tzedakah. Thus, "the perceived need to atone for these dead also led to the institution of a memorial prayer for them on the Day of Atonement."

Solomon B. Freehof, "Hazkarath Neshamoth"

8. COMMUNAL FAMILY MEMORIAL EXTENDED TO SHALOSH REGALIM. C. 17TH CENT.

"it is our custom to memorialize the dead even during festivals."

R. Mordecai Jaffe (1530-1612), Levush (Ateret Zahav 346:3)

TORAH READING Three times each year shall you appear before Adonai—Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot—and they shall not appear before Adonai empty; Everyone shall give as they are able—אִישׁ כְּמַתְּנַת יָדוֹ —**ish k'matnat yado**—according to the blessing Adonai has given you. Deut. 16:17

9. HAMBURG SIDDUR 1819, "TODTEN-FEYER"

In the Hamburg prayerbook, the end of the Yizkor prayer mentions the gift of *tzedakah*. But in place of connecting giving of *tzedakah* with merit for the soul, as in the original Yizkor, the worshiper devotes it to the memory of the departed, and asks that God find his gift acceptable. Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe* p. 332.

10. MINHAG AMERIKA, C.1866 —YIZKOR PRAYERS MORE ORNATE - ASSUAGE GUILT FOR LEAVING HOMELAND

Thy memory, dearly beloved father, which now entirely fills my soul, revives in me the holy sentiments of love and affection with thou so often and so tenderly hast lavished on me, when thy parental hand still guided me, blessed and instructed thy child.

Isaac M. Wise, *The Divine Service of American Israelites for the Day of Atonement*

11. MINHAG AMERIKA — TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL YIZKOR LITURGY

1. Prayers no longer addressed to the deceased
2. Notion of joining the departed in Gan Eden eliminated.
3. Petitionary prayers for intercession dropped.
4. Talk about an afterlife and the soul put in cautious, circumlocutory terms.
5. Agnostic language adopted, emphasizing memory, values, etc.

Eric L. Friedland, "The Atonement Memorial"

12. DEVELOPMENT OF YIZKOR PRAYERS FOR VICTIMS OF SHOAH

May Adonai remember the souls of the holy and pure ones who were killed, murdered, slaughtered, burned, drowned, and strangled for the sanctification of the Name...

13. PSYCHOLOGIZING OF CONTEMPORARY YIZKOR SERVICES

Reconstructionism rejects the superstitious dimensions of prayer, and we do not believe either that "all is decreed" or that "teshuvah, and tefillah, and tzedakah" can magically mitigate what may happen. But we do accept that though there are things beyond our control, we do retain control over how we react to those things."

Kol HaNeshama Mahzor, p. 1029

YIZKOR AS SOUL-GUIDING

14. BEYOND A RATIONALIST APPROACH TO JEWISH DEATH RITUALS

Judaism teaches us that between the world of the living and the world of the dead there is a window and not a wall. From earliest times, Jewish tradition has recognized that the living and the dead continue to interact in important and intimate ways.

Jewish Views of the Afterlife, p. 396

15. RE-CLAIMING THE ANCIENT TRADITION OF SOUL CONNECTION

In reciting Yizkor let your imagination be the vehicle of inter-connection. See the face of the one for whom you are saying Yizkor, visualize their smile, how they might be standing next to you. Hear the sound of their voice, let their words touch your heart. Feel their presence in this moment. What is the conversation between the two this year? What's the message you need to hear today? Speak. Listen. Take your time. Let all the radiance of their love to be with you right now.

Kavannah for Yizkor, Kol HaNeshmah Mazhor

16. KADDISH AS A LINK BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Rabbi Akiva once had a vision of a shadowy figure of a man carrying a load of wood upon his shoulders. "What ails you?" asked the rabbi. "I am one of those forlorn souls condemned for his sins to the agony of hell-fire," replied the shadow. "And there is no hope for you?" inquired the rabbi further in great compassion. "If my little son, who was a mere infant when I died, could be taught to recite the Kaddish, then and only then would I be absolved." The rabbi took the boy under his care and taught him to recite the Kaddish. He was then assured that the father had been released from Gehenna. *[Sanhedrin 104a]*

17. A TRADITION OF PRAYERS FOR INTERCESSION AT GRAVES OF REBBES CEMETERY PRAYERS/YICHUDIM OF CHAIM VITAL

Seclude yourself in an isolated house...wrap yourself in a prayershawl, sit and close your eyes, divesting yourself of the material world [Now] recite whatever single Mishnah you wish, many times in uninterrupted succession. Concentrate your mind upon attaching your soul to that tanna [Rabbi] mentioned in the Mishnah..so that your soul becomes a throne so that in it there may be invested the soul of this tanna [Rabbi], so that his soul will be invested in your own.

Fine, "The Contemplative Practice of Yihudim in Lurianic Kabbalah" in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, pp. 64-99. [Vital, Sha'are Kedushah, 16r-16v, p. 116]

18. YIDDISH FOLK CULTURE - VISITATION FROM THE DECEASED IN DREAMS

Now Frume Soreh was standing in her place, and this is what she said to me: 'Reb Tevye! I have always thought that you were a learned, honorable Jew; would you kindly explain to me, then, how you can let your daughter take over my house, sit in my chairs, carry my keys, walk around in my coats, put on my jewelry, and wear my pearls?' 'But why blame me? I say to her. 'That's what your Layzer Wolf wants.' 'Layzer Wolf?' she says. 'Layzer Wolf will come to no good end, while as for your daughter Tsaytl—I feel sorry for your daughter, Reb Tevye, because she won't live out three weeks with him. If she does, I promise that I'll come to her in person the next night, and throttle her, like this... *[Shalom Aleichem., Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories, pp. 50-51.]*

19. ASHKENAZI WOMEN MEASURING GRAVES TO MAKE CANDLE WICKS CREATING CONNECTIONS WITH DECEASED ANCESTORS

Raboyne ShelOylem - Master of the Universe - merciful God! The candles which we will install in Shul, for the sake of your Holy Name and the holy, pure souls, shall rouse the Oves and Imoes - Fathers and Mothers, that they should from their graves entreat on our behalves, that no evil, no troubles, no suffering should come to us, and our light, and our husbands' light, and our children's light shall not be extinguished before the time comes, God Forbid ... From Mendele Moykher Sforim' unfinished autobiographical novel 'Shloyme Reb Khayims' c. 1899

20. EARLY MODERN CEMETERY PRAYERS, c. 1910 A TRADITION OF TALKING DIRECTLY TO THE DECEASED PRAYER ON THE GRAVE OF A WIFE:

May your pure soul unite with me in prayer before the One who allocates all events, to guard me from affliction, grief and sickness, and grant me and all that belong to me, a long and happy life: a life of honor free from care so that I may maintain my children and my household, and train them in service of His sacred name...

Ma'aneh LaShon —*Memorial Prayers and Meditations*, Hebrew Publishing Co. 1910, p. 41]

21. HEALING OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS CONTINUES AFTER DEATH

One night soon after his death, the wife of Reb Abraham the Angel had a dream. A door opened unto a great hall and her husband Abraham entered. He said: "Friends, my wife bears me a grudge because in my earthly life I lived apart from her. She is right, and therefore I must obtain her forgiveness." His wife cried out: "With all my heart I forgive you," and awoke comforted.

[Martin Buber, *Legends of the Hasidim*, Vol. I, p. 117]

22. HEALING OF INTER-GENERATIONAL TRAUMA NEEDS TO BE DONE

When past trauma remains unspoken or has long been forgotten, it becomes part of us and our children—a legacy of both strength and woundedness that shapes our lives. Our past and the painful history of our ancestors does not simply disappear.. Yet we can recognize, choose and redefine out own destinies, even in the aftermath of ruinous events. Humans are created with the capacity to heal from wreckage, transform fear into compassion, and turn tragedy into strength. The power to heal lives within each of us.

Rabbi Tirzah Firestone, *Wounds into Wisdom -Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*

