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Yizkor and the Mourner’s Path: The Personal Odyssey of a Grief Therapist

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By: Simcha Raphael



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REFLECTIONS

On the last day of Passover, it is traditional to recite Yizkor prayers in memory of deceased loved ones. The Yizkor candle is lit at home at sundown and Yizkor prayers are recited in synagogue the next day. It makes sense at Passover that we remember the lives of deceased parents and relatives, with whom we celebrated seders over many years. An inherent wisdom of Judaism is that even in the midst of celebration, we reflect upon the lives of those who have died, honor their memory and attune to their souls in the world beyond.

As a bereavement counselor, I encourage people to talk about deceased loved ones at Yizkor, and feel the bittersweet memories of their loss. I learned at a very young age that talking openly about grief and about those who died can be very healing for families.

My mother was 10 years old when her father was killed tragically in a car accident. Overnight, my maternal grandmother, 33 at the time, became a bereaved widow with three young children, my mother being the oldest. I can only imagine what this trauma was like for her family in 1933, long before “single moms” and widow-to-widow support groups were a normative dimension of society.

As I was growing up, my mother frequently spoke of her father. With both cherished recollection and bittersweet feelings, she would share memories of the father she knew as a young girl, and what family life was like after his death. He was gone but his life and the impact of his death were never forgotten.

Twenty-two years later, in 1955, my mother lost her mother as well. I knew this grandmother; she was very dear to me as a young child. I recall missing her very much, but feeling a sense of her presence for many years after her death. And, just like with her father, my mother spoke frequently of her mother. Remembering her mother’s life and the wisdom she imparted, and at the same time grieving her loss, were intricately interwoven.

My philosophy of death and grief was learned by osmosis from my mother. As a young child, I knew death was simply part of life. We spoke openly of the dead and remembered their lives and legacy. Death was not denied, nor was it glorified. Death was painful but real. And in remembering the dead, in a loving not morbid sense, I learned that the connection between the living and the dead continues

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long after physical death.

In our culture, there is often a deep discomfort with the topic of death, an almost compulsive attempt to avoid talking about it, as if completely staying away from the topic will prevent the inevitable destiny of every human being.

However, having spent three decades teaching and writing about Jewish approaches to death and afterlife, I discovered for myself, and others, that Judaism provides very effective ways of mourning and remembering the dead. Healthy bereavement can be accomplished by honoring the grief one goes through; by making use of traditional Jewish death practices; and by staying open to the ever-changing mystery of the interconnection between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

There is a mistaken belief in modern Jewish life that Judaism does not uphold a belief in the afterlife. This is not the case. In the pre-modern world of Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Chasidic masters, there is never any question about survival of the soul after death. In fact, throughout the history of Judaism, there has been a sense of belief in afterlife. Even the historical Jewish understanding of the Yizkor prayers, including the Kaddish prayer, is that they are efficacious ways of attuning to the soul of the deceased.


So as Passover comes to an end this year, remember that in addition to lighting a candle and saying the traditional prayer, Yizkor offers a perfect opportunity to remember the deceased, to share those memories with family members and to honor one’s own feelings of grief. It is also a time for attuning to the soul and spirit of the person who has died, and the legacy he or she has left behind.

As the Yizkor candle burns for 24 hours, the whole day lends itself to having meaningful family conversations about life’s finality, loss and grief, and questions about afterlife and the world beyond. Through these conversations, we are given the opportunity to live life more fully, more open to the inevitability of change and transition inherent to life itself.

I am ever-grateful to my mother for how she modeled a healthy and spiritually informed attitude toward grief and loss. I will be remembering her and my father this year at Yizkor, and remembering how they both taught me that, ultimately, there are no final answers to the mystery of life and death. I

***Simcha Raphael**, of Mount Airy, is founder of the Da’at Institute for Death Awareness, Advocacy and Training. A psychotherapist and spiritual director, he also teaches Jewish mysticism at Temple University. This piece is adapted from his newly released book, The Grief Journey and the Afterlife: Jewish Pastoral Care for Bereavement.*

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Remembering those who have passed keeps them alive in this world. As a young boy, I became aware of my role as a "gan eden shlepper", the responsibility to recite kaddish for the departed for their elevation in gan eden. In the will of an unmarried cousin. she asked me to recite kaddish for her. As a result I have taken it on to recite kaddish daily remembering those who lives have touched mine. At the current time, there are 76 names I remember each day, keeping their memory alive for me and in this world. It is too easy to forget those who have passed, work a little every day to remember, not just at Yiskor.

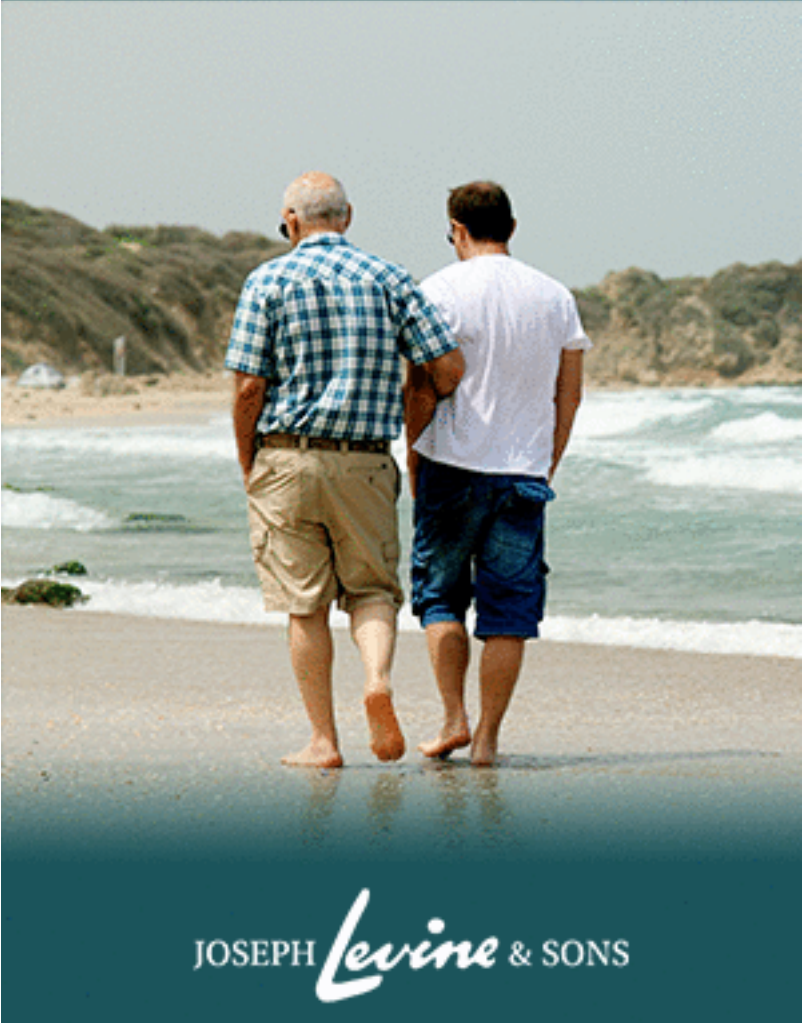
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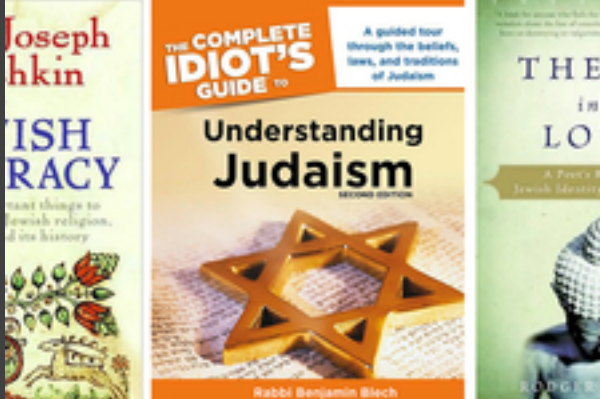
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