

## ***Yizkor: Talking About Death (with each other and G-d)***

Yahnatan Lasko | Beth Messiah Congregation | 6 Iyyar 5778 | April 21, 2018

Two weeks ago at Beth Messiah, our worship on the last day of Passover included a special service of prayers we called “Yizkor.” We have done Yizkor before at BMC; we do it every year during our Yom Kippur morning service. Today I’d like to do some learning about Yizkor together. My hope is that all of you can teach me, actually, about Messianic Jewish responses to Yizkor.

First, some context: right now we are in the season of counting the omer, which for Messianic Jews is a wondrous and joyous time, as we remember and rejoice in the good news that Yeshua, after being unjustly put to death, did not stay in the grave but was resurrected from the dead, the firstfruits of a future greater resurrection and a living promise that one day God would defeat death.

The Passover seder concludes with an allusion to the same. That’s right, if you’ve ever stuck it out til *after* the official close of the seder, the two songs at the very end, you may remember a cute song in Aramaic about the little goat. And if you weren’t too overtaken with joy after drinking the four cups to follow along in the English translation while you were singing, you might have read:

וְאַתָּא הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְשַׁחַט לְמַלְאֲךְ הַמָּוֶת  
*ve-ata ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu ve-shachat le-mal'akh ha-mavet*

“Then came the Holy Blessed One; And slaughtered the angel of death...”

What happens after we die? This is one of those universal questions. Anthropologists get key insights into a culture they are studying by looking at the beliefs and practices that group has surrounding death. Right now in our culture, we are told that fewer and fewer people are affiliated with religion, and yet it seems to me that as a culture we have not shed the idea that there may be something essential about each person that persists after their body ceases to function. Professor Stephen Hawking dismissed belief in the afterlife: “I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail.”<sup>1</sup>

Our scientists and artists are also still very much preoccupied with fighting death. Scientists and Silicon Valley biohackers are talking seriously about overcoming death, and Google’s parent

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<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/stephen-hawking-death-dies-atheist-god-brief-history-time-quotes-explained-a8254846.html>

company has another company called Calico which is a “moonshot” effort aimed at “cheating death.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, our fantasy heroes are doing the same, albeit in a different mode: next week, nearly every favorite hero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe will appear in the same movie, all teaming up in a cosmic battle against the most powerful villain they’ve ever faced. (Who is that?) Thanos...which is an elision of *Thanatos*, the personification of death in Greek mythology.

Did anyone see the final music video from pop star David Bowie? Just before he passed away from cancer last year, Bowie released his final album *Blackstar*. The album’s single was called “Lazarus.” It begins:

Look up here, I'm in heaven  
I've got scars that can't be seen  
I've got drama, can't be stolen  
Everybody knows me now

When I heard this (or saw it actually, in the visually arresting music video Bowie made to accompany it), I thought it was stunning. My amazement grew when just a few days later, they announced that Bowie had passed. The song has been widely interpreted to be self-referential...Bowie setting something up so that he could actually appear to be speaking to his fans from beyond the grave. (And by the way, some fans picked up on the disparity between that image of being in heaven and the Lazarus story found in the gospel of John, even traced the song’s lyrics to the *other* Lazarus story in the Bible, which uncovered further connections between the song and the middle of Luke’s gospel.)

But the song makes us think: what happens after we die? People often think that the New Testament teaches that after death we go to heaven, but careful readers will realize that biblical eschatology points forward to something greater. As one New Testament scholar put it, the biblical hope is about “life *after* life after death.”

So what can we say about what happens in between? The Bible offers answers to this question as well, and I’d like you to think about those answers, whatever it is that you’ve learned over the years in your study of the Bible, as we look at these prayers together.

I’ve asked \_\_\_\_\_ to pass out the handouts for our study, and I want to invite everyone to split off into *chevruta* study groups of two or three. Take a look at your handout and select one or two prayers to read and study together. You’re also free to consult the *Yizkor* selections found on pp.220-223 in the back of our *siddur* (though I want us to focus primarily on the actual service and not on the extended commentary in that section of the prayer book).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fastcompany.com/3017677/googles-next-moonshot-cheating-death>

I'm going to give some brief historical background on these prayers<sup>3</sup>:

The proper name for what we call *Yizkor* is *Hazkarat Neshamot* which means “the memorialization of souls.” Does anyone have any idea when these prayers begin (or want to guess?) *Hazkarat Neshamot* got its start in medieval European Judaism. In Ashkenazic practice, it has become a *minhag* (a communal custom), not unlike other *minhagim*: bar mitzvah, the observance of *yahrtzeits*, having the *chuppah* at weddings, or the recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish.

*Hazkarat Neshamot* consists of three prayers. The first, which begins with the word *Yizkor* (“May he [that is, G-d] remember”), traces its origin to the victimization of Jewish communities in the German Rhineland by Christian crusaders on their way to do battle in Constantinople. In the aftermath of tragedy, Jewish communities assembled memory books (*Memorbuchen*) containing the names of the victims. The prayer's opening phrase “*Yizkor Elohim*,” was originally used in the inscriptions for the books. The third prayer, *Av HaRachamim*, was also composed as a response to these events. The memorial service that these communities held for their dead was recited on Yom Kippur and included *Yizkor* and *Av HaRachamim*.

Now, the second prayer is called *El Malei Rachamim*. The first mention of this prayer is in a book by a slavic<sup>4</sup> Jew named Nathan of Hanover who lived in Poland for a time and chronicled the Chmielnicki revolts of 1648. This is what happened:

Polish Jews living on the east side of the Dnieper River heard about the slaughter of their kinsmen on the west side of the river by Ukrainian Cossacks under Boris Chmielnicki and their allies the Tatars. These Jews, on the east side of the river, decided to surrender in hopes that they would later be ransomed by Jews who lived in Turkey.

As the Tatars arrived, [Nathan of Hanover tells us]:

a certain cantor, named Reb Hirsch of Zywtow [Ziv-a-tov]...began mournfully chanting *El Malei Rachamim* over the slaughtered family members of the house of Israel. Everyone broke out in loud cries, which must have been heard on high because their captors were moved to show them compassion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman's introductory essay “*Yizkor and Memorial in Jewish Tradition*” from *May God Remember: Memory and Memorializing in Judaism (Jewish Lights, 2013)*.

<sup>4</sup> Technically “Ruthenian” is the correct term.”

<sup>5</sup> Hoffman, Rabbi Lawrence A. “*Yizkor and Memorial in Jewish Tradition*.” *May God Remember: Yizkor: Memory and Memorializing in Judaism*. Ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013. p.13.

While the passage implies that the prayer was composed prior to this event, it has been associated with this happening ever since. Polish Jews added the prayer to their *Yizkor* services, which they also began reciting on the last day of each of the three pilgrimage festivals.

As Jews of the nineteenth century incorporated these three prayers into their morning services, the *Hazkarat Neshamot* took on a life of its own, infused with fervor in light of the belief that the living had a responsibility to make intercession on behalf of the dead, for whom Yom Kippur was also believed to be a day of judgment and atonement. It's not know exactly how these three prayers became fused into their own service, but the beginnings of printed prayer books (in the 19th century) is connected to its spread among Ashkenazi Jews.

OK...does everyone have a study partner? Let's take ten minutes to study whichever prayers you want to look at. Remember the study questions on the handout? [Turn over ten minute hourglass.]

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

- If a prayer: what is this prayer asking for? If a passage of Scripture: why might this passage have been incorporated into the Yizkor service?
- What sorts of beliefs does this selection evidence?
- What effect might praying a prayer like this serve for a community which has undergone a tragedy or trauma (like the Jews of Chmielnicki), either immediately after the event or years (even generations) later?
- What sorts of responses does this selection produce in you? Are there things that you resonate with? Questions that are raised? Things you object to?
- What might characterize a uniquely Messianic Jewish approach to this passage?

#### DISCUSSION

## My Five Recommendations [significantly abbreviated in the recording]

I would like to make five observations/recommendations which may help address some of the questions raised today and serve as my contributions to our communal discussion about Yizkor.

1) First, we should recognize that the Ashkenazic *Hazkarat Neshamot* service found in this booklet is one manifestation of the Jewish memorialization tradition. Sephardic Jews have a different tradition for expressing their hopes (the *Hashkavah* prayer, offered in the context of an aliyah to the Torah). Both sets prayers reflect beliefs drawn from biblical and rabbinic texts, but they find their origin in *minhag* (hallowed custom) rather than in *mitzvah* (biblical commandment). Like some other traditions emergent in the medieval period (such as *Kol Nidre*), some rabbinic authorities registered theological concerns with these prayers. This does not mean that we should brush these prayers aside as non-beneficial, but it can influence the shape of our engagement.

2) Second, we should recognize what is present and absent in these prayers. Rabbi Daniel Landes observes what we *don't* find in these prayers:

Absent is any form of prayer directed to or through the dead. A memorial could have taken two such forms: (a) a prayer to the dead asking them to be intercessors to God on our behalf, or (b) a prayer through the dead, a prayer, that is, that claims God's mercy on the basis of our relationship to the dead. Neither option has a place in *hazkarat n'shamot*. Our prayers are delivered to God directly (not to the dead), and they are on behalf of the dead (not on our own behalf).<sup>6</sup>

Also absent is any definitive judgment on the eternal destiny of any person. The *Yizkor* prayer takes for granted that the souls of the departed will be sent to some place to await resurrection, and that it is possible for family members of the departed and/or others to influence God's judgment on this matter. Thus, the prayer asks God to "remember" (*yizkor*) the soul of the departed and that their soul would be bound up with those of the righteous. Reuven Hammer explains that the connotation of the request to "remember" is "act for their benefit."<sup>7</sup> An early Jewish precedent for such prayers is found in the example of Judah Maccabee in 2 Maccabees 12:43–45; some Christian interpreters also point to Paul's words about Onesiphorus in 2 Timothy 1:16-18 (where Paul seems to speak of Onesiphorus in the past tense, as if he is deceased):

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<sup>6</sup> Landes, Rabbi Daniel. "Remembering the Dead as Halakhic Peril." *May God Remember: Yizkor: Memory and Memorializing in Judaism*. Ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013. p.33.

<sup>7</sup> Hammer, Reuven. *Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service*. New York: Schocken Books, 1994. p.285.

May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my imprisonment. On the contrary, when he was in Rome he zealously searched for me and found me. May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord in that day! x

***The fact that Yizkor is repeated year after year indicates that, in Jewish tradition, the prayer is not one about which we can have certainty. Rather, Yizkor creates spiritual space for the living to address God concerning the fates of departed loved ones while simultaneously reinforcing the limitations of such petitions.***

3) Third, we should address the the potential for misunderstanding inherent in the commitment to give *tzedakah*. Landes writes:

“Attempting to use our own prayers or charity to expunge a sin of others smacks of bribery... The Rishonim frequently put it this way: ‘One eats only what one has prepared [by oneself] for the Sabbath.’ ... Insofar as *hazkarat n’shamot* involves the tending of prayer and charity for the deads credit, it is perilous to the halakhic notion of individual moral responsibility.”<sup>8</sup>

To this we must add that what we do with our possessions does matter very much to God. The Jewish notion of *tzedakah* as monetary gift has biblical roots, and, according to biblical testimony, *tzedakah*, when placed alongside prayer, can in fact win divine favor, as shown in the angelic testimony concerning the God-fearing Gentile Cornelius: “Your prayers and *tzadakah* have gone up as a memorial offering before God.” (Acts 10:4) Nevertheless, some Messianic Jewish liturgists have eliminated the commitment to charity (c.f. Budoff, Resnik above), presumably due to such concerns.

4) Fourth, we should recognize and highlight the resonances between these prayers and portions of the Apostolic Writings. One such connection is the *Av HaRachamim* prayer which asks God to “redress the spilled blood of His servants...who laid down their lives for the sanctification of His name.” Revelation 6:9-10 places this exact same request in the voice of the souls of slain martyrs which reside under the heavenly altar. Another connection is Yeshua’s parable about the rich man and Lazarus, which describes a formerly wealthy man suffering in Hades while the poor beggar Lazarus is carried by angels to repose with Abraham.

5) Last, we should consider the way some Jewish movements have emended the *Yizkor* and *El Malei Rachamim* texts in order to enact theological correctives. There is abundant precedent for

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<sup>8</sup> Landes, p.36.

such emendations within Messianic Judaism. Doing so allows us to retain the positive aspects of a practice while modifying those aspects which do not accurately reflect our theology. The *Hazkarat Neshamot* service thus becomes an opportunity to clarify and reinforce our beliefs within an established Jewish context. The *Yizkor* service is one place where Ashkenazic Judaism clearly articulates beliefs about the afterlife, in a form that allows sincere worshippers to speak to God about a matter of great concern in the midst of a supportive community. Messianic Judaism would do well to embrace this space and make it our own.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion: I hope today's session served as an appeal: in order to talk about resurrection, life after death, we have to be able to talk about death too...not just in cold, detached ways or with fear and dread, but bringing the depths of our being out to G-d and each other. I hope that in this month of April, which is genocide awareness month, we can draw a connection between our remembrance of those who were killed and our commitment to preventing such tragedies...especially for the Shoah and our own Jewish community.

As followers of Yeshua, we do not face death with fear and dread, but with faith and hope in the G-d who is powerful enough to bring the dead back to life. My prayer for us in this season is that all of us will "know Messiah and the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10) in the here and now, for the dead and dying things in each our of lives which need a revival, and that each of us will "begin to understand how incredibly great His power is to help those who believe in him. It is that same mighty power that raised Messiah from the dead and seated Him in the place of honor at God's right hand in heaven." (Eph. 1:19)

Shabbat shalom.