Yarhzeit

By Rabbi Barry Freundel

Yahrzeit. The anniversary of the death of a loved one draws Jews of all degrees of religious commitment and ideological identification to synagogue and ritual observance like little else in Jewish practice. Yet for all its power and all of the emotions we associate with it, its structure has changed dramatically over the centuries, and many of our most familiar experiences of and associations with Yahrzeit are developments of recent centuries rather than traditions from antiquity.

One clue to that historical reality is the name of the commemoration itself. Yahrzeit is obviously not a Hebrew word. It literally means "year time" in German, and it is not even clear whether its name comes from German or Yiddush.

The first appearance Yahrzeit as a Jewish memorial commemoration is in the book of customs authored by a relatively obscure Rabbi, Isaac of Tyrnau, in the 16th century. It reached mainstream consciousness and usage in a work called Levushei Techeilet, written by Mordechai Jaffe a few years later. Around the same time, interestingly, the German church began to refer to its annual commemorative events with the same term.

Obviously, Sephardim, whose communities had long been distanced from German literary influence by the 16th century, should not know of the name "Yahrzeit." traditionally, the anniversary of death in these communities is called "Nahala." Nonetheless, Sephardic literature from the 20th century uses the name Yahrzeit simply because the power and popularity of the institution overwhelmed any and all cultural resistance.

Commemorating Yahrzeit as we have it today involves three categories of observance, each with its own unique history and evolution. The oldest, and the only one even hinted at in the Talmud, involves restriction of food and drink on the day of the loss as an indication of sadness.

The Talmud in Nedarim refers to someone taking an oath and swearing not to eat meat or to drink wine, "as on the date of my father's death, or as the day when Gedaliah was killed (known as the Fast of Gedaliah and observed annually on the 3rd of Tishrei; it is our only universally observed Yahrzeit), or as the day when I saw Jerusalem in ruins." These events relate to the loss of our most important formative institutions, my parent, the Temple, and all semblance of Jewish sovereignty (which was lost after Gedaliah's assassination. Gedaliah had been serving as the head of Babylon's installed puppet government in Judea. His murder ended even that limited

autonomy for the Jews.) Under such circumstances, I limit the joyous foods associated with the Temple service--meat and wine.

In any case, we have a reference here to what from the context must have been a well known practice, that of limiting certain aspects of eating and drinking at least for one's father's Yahrzeit (though the date wouldn't be called by that name for more than a millennium). Almost no one today follows this custom, though one member of the congregation told me that she remembers members of her family doing so. It has been replaced, or perhaps expanded, into the custom of fasting, of refraining from all food or drink on this day.

This fast in mentioned at least as far back as the Sefer Chassidim, a work that emerged from a German pietistic community of the 13th and 14th centuries. Sefer Chassidim also provides a Biblical rationale for the practice. When King Saul died, David fasted. Now Saul was actually David's father-in-law, but David referred to him as avi, "my father." David's fast, then, set the pattern for our fasts for our parents.

Sefer Hahinuch goes further. In language redolent of poetry and personal perspective, the author reminds us that the children are the flesh of their parents. The loss of one's parent is therefore the loss of one's own flesh. How appropriate, then, to bring the one together with the other and to fast and diminish one's flesh on the anniversary of the loss of a parent. Fasting becomes, then, an act of honoring one's parent, which is understood by Halachah to be an obligation even if the parent is no longer living.

For Judaism, fasting is never an end unto itself. Such an action is always to serve as a springboard for repentance, spiritual growth, inspiration, and study. In this regard, Rashi says, "In the responsa of the Geonim I found...regarding the day that a great person dies the date is established in his honor and each year when the date comes, scholars gather from all the surrounding areas and come to his grave with the rest of the people and make a place of study there."

This too is claimed to have a Biblical origin. The Bible, tells us that when Hezekiah, the great king of Judah died, "Honor was done for him after his death." The Gemarah explains this to mean, "that a study gathering was held at his grave."

Though these sources seem not to specify a particular subject to study, later practice reflecting mystical influence has come to focus that study on Mishnah. This is because the word, Mishnah, in Hebrew has the same letters as the word Neshama, or "soul." Particular emphasis is placed on learning sections of the Mishnah whose first letters spell out the name of the deceased. In this way, the person's presence is powerfully evoked. this type of personal interaction between those who commemorate and the

one who has died will become even more central as we look to two other major areas of commemoration.

Our central Yahrzeit experience is Kaddish, perhaps the best known and certainly the most emotional mourning ritual that we have. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that Kaddish was not originally said for the Yahrzeit. The Shulchan Aruch, codified in the 16th century, does not include Kaddish as part of the experience. In fact, as the practice of reciting Kaddish for Yahrzeit seems to begin around that time, it is interesting to note the strength and frequency of objection to the practice in that era.

Many people are familiar with the reason for reciting Kaddish for one day less than eleven months after the death of a parent rather than for the entire 12 month mourning period. The Talmud tells us that true sinners suffer the pain of purgatory for twelve full months after death. There is also a famous Midrash describing Rabbi Akiva's encounter with the spirit of a dead man who could find no rest until Rabbi Akiva taught the dead man's son about Judaism. In one version of the Midrash, the spirit finds rest only after the son comes to the synagogue, where he recites Yehei shemei rabbah mevorah, etc., the central response of the Kaddish.

From this latter version of the Midrash, the idea has arisen that recitation of Kaddish by a child aids in bringing a parent into the world-to-come. For this reason, Kaddish for parents is recited, but not into the twelfth month, as it would be embarrassing to suggest that a parent was such a wicked person that he or she would need the full twelve months to achieve his or her final reward.

For this reason, too, opposition was generally found to the idea of reciting Kaddish on a parent's Yahrzeit. As such a commemoration, by definition, occurred after the twelfth month, this would again seem to suggest that the parent possessed a particularly negative nature.

The change in practice can be traced in its origins to the great mystic, the Ari. The Ari taught that the Kaddish on the Yahrzeit is a different Kaddish than the one recited during the year of mourning. Whereas the Kaddish for the year aids the parent in entering the world-to-come, the Kaddish for the Yahrzeit helps the soul which has already entered its reward to achieve a higher level in the world-to-come.

Perhaps most important for our understanding of how Yahrzeit is commemorated in some circles today is the fact that the Ari has changed the mood of the day from one of tragedy to one that carries, at least, some elements of joy. This strand of joy will expand perhaps to the point of becoming the dominant theme in Chassidic circles, though it will have its effect among Mitnagdim, as well.

In 1652, Menasheh Ben Yisroel, while on the one hand calling the recitation of Kaddish on Yahrzeit "a strange custom," nonetheless offers an interesting rationale for the practice. The soul's rising from one level to another in the world-to-come, while it is an act of birth into a better reality, is at the same time a type of dying out of the lower level, just as one has previously left this earth. For this reason, recitation of Kaddish may be an acceptable practice.

Dating from the same era, we find Ramah writing as follows: "it is found in the Midrash (bemidrashot) to say Kaddish for a father, therefore, they are accustomed to recite Kaddish for father and mother after twelve months."

Ramah then expands the practice beyond leading the community in the recitation of Kaddish to leading the community in other prayers:

and so too they are accustomed to recite the Maftir in the Prophets and to lead

Ma'ariv at the end of the Sabbath which is the time when the souls return to hell

(Gehennom). And at that time when the son prays and publicly sanctifies, he

redeems his mother and father from hell.

This refers to the mystical tradition that Gehennom closed down for Shabbat as all souls present were allowed to visit Heaven (Gan Eden) for the day. On Saturday night, the souls are returned to their far less desirable abode.

Further on in the section, Ramah mentions a custom we discussed earlier and uses much stronger language than he has to this point. "It is a commandment (mitzvah) to fast on the day that father and mother died."

Ramah concludes, "They are accustomed that if the day of one's father or mother's death comes upon an individual that they recite mourner's Kaddish on this day, and one who knows how to daven all of the prayers should lead the prayer."

In other words, the mitzvah, the requirement, is to fast. Nonetheless the "custom" of reciting Kaddish and its extension into davening has achieved such great prominence that it is mentioned first. The emphasis has shifted dramatically over time.

One other shift is hinted at as well. Note that Ramah mentions only Yahrzeit of parents, not of other relatives. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a contemporary halachik decisor, restates this lack of requirement to lead services for the Yahrzeit of other relatives in a recent responsum. Nonetheless, custom has grown to include spouses,

children, and siblings in this commemoration, as well. Some have even tried to include other relatives in the Yahrzeit rituals.

When it comes to Kaddish, since, in our synagogues, all recite Kaddish at one time, there is no problem as no one is precluded from reciting Kaddish as a result of my recitation of the prayer. In past times, when only one person recited Kaddish at a time, giving a Kaddish to one celebrating for a more distant relative might have left someone out who had a closer Yahrzeit and, therefore, was not done. This is the situation today with leading the davening. As only one person can lead, no priority is given to those who have Yahrzeit for more distant relatives.

The third aspect of Yahrzeit commemoration is the familiar lighting of a candle to burn for the entire anniversary day. This, too, was somewhat controversial. Some thought it to be too Christian and discouraged the practice. However, in the early 17th century, Aaron Berachiah of Medina offered support for the lighting of a candle, citing the verse, "The candle of G-d is the soul of the human being."

The lighting of a candle brought with it other associations. Candles demarcate the Sabbath and provide a part of its joy, and they are the center of the Chanukah celebration. These are both joyous occasions and so candle lighting for the Yahrzeit added to the growing celebratory air of the day previously described.

For the mystics, who associate a candle with the Shechinah (G-d's divine presence), the light enhances the joy even more. For these reasons, in Chassidic communities the Yahrzeit particularly of a Tzaddik, is an occasion for enough joy that these communities do not recite Tahanun, the penitential prayers, on this day.

Chassidim believe that not only has the Tzaddik's soul moved to a new and higher level, which makes it a sort of Day of Atonement, but, in addition, the Tzaddik, who in any case has been interceding with G-d on behalf of his people, is now in his higher place in an even better position to do so, as his soul is now closer to G-d.

Some Yahrzeits have made their way into the general public consciousness. Some of these are more somber and come more celebratory. Consistent with our discussion thus far, the most important factor in determining which mood the day embodies is the era in history in which it emerged as a day to be commemorated.

In that regard, the Fast of Gedaliah, the anniversary of Gedaliah son of Achikum's death, with its Biblical origins mentioned above, is a sad day associated with the Jewish loss of sovereignty at the end of the first Temple period.

Similarly, the seventh of Adar is the Yahrzeit of Moshe, of Moses our teacher and greatest prophet. It has, for many centuries, been associated with the Chevra Kaddisha, the burial society which meets for study and deliberation on this day.

On the other hand, the more recent and more mystically rooted "Hilula of Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai," the claimed author of Jewish mysticism's most important work, The Zohar, is much more of a celebration. One can see this most dramatically if one visits his gravesite in Meron in Israel. Normally a barren hilltop with a small moshav at its base, some 250,000 people crowd the location on the 33rd day of the Omer, Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai's Yahrzeit. Bonfires, singing, and dancing and the custom practiced by some using this date for the first haircut for three year old boys highlight the festivities.

In Tiberias, on the 15th of Iyar, there is a festive Yahrzeit for Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes, and even Ramah, whose comments had such an important impact on the way we commemorate Yahrzeit, had his Yahrzeit celebrated publicly for many centuries in Cracow.

Even the average non-Chassid has been touched by Yahrzeit in its celebratory mode. Most people who have Yahrzeit either sponsor or bring a kiddush or some type of refreshment to the synagogue at the time of the Yahrzeit. To this practice there was again some opposition, particularly to the cost, among mitnagdim, the ideological opponents of the Chassidim. Nonetheless, almost everyone today commemorates Yahrzeit in this way.

Our story is complete. From a mournful day on which Kaddish was not recited and meat and wine were avoided, out of which a requirement to fast developed, a very different reality has emerged. Kaddish and then leading the services became the functional reality. Understood as helping the souls to enter a new, higher realm in the world-to-come, the day became as much a day of celebration as one of mourning.

Though some still fast, by far the most extensive practice is the Kaddish. Finally, the candle provides both a pensive focus and a warm glow. Perhaps underlying this history is our very real sorrow at death and loss and our very powerful capacity to find meaning, purpose, and consolation in that ultimate reality of life.