

Giving in Memory of Our Loved Ones

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Growing up attending some more traditional services, I was offended as I got older and understood that the *mi sheberach* for someone who had come up for an Aliyah, or was praying for a loved one's recovery, or the Yizkor prayer in memory of a parent or other close relative, included the words *ba'avor shenadar*, because he made a vow to contribute, and then an amount, sometimes only mentioned in the Hebrew, but memorized by the appropriate individual who was responsible for a post-Shabbat or post-Yuntef accounting.

The idea of God paying special attention because money would change hands was offensive to me. What kind of God would not heal or remember someone who had no relatives to contribute, or even to pray on their behalf?

This past week, the Cantor and I attended a webinar on the Yizkor service with Professor Yvonne Shor, a cantor who teaches at the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. Among the topics she touched on was the relationship between this idea of making a tzedakah contribution in memory of a loved one and the custom of reciting Yizkor not just on Yom Kippur, but additionally on the three pilgrimage festivals.

I had known that this was a relatively late custom, arising out of the slaughter of Jewish communities by Crusaders making their way through Europe to the Promised Land. What I learned was that in seeking a scriptural basis for this

custom, it was found in the reference in Deuteronomy to each person who comes on a pilgrimage making a gift, ish kematnat yado.

We read in Deuteronomy 16:16–17: “Three times a year—on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the Feast of Weeks, and on the Feast of Booths—all your males shall appear before the Eternal your God in the place that God will choose. They shall not appear before the Eternal empty-handed, but each with his own gift, according to the blessing that the Eternal your God has bestowed upon you.”

Though the reference here was to animals brought to sacrifice in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, the phrase matnat yado was also used in Ashkenazi culture to refer to donations made in memory of a loved one.

Cantor Shor reframed this from a fund-raising opportunity into something that one does as an active remembrance.

In Hebrew the word zachor, remember, or the synonym pakad, refers not to inner brainwave activity but to an action taken on someone’s behalf. When we read V’Adonai pakad et Sarah, and God remembered Sarah, it is to fulfill the promise of progeny. Similarly, when during the Israelites enslavement in Egypt, God remembers the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it is to act on behalf of the Israelites and redeem them from bondage.

I like the idea that remembering our loved ones at Yizkor should be an action and not just a passing thought. What did they value that we might want to perpetuate in our actions and perhaps also in our charitable giving? Incorporating something of their lives into our own is a special kind of remembrance.

When my father died, almost a decade ago, in addition to supporting organizations that were important to him, particularly around racial integration, I played Bartok on the piano for a year, as that was the style of music he particularly favored. It was a way of feeling closer to him even though he was gone.

I am still not reconciled to including donations in our prayers, but Cantor Shor has left an impression upon me of the possible power of action as a form of tribute and remembrance. Perhaps there is something you can do creatively in your life as well, something that brings you closer to those you love and for whom you have come this evening to recite the Yizkor prayers.