A YAHRZEIT COMPANION

by

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The Yahrzeit observance

INTRODUCTION

Over the years of my Ministry I rarely had anyone asking me if there were any prayers or meditations that they could recite on lighting their Yahrzeit lights. Strangely, over the past year, several acquaintances have raised the subject with me, prompting me to realise that some guidance would be appreciated by many, especially (but not exclusively) for people who cannot get to shul to recite Kaddish. Tragically, the Corona virus, that has caused the country, indeed the world, to impose isolation restrictions on us all, has made this request even more relevant.

The Yahrzeit is an observance shared between heart, home and synagogue. Although the loss of a close relative leaves a void in one's heart that one bears throughout life, Yahrzeit brings their memory to the fore and leaves the heart especially sensitive and the memory acute. It is, therefore, a day of memory, dedication and resolve.

Memory — to recall the happy family memories, the sacrifices our departed made for us, their special qualities, and the love, nurturing and encouragement they gave us.

Dedication— to honour their memory and express gratitude for all their love and care, and the values they imparted to us.

Resolve— to renew our determination to live up to their expectations, to embody their values and to teach them more positively and vigorously to our children and grandchildren; to attempt to realise their hopes for us, and to build even further on their sense of mission, commitment and responsibility.

So much for the heart. In the home, as we bring their memory to mind, we keep a light burning from nightfall to nightfall, and in synagogue the mourners recite their special Kaddish.

I would suggest that the precedence for these three ways of expressing and keeping alive our love for those we revere is the *Shema*, where we are bidden to express our love of God— our heavenly Parent— 'with all our heart', the seat of our emotions, which are activated by *memory*; 'with all our soul', the kernel of our sense of *dedication* and matters spiritual; and 'with all our might', namely our strong *resolve* and motivator of our sense of purpose.

Why a Yahrzeit light?

Light is regarded as the primordially created element, whether we think of the effects of the Big Bang or the opening verses of the Torah: *And God said, 'let there be light,' and there was light.* Hence, we usher in Shabbat, festivals, and the new week with a blessing over a light, and, on seeing lightning, there is a special blessing of thanksgiving to God for providing light, Heat, warmth, all essential for human sustenance, comfort, construction and progress.

Light is also a symbol of 'enlightenment.' We use the imagery of 'seeing the light' – as a metaphor for clarity of thought and inspiration, a revelation of a fact, situation, or truth, that was hitherto

concealed from us. Hence the verse, *It is You who lights my lamp; the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness* (Psalms 18:29);

Biblical tradition employed light as a symbol of the soul, the source of purity, enlightenment and truth. Hence, *The soul of man is the lamp of the Lord* (Proverbs 20:27); *The Lord is my light and my salvation* (Psalm 27:1). We are reminded that, when God first appeared to Moses, to give him his mission, He manifested His Presence in the form of a burning bush that did not die down. Fire is a symbol of light, purity and power, for which reason the fire on the altar and of the Menorah in Temple times was never extinguished. To symbolise that, we have a *Ner Tamid*, a perpetually burning lamp suspended above our synagogue Ark. And, to convey that notion of eternity, we use the element of fire and light to symbolise the eternal soul of our dearly departed.

The Yahrzeit light reminds us of the dear soul that has returned to its divine source. It reminds us also of how essential that soul is to our human existence, our spirituality and enlightenment, and, by extension, how essential that special soul was to our growth and development, our comfort, well-being and happiness. Lighting it is also a tribute and affirmation that the light of the departed still burns brightly, and that we will be eternally grateful for it.

Why no blessing over the Yahrzeit light?

As to why there is no blessing prescribed for the lighting of a Yahrzeit light, we only recite blessings that are referred to in the Talmud and which are prescribed for festivals and rituals innovated by our Torah, by the prophets, or by those early Talmudic sages. This was to avoid the proliferation of theologically unacceptable sectarian blessings and prayers, or a free-for-all liturgy, which would inevitably lead to inappropriate extemporising. As the lighting of a memorial light for the departed was only introduced in medieval times, we do not therefore recite a blessing.

As many people are unable to get to synagogue to mark their Yahrzeit but sense the absence of some religious accompaniment to the lighting of the candle, we offer below some readings and meditations to fill that gap.

What is death?

As long ago as 1983 I compiled a booklet, entitled *Yizkor: A Memorial Booklet*, with a Foreword by the late Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, of blessed memory. It was the first of its kind, and, because I was strongly opposed to young people who didn't have to recite Yizkor leaving the synagogue, I included a special prayer for them to recite for the health and well-being of their parents and family. The booklet was used by many synagogues; and, today, many synagogues produce their own versions. I include below a few selections from it, as well as its 'Meditations in memory of various family members' which may be recited after lighting the Yahrzeit candle.

Let us begin with a question that most of us have pondered, certainly as youngsters, probably in old age, and possibly in between. It is, will we be reunited with our loved ones when we leave this world?

Colonel David Marcus, who created the army of the State of Israel, gave a novel definition of death, which, I believe, also addresses this question:

I am standing on a seashore quayside. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts out for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength, and I stand and watch her until at length she is only a ribbon of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then, someone at my side says, ''There, she's gone!''

Gone where? Gone from my side, that is all. She's just as large, in mast and hull and spar, as she was when she left my side, and just as able to bear her load of living freight to the place of her destination. Her diminished size is in me, not in her!

And, just as the moment when someone at me side says, ''There she's gone!'' there are other voices to take up the glad shout, ''Here, she comes!'' and that is death.

We may hope — many will take it for granted— that our departed loved ones will be among those standing on that far-off quayside, awaiting the ship that will bring us that blessed reunion.

The person who has faith believes that there is a world beyond the grave, that death is a starlit strip between the companionship of yesterday and the reunions of tomorrow, and that, just as we sometimes breathe a sigh of relief on awakening from a nightmare, so it will be the moment after death.

* * *

A memorial prayer

El malei rachamim

אל מלא רחמים

For a man

אֵל מָלֵא רַחֲמִים שׁוֹכֵן בַּמְּרוֹמִים הַמְצֵא מָנוּחָה נְכוֹנָה עַל כַּנְפֵי הַשְּׁכִינָה
בְּמַעֲלוֹת קְדוֹשִׁים וּטְהוֹרִים כְּזֹהַר הָרָקִיעַ מַזְהִירִים לְנִשְׁמַת

[Insert here the Hebrew name]

שֶׁהָלַךְ לְעוֹלָמוֹ, בְּגַן עֵדֶן תְּהֵא מְנוּחָתוֹ, לָכֵן בַּעַל הָרַחֲמִים יַסְתִּירֵהוּ
בְּסֵתֶר כְּנָפָיו לְעוֹלָמִים וְיִצְרֹר בִּצְרוֹר הַחַיִּים אֶת נִשְׁמָתוֹ ה' הוּא נַחֲלָתוֹ
וְיָנוּחַ בְּשָׁלוֹם עַל מִשְׁכָּבוֹ וְנאמַר אָמֵן

Transliteration

El malei ra-chamim, shochein bam-romim, ha-metzei menuchah nechonah al kanfei ha-she-chinah, b'ma'alot k'doshim u-t'horim k'-zohar ha-raki'ah maz-hirim, l'-nishmat **[Insert Hebrew name}** ***she-halach l'-olamo. Be-gan Eden t'hei m'nuchato, la-chein ba'al ha-rachamim yastirei-hu b'seter k'nafav l'olamim. V'yitzror bitzror ha-chayyim et nishmato. Adonai hu nachalato; v'yanu-ach b'shalom al mishkavo. V'nomar Amen***

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For a woman

אֵל מָלֵא רַחֲמִים שׁוֹכֵן בַּמְּרוֹמִים הַמְצֵא מְנוּחָה נְכוֹנָה עַל כַּנְפֵי הַשְּׁכִינָה
בְּמַעֲלוֹת קְדוֹשִׁים וּטְהוֹרִים כְּזֹהַר הָרָקִיעַ מַזְהִירִים לְנִשְׁמַת

[Insert here the Hebrew name]

שֶׁהָלְכָה לְעוֹלָמָהּ . בְּגַן עֵדֶן תְּהֵא מְנוּחָתָהּ , לָכֵן בַּעַל הָרַחֲמִים יַסְתִּירֶהָ
בְּסֵתֶר כְּנָפָיו לְעוֹלָמִים וְיִצְרֹר בִּצְרוֹר הַחַיִּים אֶת נִשְׁמָתָהּ ה' הוּא נַחֲלָתָהּ
וְתָנוּחַ בְּשָׁלוֹם עַל מִשְׁכָּבָהּ וְנאמַר אָמֵן

Transliteration

El malei ra-chamim, shochein bam-romim, ha-m'tzei m'nuchah n'chonah al kanfei ha-sh'chinah, b'ma'alot k'doshim u-t'horim k'zohar ha-raki'ah maz-hirim, l'nishmat **[Insert Hebrew name]** ***she-holchah l'olamah. B'-gan Eden t'hei m'nuchatah, la-chein ba'al ha-rachamim yastireh-ha b'seter k'nafav l'olamim. V'yitzror bitzror ha-chayyim et nishmatah. Adonai hu nachalatah; v'tanu-ach b'shalom al mishkavah. V'nomar Amen***

Translation

Merciful father, in whose hands are the souls of the living and the dead, may Your consolation cheer me as I remember on this day of sacred commemoration my beloved (mother/father/wife/son/daughter/brother/sister/ grandparent).

[Insert here the English name]

who has gone to her/his eternal rest. I pray that her/his soul may enjoy tranquillity in the world of eternal life, together with the souls of our matriarchs and patriarchs and of all the other righteous souls that continue to praise You. Amen.

Psalm 16*

A *Michtam*-psalm of David

Save me, Lord
For in You I trust.
I said to God,
''I really must
Acknowledge You
As my Guide,
For the benefits
You alone provide.

All hail to the holy
Who inhabit our land;
I acclaim you all
As glorious and grand.
But those who rush
To idolatry
Will suffer sorrows,
Exponentially;
I recoil from the blood
Of their libations;
I avoid their names
In deliberations.
Lord, You are my heritage;
A toast to you I drink;
My fate is squarely
In Your hands;
My faith,
Our strongest link.

You ensure that I enjoy
A vista of delight;
A legacy of loveliness,
My spirit,
To excite.

I bless the Lord
For guiding
My every decision,
When nightly doubts
Tormented me
And clouded my vision.

The Lord's Presence
Has been to me
An ever-present reality;
I shall not slip,
For He takes His stand
Protectively
At my right hand.

Therefore, my heart is happy
And my disposition bright;
Every limb of my body
Feels vigorous and light,
Knowing You would never
Abandon my soul
Nor consider consigning it
To the depths of Sheol;
For Your pious ones
You'd not permit
So much as a glance
Into the pit.

The right path
Wherein life resides
I beg You to disclose;
For in Your holy presence
Joy overflows,
In abundance
At Your right hand;
Delights forever,
You'll command.''

*****This Psalm is excerpted from my *The Book of Psalms: Poetry in Poetry.*

MEDITATION FOR DEPARTED PARENTS

Father of mercy, look down on me as I stand this day, paying fond and reverent tribute to the memory of my beloved (father/mother).

Each soul that You have created is unique, and unbounded in its capacity to give love and radiate joy. When that soul is removed from among us, the quality of our lives is sorely diminished.

The nature of man is to take for granted the love that is shown to him, and the sacrifices made for him by his parents. Frequently, it is only in retrospect that the magnitude of their gifts to us is appreciated. And then it is too late to say, 'thank you!'

But, if the soul you have created is immortal, and if death does not end its existence, then my thanks and appreciation continue to be heard and my prayers are not in vain. If the soul yet lives with Almighty God, then my debt can still be repaid by my leading an exemplary life, by studying and observing Your Torah, by deeds of kindness and charity, and by passing on the finest values to the younger generation.

May my beloved (father/mother) rest in peace, content in the knowledge that (her/his/their) memory is still revered, beloved and vivid within (her/his/their) family. Amen.

MEDITATION FOR A SISTER OR BROTHER

Father of mercy, look down on me as I stand this day, paying fond and reverent tribute to the memory of my beloved (sister/brother).

I recall with gratitude the years of our childhood, and the bond which linked us as we shared confidences, experiences and hopes, as we

helped each other to develop and mature, influenced by the values and traditions we inherited from our parental home.

And even in later years, when we were separately preoccupied with the task of establishing a career and building our own family life, that bond of love and esteem remained strong.

May my beloved (sister/brother) rest in peace, content in the knowledge that (her/his) memory is still revered and beloved in my heart, and vivid in my mind forever. Amen.

MEDITATION FOR A HUSBAND OR WIFE

Father of mercy, look down upon me as I stand this day, paying fond and reverent tribute to the memory of my beloved (husband/wife).

Oh, how I miss my twin soul and partner who shared all my dreams and confidences, and who walked, lovingly and proudly, by my side, at all times, making the joys we shared so much sweeter, and the sorrows so much easier to bear. I sorely miss the companionship, love and kindness, advice, generosity and support, which (he/she) gave, and which I gratefully recall at this sacred moment.

Almighty God, only You really know how much light has gone out of my life since (his/her) passing. Send me, therefore, Your soothing comfort, and compensate me with Your protection, love and blessing until the moment of reunion arrives.

Send me the gift of health and strength so that I will not become a burden to others, especially to those I love. Give me good reason, Lord, to be content and to bless Your name. Amen.

MEDITATION FOR A CHILD

Father of mercy, look down upon me as I stand this day, paying fond and loving tribute to the memory of my beloved child…… who was taken away from (me/us) so tragically before (his/her) life had run its expected course.

I do not presume to understand the mystery of life and death, nor to call into question the righteousness of Your will. Man's pilgrimage on earth is, after all, to serve Your sovereign and unfathomable purpose. Indeed, from that I draw strength and courage in the knowledge that the period of my child's existence on earth was pre-determined by You according to a sacred plan. All that You do is for the best; and, in my grief, I humbly acknowledge Your righteousness.

Help me, Lord, to bear my burden without complaint, without giving in to despair, without spreading gloom. Renew within me the will to smile, to look forward to the future with hope, joy and confidence.

My child's soul is committed to Your loving care. It lives on with You, enjoying the rewards that are treasured up for the innocent and the righteous. That, I do believe, and for that I shall hope until the day of reunion arrives.

God, bless (his/her) immortal soul forever. Amen.

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Psalm 23

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד ה׳ רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר

בִּנְאוֹת דֶּשֶׁא יַרְבִּיצֵנִי, עַל-מֵי מְנֻחוֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי.

נַפְשִׁי יְשׁוֹבֵב, יַנְחֵנִי בְמַעְגְּלֵי-צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ

גַּם כִּי-אֵלֵךְ בְּגֵיא צַלְמָוֶת לֹא-אִירָא רָע כִּי-אַתָּה עִמָּדִי, שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתֶּךָ

הֵמָּה יְנַחֲמֻנִי

תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי שֻׁלְחָן נֶגֶד צֹרְרָי, דִּשַּׁנְתָּ בַשֶּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסִי רְוָיָה

אַךְ, טוֹב וָחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל-יְמֵי חַיָּי, וְשַׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית-ה׳ לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים

A song of David.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He enables me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside tranquil waters.

He restores my soul and leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

Even as I walk in the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You set a table before me in the presence of my adversaries;

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life,

And may I dwell in the house of the Lord for length of days.

Wishing you and your family long life, good health, comfort and happiness.