

LIVELY OPINION

I can clearly remember the moment when I finally joined the club that I had dreaded joining for years; when I found myself remaining in shul to recite the prayer of *Yizkor* for the first time.

Hesitantly, I waited with trepidation to experience the power of this first *Yizkor* . . . only to be sorely let down. “*This is it?*” I wondered as I looked at the text before me, “*This is what the drama is all about? One short paragraph? A few sentences asking G-d to remember my father and an E-l Maleh?*”

The *Yizkor* prayer had been a source of mystery to me for years. Now, with its text open before me, I was deeply disappointed. It seemed less significant, and much less powerful, than I had expected.

As I studied the passage itself, however, my disappointment was soon replaced with an even greater sense of bewilderment. The prayer seemed deeply puzzling for. *What exactly, I asked myself, are we praying for?*

“Yizkor, G-d, please remember our departed loved ones . . .” Remember? How can G-d forget?

“Because we intend to give tzedakah in their memory . . .” Even if G-d can somehow forget, why should our tzedakah make the difference? Don’t our departed relatives deserve to be “remembered” in their own merit?

Finally, and most important:

“Remember . . .” To what end? What are the practical implications of Divine remembrance? What will change if G-d “remembers” my father?

To be sure, the concept of G-d “remembering” does appear a number of times in the Torah. On each of those occasions, however, the text seems to be informing us that G-d is not simply remembering a person or phenomenon, but that he is now willing to act on that remembrance. It is the Torah’s way of saying that G-d, after a period of waiting, is ready to assume an active role.

This explanation, however, so help-

Yizkor — this is it?

By SHMUEL GOLDIN

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ful in understanding the biblical text, was singularly unhelpful to me when it came to understanding *Yizkor*. Here, we were apparently not asking G-d to “do” anything. We were simply asking him to “remember.” At face value, such a request did not seem to make any sense.

A few years passed before I realized that a sober warning in *Pirkei Avot* (“Ethics of the Fathers”) could provide an answer to my *Yizkor* quandary: “Akavia ben Mhalalel says, Look upon three things and you will not fall into the grip of sin. Know from where you came, where you are going, and before whom you are destined to undergo a judgment and a reckoning.”

At first glance, the sequence in Akavia’s account of an ultimate “judgment and reckoning” before G-d is problematic. Wouldn’t a “reckoning” precede a “judgment,” rather than the reverse? Why does Akavia invert the logical sequence?

A beautiful answer is suggested by a number of scholars. At the end of our lives, these sages maintain, each of us is actually destined to undergo two separate trials. The first of these heavenly hearings — referred to by Akavia as “judgment” — is the classical, straightforward procedure by which G-d measures our lives in retrospect. Our record is reviewed; our *mitzvot* and sins are tallied and “placed on the scale”; and a verdict is rendered.

After this process of judgment, however, an even more important investigation begins — one that can only commence upon an individual’s death. During the course of this inquiry — referred to by Akavia as a “reckoning” — G-d measures our

continuing impact upon the world that we have left behind. Who are the people who will remain affected by our touch? How did we change the course of their lives? What was our lasting contribution?

Unlike judgment, the process of reckoning is open-ended, literally continuing until the end of time. During the course of our lives, we not only influence the “usual suspects” (members of our family and our friends); our actual reach is much broader. Actions, words, gestures on our part; large and small, have the power to affect the lives of people with whom we interface each and every day.

Consider the possibility, for example, that a kindly stranger passing through the shtetl of Aishoshok in 1898, took the time to converse with an eager 17-year-old that he met along the way. And consider the possibility that this conversation inspired the 17-year-old, my grandfather, to begin thinking about an eventual journey from Lithuania to America? The stranger’s identity will have been lost in the mists of time, yet his words will have affected the generations of progeny and students eventually touched by my grandfather and his teachings. The lives of these individuals will then, in turn, intersect with the lives of others who will themselves interface with yet others, ad infinitum, across the span of time. All this will be included in the stranger’s “reckoning” because of a conversation, the impact of which he could not possibly have known.

What similar phenomena might our own “reckonings” include? The time we took out of a pressured day to reassure a colleague

who seemed down; the kind word we shared with the harried salesclerk on an especially busy day; the report we gave to a supervisor concerning the excellent work of an individual on his team; the invitation we extended to someone who was going to eat alone for a Shabbat meal; the effort we made, not only to give *tzedakah*, but to actually speak encouragingly to the person holding out his hand.

These and other simple opportunities so easy for us to miss, so seemingly unimportant, can make all the difference in the lives of others. These unexpected moments will form the substance of our “reckoning” at the hands of the heavenly court.

Just as importantly, however, each of these events will then be included in the “reckonings” of our parents, grandparents and all who helped shaped us. Our acts of kindness and compassion will reflect back on those who taught us to be kind. The results of our compassion will be added to the ledgers of those who modeled compassion to us.

Coming full-circle, therefore, we can return to *Yizkor*, and what was a puzzling prayer can now be better understood.

We turn to G-d, and we pray:

“Yizkor-G-d, please remember our departed loved ones . . .” Hashem, we recognize that our own words and actions serve as ongoing testimony to the value of our loved ones’ lives. As their “reckoning” continues to unfold, we state emphatically that the good that we do is because of them. They are responsible for our positive actions today.

“Because we intend to give tzedakah in their memory . . .” We, therefore, commit ourselves



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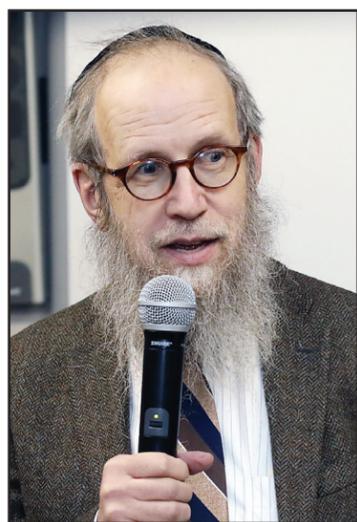
toward increased acts of goodness in their honor. We pledge to be more aware of the easily missed opportunities for kindness that confront us each day. In return, we ask that You add the value of our increased commitment not only to our ledgers, but to their ledgers as well.

“Remember . . .” Finally, Hashem, consider the countless other individuals who, knowingly or unknowingly, were affected and are still being affected by the presence of our loved ones. In each of their lives and in the lives that they themselves will yet shape, you will see the unending contributions of those whom we ask you to remember today.

May we each, in word and deed, serve as powerful, ongoing testimony to the merit of those who shaped our lives.

And may we also be wise and righteous enough, in our own right, to leave behind many others who, through speech and action, will one day testify positively on our behalf. Ultimately, that is the truest *Yizkor* of all.

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Hillel Goldberg

Hasn’t everyone had a flat tire, missed a flight or boarded a plane intending to land in one city but ended up in another? We have all found ourselves in a different place.

Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski tells the story of an early chasidic rebbe who was once falsely accused of theft and jailed. It was a miserable experience.

There was violence and extortion. One prisoner, however, was different. He had been kidnapped as a child, knew he was Jewish and knew his Jewish name.

That’s it. He had no other connection to Judaism or the Jewish people.

The rebbe befriended him and taught him the *Shma*. Little by little he learned some Hebrew and some Jewish practices. After two months, both of the rebbe and his fellow prisoner managed to escape.

In jail, the rebbe had wondered:

HILLEL GOLDBERG: VIEW FROM DENVER

Coming in from a different place

Why did G-d put him in such a different place? After the escape, his friend returned to his religion and his people. The rebbe had his answer.

The call of *teshuvah* is to do voluntarily what life does to us involuntarily. Almost everyone ends up in a different place — living in a different city, pursuing a different field or marrying a different person — than anticipated. We suffer from an unexpected illness, rejoice in an unexpected *simcha* or never marry at all. We end up with a family larger or smaller or different than we thought.

Life changes us. It puts us in a radically different place. To do *teshuvah*, to repent, is to put ourselves in a radically different place.

Why?

The Talmud states that G-d created the world with the Hebrew letter *heh* because it allows for *teshuvah*. A *heh* is shaped like a doorpost, with a jamb and two sides, but without a floor. The *heh* is an abbreviation for G-d and the space within the *heh* symbolizes the Divine presence. Open at the bottom, the *heh* allows the human being the freedom to sin, to exit from the embrace of G-d. The Talmud extends the metaphor. The *heh* not only allows for sin. One of its two sides is actually incomplete; it is slightly open just beneath the jamb. This second opening signifies the possibility of return, of reentrance into the sacred

space — of *teshuvah*.

One comes back in from a different place, not through the floor, not from the same same place one exited. The Talmud asks: Why can’t the sinner just come back in via the same space he left? “It won’t

help,” says the Talmud. It doesn’t work that way. It is necessary to come back in from a different place.

Teshuvah is not linear.

Teshuvah is not a matter of sinning and then thinking it possible to repent the sin, to correct the sin, to return to where one was before.

If *teshuvah* were linear, it would be a matter of remorse, doing a bit better, growing a bit, then reentering G-d’s sacred space, symbolized by the space inside the *heh*. But *teshuvah* is not linear. That is why, year after year, so many people go through the entire Rosh Hashanah season, think they have done *teshuvah* and then, as the next Rosh Hashanah rolls around, feel that they really haven’t improved much, if at all. They’re right back where they started, stuck in the same bad habits, beset by the same failings and inadequacies.

Why?

They did not realize that to come back in, it is necessary not so much to “grow” as it is to change.

Not to focus on the same old failings and try to remediate them, but to follow a larger dream.

Repentance is not linear

To harness a larger motivation. A grander aspiration. A life-changing dream.

Within a larger whole, one can more readily cure those old failings.

Within a larger spiritual discipline, one can more likely fix those bad habits.

Motivation counts. When it is larger, so are the results. Maybe I once thought it farfetched that I could really, permanently, study more Torah, or spend more time with my family, or make a difference in the community. Actually, I can, but only if I do not retrace and reorient a few steps; I can, but only if I become a different person. When I enlarge my vision — when, say, I set out not to study more Torah but to complete the entire Talmud; when I set out not to close my email an hour a day but the minute I come home from work until the next day; when I set out not to give a bit more to the community but to

take on the presidency of an important organization — if I can truly envision a different me and extend my reach, I can achieve my goals.

I conquer my inadequacies if I aim higher.

If I come in from a different place. That is *teshuvah*.

The second opening in the *heh* means: We need to figure out how to do something voluntarily as big as what life does to us involuntarily; how to travel far from our comfort zone.

How to enter from a different place.

It takes that dimension of change to get us out of the rut, the pattern of sin and *teshuvah* on last Yom Kippur, only find ourselves right back where we started this Yom Kippur.

It takes that dimension.

The Alter of Slobodka said: “If I knew that I could be only what I am, I could not endure it; but if I did not strive to be like the Vilna Gaon, then I would not even be what I am.”

That is why there is a second opening.

It is not a second chance.

It is an invitation to an entirely new world.

That is what *teshuvah* on Rosh Yom Kippur asks, and that is what *teshuvah* promises.

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