

Helping and Maintaining Our Relationship with the Deceased – Part 1

Losing a close relative or friend is among the greatest traumas a person can experience. The thought that we have lost any possibility of relationship with one we were so close with can be devastating. While Judaism appreciates just how painful this can be, it also offers something that can provide a degree of help. This is what is known as *l'iluy neshama* — the elevation of the soul of the deceased. In addition to whatever one manages to accomplish during his or her lifetime, others can also grant them merit, and help them to elevate their soul, specifically once they have left this world. In the process, those in this world will be able to maintain a connection, and even a relationship, with the deceased. G-d willing, we should all have the ability to directly help our departed loved ones, and to maintain a relationship with them, as much as is possible.

Working for the *iluy neshama* (elevation of the soul) of the deceased is not only a *chessed shel emet* (true kindness); it is also an obligation of *nosei b'ole im chaveiro* (carrying the burden with one's friend).

In *Yeish Nochalin* (by the son of the *Shelah HaKadosh*) it is written — “*Chessed shel emet* (the true kindness) that one does for the *niftar* (deceased) is enormously greater than all of the *chassadim* (kindnesses) that one does for the living in this world... Therefore, every person needs to be careful not to **steal** from the deceased, but rather to give tranquility to the soul that is at rest. The [living] one, who has the ability, should give [to the deceased]. We already wrote that there is a very great mitzvah for every person in this world to ease the judgment of those in *Olam Haba* (the world to come).” (Quoted in *Kol Bo l'Yartzeit*, p. 50)

The *Sukkat Shalom*, the classical organization of sources discussing the concept of *l'iluy neshama*, points out that if the Torah considers burial of the deceased, which is taking care of the body, to be a *chessed shel emet*, how much greater is the *chessed* we do when we help the *neshama* (soul) to reach its proper place in *Gan Eden* through *mitzvot* and learning done on behalf of the deceased? (Foreword, p. 8)

Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, Mashgiach of Ponovezh, wrote:

Nosei b'ole im haniftar (carrying the burden with the deceased) is enormously great and called — “*gemilut chessed shel emet* (the giving of true kindness).

The *Saba* from Kelm explained that the entire concept of *aveilut* (mourning) is to be *nosei b'ole im haniftar*, and to lighten his burden. This is why the Torah is so strict with *aveilut*, specifically during *shiva* and *shloshim* (the first week and month of mourning) [when the initial judgment is occurring].

The *niftar* (deceased) has to give a full accounting for his actions, and it isn't easy for him to arrive at his [final] resting place. As soon as we are *nosei b'ole im haniftar*, his burden is lightened. All of this is what we are required to think about at the time of the *aveilut* (mourning) — that we want to lighten the *yissurim* (difficulties) and *onshim* (punishments) of the *niftar*. Even the people that are coming to comfort the mourners [should] have this goal — to make things easier for the *niftar*. All of these matters are inherent in what the Torah requires from us.

As long as we focus on *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world), there is room for jealousy and arrogance, and we don't [necessarily] think about others. But once we understand that the purpose of man is *Olam Haba* (the world to come), our [negative] *middot* shrink within us, and we draw closer to loving others. When we listen carefully to the *Kaddish* and answer *amen* with *kavanah* (focus), we are being *nosei b'ole im haniftar*. And similarly giving *tzedaka* or learning *mishnayot* is all a

tremendous *zechut* for the *niftar*. In addition, whoever gives *zechut* to the *niftar* also gains [a great deal] himself. (*Ohr Yechezkal, Middos* pp.103-7).

Rabbi Hebel explained that when one passes away, our relationship with them is not over.

“The relationship is instead transformed from physical to spiritual, and in this new form can potentially be even deeper than the physical relationship was. By sharing in their pain, we should be moved to do what we can to ease their burden. Being *nosei b'ol* with the deceased creates an everlasting spiritual connection. [This] is a very real obligation toward our departed loved ones that exists for the rest of our lives.” (*The Neshama Should Have an Aliya* – pp. 27-8).

The anguish of the departed is because they are now facing a *din v'cheshbon* (Divine judgment and accounting), and can no longer do *mitzvot*.

Parallel to the *aveilut* (mourning) of the bereaved family, there is also a type of *aveilut* that the departed themselves go through (*Shabbat* 152a). This anguish of the departed takes two distinct forms:

- A *din v'cheshbon* for the life they lived in this world. Many of the laws and customs of *aveilut* correspond to the various stages of judgment that the departed are experiencing at those times.
- The realization that they can no longer perform *mitzvot* in this world. Those still alive must, therefore, try to redirect their thoughts from their own grief to the grief of the departed, and try to ease their difficulty. Empathizing with this pain of the departed is a crucial part of the mourning process and is extremely meaningful to them. Rav Chatzkel Levenstein wrote that the deceased greatly desire that their relatives be *nosei b'ol* with them. (*Ohr Yechezkel, Michtavim*, 358).

Rav Dessler wrote — “*Chazal* (Our Sages of blessed memory) taught us that there are [three] different judgments on the *nefesh* (soul) after death — ***chibbuk hakever*** (the embrace of the grave), ***kaf hakelah*** (a type of slingshot), and the ***din (judgment) of Gehenom*** (the place of purification from our transgressions):

Chibbuk hakever is the process by which the deceased come to recognize that they have already separated from this world, and their soul is no longer able to return to the *guf* (body) and its [physical] desires.

Kaf hakelah — Even so, the *nefesh* of the person still chases after the desires that it was used to, [which allows the deceased] no rest. The power of the desire is racing from here to there with great confusion after what is impossible to find there, until, with the passage of time, its desires are [finally] forgotten from it bit by bit.

Only after the end of all of this is a soul finally able to enter into ***Gehenom***. That is [where we] will see with great light and tremendous clarity the essence of our transgressions — that we rebelled against our Creator, and we [will] be pained about this with an overwhelming regret. We will [then] feel in our soul the lack of true reality because we attached ourselves during our lifetimes to emptiness and nonsense, since whatever is against the will of G-d is emptiness. Therefore, we ourselves became empty, and there is no greater pain than this.” (*Michtav M'Eliyahu*, Vol.4, pp.193-201).

The principle of *b'rah m'zakeh Abba* means that children can help their parents to improve their situation after they have passed away from this world.

Seemingly, once one leaves this world, he is no longer bound by *mitzvot* and is thus unable to add to his *zechuyot* (merits) at all. As *Chazal* (the Sages of blessed memory) put it — “Only what one prepared *erev Shabbat* (prior to Shabbat) [i.e. in this world] will they be able to eat on Shabbat [i.e. in *Olam Haba*]” (*Avodah Zara* 3a). However, *Chazal* revealed to us the principle of *B'rah m'zakeh Abba* — that every child can give merit to their parents.

Rabbeinu Yona wrote — “When one's children serve Hashem, do His will, and fear Him, it is considered as if [the parent] is still alive and doing all of the *mitzvot*.” (*Igeret HaTeshuva*, 3rd *Drasha*, # 79).

How do the actions of the children help the parents?

The *Sefer Chasidim* explains that the parent [was generally] the cause of the *chinuch* (education and guidance) that led to the child's good deeds. (Section 1171). Another way of understanding this is that every child is actualizing some potential within the parent that the parent had not managed to actualize him or herself.

However, even if the parent didn't help the *ruchniyut* (spiritual situation) of the child at all, and even if the parent was a terrible person, since the child is considered like a *chelek* (portion) of the parent, the child is still able to help the parent get to *Olam Haba*. A child is referred to as *kara d'Avuha*, the foot of the parent, because he allows the parent to keep moving forward, even in *Olam Haba*.

Rav Dessler asks how such a thing could be possible:

“We know that *Olam Haba* is the reality and true essence of a person. How would this be able to change through the actions of one's child? We also need to understand, when we are davening, saying *Kaddish*, and learning for the *neshamot* of [our parents] that have passed away, how does this affect their situation in *Olam Haba*?” Rav Dessler's answer is simply that — “Children are the extension of the parents. Therefore, even if the parents didn't impact the *ruchniyut* of the child directly, in any case they brought him into the world and certainly helped the development of the child, whether a little bit or a lot.” (*Michtav M'Eliyahu*, Vol.4, p.157).

The **Ramban** says that even Terach may have merited his *chelek* (portion) in *Olam Haba* through the *zechut* (merit) of his son Avraham, and this was despite being an idolater who hadn't kept the *sheva mitzvot b'nei Noach* (seven *mitzvot* for the non-Jews). (*Bereshit* 11:32).

The *Chafetz Chaim* wrote — “Through any *mitzvot* and good deeds that one's offspring fulfill after their passing, the parent's soul gets atonement. Through the power of their deeds, children have the ability not only to spare their departed parents from suffering for their *aveirot* (transgressions), they can also affect their entry into *Gan Eden* and continual elevation there.” (*Ahavat Chessed* 2:15).

The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* explains — *Ha'ikar – She'habanim yeilchu b'orach mishor* — The main [*zechut* for the parents] is if their sons and daughters follow the straight path. And if, G-d forbid, one's children don't take the straight path, it is a great disgrace to the parent in the upper world, even after the child has also died. However, it is obvious that one should try to prepare one's own path to *Olam Haba*, and not merely rely on one's children to get there. (Chap. 26:22).

Kaddish is very helpful, particularly when said by a son that lives properly.

Rav Henkin explained how the *Kaddish* is a *zechut* and *korat ruach* (spiritual satisfaction) for the *niftar*. It is a *kiddush sheim Shamayim* (sanctification of G-d's Name), a *tziduk hadin* (recognition

of the justice of the judgment up above), and a *kabalah* (acceptance) of the *din* from *Shamayim* (Heaven). *Kaddish* should be combined with *teshuva* (self-improvement), *tefillah* (prayer), and *tzedaka* (donations to the poor) for [the greatest] *korat ruach* to the *niftar*. Before saying the *Kaddish*, it is good to have the intention that one is about to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of G-d's Name). (Quoted in *Ta'arich Yisrael*, section 19).

The main source for the saying of *Kaddish* is a *medrash* which says that **Rebbe Akiva** saw a man in terrible anguish because of his lifetime of evil deeds. Only once Rebbe Akiva taught the man's **son** to do *mitzvot* and to say the *Kaddish* did the man's suffering finally stop. And eventually the father even entered *Gan Eden*. From this *medrash* we see:

- The main benefit of *Kaddish* is when it is said by a **son** that lives properly. Rebbe Akiva, therefore, worked hard to teach the son of the *niftar*, and didn't just say it himself.
- *Kaddish* by a **son** can help even a parent who was a terrible person. (*L'iluy Neshama*, pp. 52-3)

The **Ari z"l** explained that *Kaddish* is not, as most think, only able to save [the deceased] from the judgment in *Gehenom*. It can also bring them into *Gan Eden*, and [help them] to be elevated step by step. Therefore, even on Shabbat and *Yom Tov*, when there is no judgment in *Gehenom*, one should still say the *Kaddish*. *Kaddish* is the only thing in this world that saves the *niftar*, by itself, from the *din* of *Gehenom*. (Quoted by Rav Chaim Vital, *Sha'ar HaKavanot*, *Drosh HaKaddish* 15:2).

Even a non-relative of the deceased can contribute to the *iluy neshama*.

Teshuvot Maharam Shick wrote — “**Every Jew** is commanded on *lo ta'amod al dam rei'echa* (don't stand by the blood of your friend), in addition to the *mitzvah* of *hashavat aveidah* (returning a lost object) which includes returning one's body and saving one from danger, even with one's money. If we are commanded to save the body, all the more so to save the *neshama* with whatever is possible. Whoever returns the soul of a person fulfills this *mitzvah* whose obligation is upon all relatives, **as well as others**.” (Quoted in *Kol Bo l'Yartzeit* — pp. 46–7).

Sukkat Shalom (1:4) wrote explicitly that taking part in *iluy neshama* is relevant and possible for **anyone**. He said — “Many have the custom to supply merit to their **parents, relatives, and friends** who have passed away, by studying Torah for their sake.”

The *Medrash Tanchuma on Ha'azinu* (with explanations based on Rabbeinu Bach'ya) quotes the *Torat Kohanim* on *Devarim* 21:8 — “*Kapeir l'amcha Yisrael* (atone for your nation of Israel) *asher padita* (that were redeemed)”:

“*Kapeir l'amcha Yisrael* (atone for your nation of Israel)” — this refers to the living [that cause a *kaparah* (atonement) to occur through their money].

“*Asher padita* (that were redeemed)” — this refers to the deceased [who receive a *kaparah* through the money of the living]. [We learn] from this that the living [**even non-relatives**] can redeem the deceased [by giving donations for their sake]. Therefore, we are accustomed to mention the deceased on Yom Kippur [i.e. during *Yizkor*] and to make pledges to *tzedaka* for them. One might think that once someone dies, *tzedaka* would no longer help them. The *Torat Kohanim* on “*asher padita*,” therefore, teaches us that when we make pledges to *tzedaka* for the deceased, we [**are able to**] take them [from *Gehenom*], elevate them, and purify them like when they were first born.”

We are accustomed to pledge *tzedaka* on Yom Kippur for the sake of the deceased (*Shulchan Aruch — Orach Chaim — 621:6*).

Therefore the day is called *Yom HaKippurim* in the **plural** — [since it is a day of *kaparah* both] for the living and for the deceased (*Mishnah Brura*).

And we mention the *neshamot* since the deceased [also] receive a *kaparah* (atonement) on Yom Kippur (*Rema*).

[A pledge from a **non**-relative helps them because] we say — if they were still alive they would [probably] also have given *tzedaka*. And even if they were poor, they would have had a pure heart and wanted to give. And, even a bad person, if he had tried to improve, like saying *viduy* (the verbalization of the *teshuva* process) before he died, we can assume that he received a *kaparah* and is now considered a *tzadik* (*Mishnah Brura*).

The *Shelah haKadosh* wrote — “One that gives *tzedaka* on behalf of the *neshama* of a departed person is certainly providing them with a great salvation, and granting their soul much satisfaction (*nachat ruach*). This is true even if done for one that is **not a relative**...it certainly works for a relative.” (Quoted by the *Chafetz Chaim* in the footnotes to *Ahavat Chessed* 2:15).

Rav Chaim Kanievsky explained that learning and *mitzvot l'iluy neshama* can be divided into two categories:

Specifically for deceased parents (what is known as *B'rah m'zakeh Abba*) — There is no requirement that the children learn Torah or do *mitzvot* particularly for the sake of the parents, or even that it be anything beyond what they would normally do. [As we explained previously, the parent was either the cause of the children's good deeds, or the children are viewed as an extension of the parents. *Pele Yo'eitz*, however, (in the section on *kibud av v'eim* — honoring parents) implies that a child should explicitly mention their parent before doing something [particular] in their merit.].

Learning and mitzvot for all non-parents — This must be extra, it needs to be specifically for their sake, and should explicitly mention their name beforehand. Common examples are *tzedaka* which is given, or learning which is done, for the sake of the deceased. It is a *zechut* (merit) because the *niftar* has thereby **caused** some **increase** in learning or *mitzvot* [presumably in either quality or quantity]. (Quoted in *L'iluy Neshama*, pp. 9-10).

Virtually any mitzvah can be done l'iluy neshama.

Here are some that are discussed (in *L'iluy Neshama* – pg. 63-7):

Inspiring *teshuva* during a *hesped* (eulogy).

Leading the *bentching* (blessings after a meal).

Making blessings on food with the name of the deceased in mind.

Saying the blessing “*Asher Yatzar*” with extra *kavana* (focus and intention).

Writing a *sefer Torah*, or donating *sefarim* (Torah books) to the community, which will give *zechut* whenever they are used.

Raising funds for Jewish education.

Doing a mitzvah the deceased was particularly connected to during his or her lifetime.

The personal *kabalah* (commitment) of Rav Yechezkel Levinstein for the *iluy neshama* of the *Ponovezher Rav* was to overcome some *middah* (character trait) issue **every day**.

The *Chazon Ish* once sent an *avreich* (married student) to take care of one that was very ill. The *avreich* told the *Chazon Ish* he had a *yartzeit* that particular day and needed to lead the *davening* for *Mincha*. The *Chazon Ish* replied to him — “What is the importance of leading the *davening*? That it should be *iluy neshama* [for the *niftar*]. This mitzvah to be concerned for [and take care of] one who is ill will itself be what is *iluy neshama*.”

The *Shelah* (quoted in *The Neshama Should Have an Aliya*, pp. 79-80) recommended donating *tzedaka* money for the *iluy neshama* of the deceased to three different categories, corresponding to the three pillars that the world stands on (*Pirkei Avot* 1:2):

- Torah — Support for Torah scholars, *Yeshivot*, and tuition for the poor.
- *Avodah* (Service of G-d) — Communal *tzedaka* and communal spiritual needs.
- *Chessed* (Kind deeds) — Set up *gemachim* (free loan funds) for the poor.

***Sukkat Shalom* lists six different levels of *tikunim* (repairs or benefits) for the *neshama* in ascending order (*L'iluy Neshama*, pg. 44-6):**

1. Saying *Kaddish* and receiving *Maftir* — The *brachot* following the *haftarah* are similar to the *Kaddish*. Both contain an aspect of *tziduk hadin* (accepting the justice of G-d's judgments) as well as prayers for the final redemption. (*The Neshama should have an Aliya* — p. 95).

2. Leading the *davening*. This is greater than simply saying *Kaddish Yatom* (the Orphan's *Kaddish*) which was initially established for children, who weren't able to lead the *davening*. This is true, however, only if one is able to do it while avoiding conflicts with others.

Rabbi Hebel (ibid, pp. 98-100) quotes *Mikdash Me'at* who stresses how careful we should be to avoid conflict in the process of trying to lead the *davening iluy neshama* for the *niftar*. He lists a total of nineteen different prohibitions that one may end up violating, such as *ona'at devarim* (afflicting others with words), *lashon hara* (negative speech), and *malbin p'nei chavairo* (embarrassing others). While a *poseik* (halachic authority) determines the proper order of preference for leading the *davening*, in some cases it may be best for the one who actually has the priority to allow another less-flexible person to lead. Not only will the *neshama* that one is *davening* for still get the *zechut* (*Chatam Sofer* in a *teshuva* — *Yoreh De'ah* #345), but the avoidance of conflict itself will also be a great *zechut* for the *niftar*.

In addition, we should try to prevent people from leading the *davening* if they can't properly *daven* or won't be heard. They won't be helping the *neshama*, will be misusing *hekdeish* (sacred property), and may end up embarrassing the *neshama*.

3. Fulfillment of whichever *mitzvah* the *niftar* requested be done — ideally a mitzvah of action that will also benefit the community.

This is considered greater than the *Kaddish* and is clearly also relevant for women and non-relatives.

Sukkat Shalom (*L'iluy Neshama*, pp. 44-5) stresses how important it is to dispel the common error of thinking that only by leading the *davening* or by saying *Kaddish* can one give *nachat ruach* to the deceased. People, therefore, enter into *machloket* (disputes) over this, while that which they can do even better, and without any argument, they don't do. We should teach them that it would be better for them to do active *mitzvot* during *aveilut* (mourning) and on the day of the *yartzeit*, and that this is the *ikar* (main point). It is also obvious that if it is possible to seek out **active** *mitzvot* that are also **communal** *mitzvot*, one should certainly try to do so, and thereby take [the *niftar*] out of all of the chambers of *Gehenom*. Whoever is able to publicize these matters will be *mezakeh et harabim* (giving merit to the community).

4. Learning Torah — at least *mishnayot* with *meforshim* (basic commentaries).

When the wife of the *Steipler Rav* passed away, the *Steipler Rav* instructed their daughters to learn *Pirkei Avot l'iluy neshamah* for her (ibid, p. 48).

5. Talmud Torah (learning Torah) publicly — i.e., with at least ten men.

6. Learning specifically between *Mincha* and *Maariv* — i.e., joining day and night together with Torah.

This should be *I'zechut ul'illuy nishmat Ruchama Rivka, a"h*, bat Asher Zevulun