

The Second Letter

Will Our Parents Recognize Us

A Yizkor Drash for Yom Kippur 5787

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The Letter We Open at Yizkor

My dear friends, last night before Kol Nidrei we heard the mashal of the three letters. A beloved son had squandered his parents' trust and destroyed his life. After his father's death, he returned to the family home expecting to find a hidden fortune, but the first letter sent him upstairs to a rope and a chair. On the chair lay a second letter: Before you leave this world, stop blaming everyone else. Say vidui honestly. Remember your mother's tears, your father's warnings and the person you could have become. For the first time in years, the son stopped saying, 'Yes, but,' and simply said, 'Yes. I did this.' The third letter would eventually give him another day and a future; that will be our letter at Ne'ilah. At Yizkor, we remain with the second letter.

What was the father really saying? My son, if you believe that you are about to enter the next world, do not arrive there as a stranger. Before you come to meet your mother and me, uncover the child we once knew. Remove the lies that have covered your face. Become someone whom we will be able to recognize.

The first letter said: The life you have been living must end. The second letter said: Before you come upstairs, make yourself recognizable.

That is the avodah of Yizkor. Not only: Do I remember my parents? The harder question is: If they could see me now, would my parents recognize me?

Foehrenwald 1945

There is one Yom Kippur story in which that question was not a metaphor.

The account was related by Reb Leibel Zisman, who was fourteen years old at the time. He had survived the Gunskirchen concentration camp in northern Austria and was liberated on May 5, 1945. He remembered the bodies, the hunger, the stench, the thirst, and the way the Nazis had tried to strip people of every last trace of human dignity. After liberation, thousands of survivors - orphaned, widowed, homeless, stunned - eventually gathered in the Foehrenwald displaced-persons camp southwest of Munich.

Among them was the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rav Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam. The Rebbe had lost his wife and all eleven of his children. Nevertheless, he was gathering broken Jews, arranging minyanim, teaching Torah, finding food and clothing, creating marriages, and beginning to rebuild Jewish life from the ashes.

Yom Kippur arrived only a few months after liberation. Approximately five thousand survivors gathered in a makeshift shul for Kol Nidrei. It was Yom Kippur, but Reb Leibel remembered that it felt like Tishah B'Av. Almost every person in that hall had lost parents, children, brothers, sisters, spouses, homes and entire communities.

Before Kol Nidrei, the Klausenberger Rebbe rose to speak. He stood on the bimah wearing a white kittel. With tears in his eyes, he first thanked Hashem for saving their lives from the Nazi inferno.

Then he pointed to his kittel. He explained that one reason a Jew wears a kittel on Yom Kippur is that it resembles the tachrichim in which a Jew is buried. It reminds us of the day when we will stand before the heavenly judgment. Its whiteness also represents the purity for which we pray on Yom Kippur.

Then the Rebbe's voice changed.

If the kittel reminds us of the burial shrouds of those who died before us, he asked, why are we wearing kittels today? Our parents and our loved ones were slaughtered without tachrichim. Some were thrown into mass graves in whatever clothing remained upon them. Some were burned and never had a grave at all.

Suddenly, the Klausenberger Rebbe began pulling off his own kittel. He cried, 'No kittel! Let us be like our parents. Let us remove our kittels, so that they can recognize us.'

The people began removing their kittels. Then the hall erupted.

Five thousand survivors began to weep. Not quietly. Reb Leibel said that they were not merely crying; they were bawling. Men and women, the old and the young - years of terror, grief, humiliation and unbearable loss poured out at once. He remembered the floor becoming wet with tears.

The Rebbe continued. What tachrichim are we wearing? Your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your zeide and your bobbe are lying in mass graves, or they have no graves. How will they recognize us if we appear dressed differently from them?

Then the Rebbe opened the machzor and began speaking about vidui. Ashamnu - did these Jews sin in Auschwitz? Bagadnu - were they unfaithful to Hashem? Gazalnu - from whom did they steal in the camps? Maradnu - against whom had they rebelled? The standard vidui, he said, did not seem to describe what they had endured.

But then he said that they did have sins not written in the machzor. How many times, in their despair, had they pleaded, Ribbono Shel Olam, I cannot endure another morning; take my soul so that I will not have to say Modeh Ani again? They would ask Hashem to restore the faith and trust that the camps had tried to destroy.

Picture the scene: the holiest night of the year; the sifrei Torah removed from the aron; five thousand Jews without families; and a Rebbe who had buried no wife and no child because there had been nothing to bury, tearing off his kittel and pleading that those above should still recognize their children below.

They removed their kittels so that their parents would recognize them. Eighty years later, our question is no longer what clothing we are wearing. It is whether the lives we are living still bear the family likeness.

Will our parents recognize us?

The Books of the Living and the Dead

This question brings us to a remarkable teaching of the Chasam Sofer.

The Gemara says that on Rosh Hashanah the books of the living and the books of the dead are open before Hashem. The Chasam Sofer asks the obvious question: Why are the dead being judged? Their earthly choices have ended. They can perform no new aveirah and no new mitzvah.

The Chasam Sofer answers that these are not merely separate account books. He calls them a gilyon haneshamos - a scroll of souls. A person's neshamah is written together with its roots, extending through parents and grandparents. The generations are judged together because the spiritual consequences of a life continue through the people that life shaped.

Chazal express the same truth in three words: Bara mezakeh abba - a child can bring merit to a father. When a son says Kaddish, learns Torah, gives tzedakah, repairs his character or returns to a mitzvah because of something his father or mother planted within him, the parent's story is still producing holiness in this world.

A person's book, then, does not necessarily close when the person's life closes. A parent leaves children. A teacher leaves students. We leave habits, standards, wounds, acts of generosity, words of Torah, family customs and ways of seeing the world. All of these continue to bear fruit after we are gone.

But there is also a frightening side to this teaching. If a child uses inherited intelligence, passion or influence to move farther away from everything a parent

regarded as sacred, that too becomes part of the continuing story. We continue writing in our parents' books. The question is what we are writing there.

Yizkor is therefore not only an hour of memory. It is an hour of responsibility. We do not merely ask, What did my parents leave to me? We ask, What are my parents still accomplishing through me?

A Son Writes Back

This past year, I came across a remarkable and deeply troubling letter. It was published openly in June 2025 by Rabbi David D. Steinberg under the title, 'Daddy, Am I Worthy Enough to Say Kaddish for You?'

Dovid Steinberg describes himself as the second oldest of ten children - seven sons and three daughters. His father, Rav Mordechai Steinberg, was his first Torah teacher. The father died on September 16, 2024. Because of the son's work promoting academic biblical criticism through TheTorah.com, he was the only son not given an opportunity to eulogize his father.

The son admits that he never found the courage to speak openly with his father about the path he had taken. Years earlier, one of his siblings told him that their father had said he was destined for Gehinnom. The son acknowledges that perhaps the words were misunderstood, but he believed that this was how his father viewed him. That belief stood like a wall between them.

He remembered how seriously his father took Gehinnom. His father had asked to be buried on the day he died and wanted Kaddish said as soon as the first earth fell upon the coffin, because he did not want to suffer there any longer than necessary.

Yet the letter is not the writing of a son who escaped an ignorant father. It is filled with admiration for his father's Torah and integrity.

He remembers being fifteen years old, learning Maseches Gittin with his father during morning seder in Manchester Yeshiva. They encountered a difficult question. The boy opened the Pnei Yehoshua and discovered that the Pnei Yehoshua asked the same question. Excited and proud, he ran to his father. His father looked up and asked, 'What is his answer?'

The boy had not read the answer. He was satisfied that a great acharon had asked his question. His father read the answer, apparently found it unconvincing, and then turned back to his son: 'Nu, what do you think?'

That moment never left him. His father did not care only who asked the question. He cared whether the question was strong and whether the answer made sense. The son

later came to see that intellectual honesty as one of the forces that led him away from his father's beliefs. He even listened repeatedly to a shiur his father had delivered about Matan Torah in 2017. He disagreed with the answers, but heard his father's questions and concluded: In some strange way, I am still walking on the derech you taught me, even if you could not accept where it led.

He began saying Kaddish after his father died, although, by his own admission, not as regularly as he wished. He could not connect to it. He no longer observed halachah as his father had, and he no longer accepted the Rambam's principles of faith as his father had. He wondered: If my father believed that I was going to Gehinnom, can my Kaddish possibly elevate his soul?

Then, after discussing his pain with a therapist and reaching a place where he felt able to forgive his father, the son arrived at an astonishing conclusion.

His father was now in Olam HaEmes, the World of Truth. Therefore, the son reasoned, his father was no longer restricted by the boundaries of the frum world. Now his father could see what the son considered the true history and origin of the Torah. The father must now understand that the son had been correct. Indeed, the son suggested that the pain his father experienced upon discovering this truth might itself be the Gehinnom from which the son's Kaddish could help elevate him.

And when the son arrived at that conclusion, he wept so deeply that he could not say the words of Kaddish.

The letter continues with the son's struggles: divorce, loneliness, the financial burden of keeping his project alive, and his move into a community different from the chareidi world in which he was raised. Yet he confesses that his neshamah still longs for the heimeshkeit and realness his father taught him.

The last time he saw his father conscious was in June 2024, when Rav Mordechai was already very weak. On the day his father died, he was mostly unconscious. The son sang the Shavuot song his father loved - Kad yasvun Yisrael v'askin b'simchas haTorah, when the Jewish people sit and rejoice in Torah. His father stirred, and the oxygen reading rose.

At the end of the letter, the son asks his father to stand before the Kisei HaKavod and daven that he should find strength, a new life partner, and success in continuing what he calls the Torah his father planted within him, even if it now looks completely different from anything the father imagined. He closes with four haunting words: 'I am still your son.'

I do not tell this story in order to mock the son. The pain is real. The longing is real. His love for his father is real. In fact, that is precisely why the letter is so powerful. The father is present in almost every line. His language, his questions, his passion for Torah, his niggun, his demand for honesty - all of it continues to live within the son.

But there is something deeply unsettling here as well. None of us can know precisely what another neshamah sees in Olam HaEmes. In our parable, the father asks the son to strip away his self-deception so that the father will be able to recognize his child. Steinberg reverses the demand. He does not ask what must change within him so that his father can recognize him. He imagines that death has changed his father until the father now thinks as the son does. Instead of becoming recognizable to his father, he makes his father recognizable to himself.

That is the failure of the second letter. In his longing to open his father's letter, he writes over it.

And that danger is not limited to a public theological controversy. All of us can do it. We remember selectively. We keep the warmth and discard the demands. We quote our parents when their words support what we already want. We turn them into silent witnesses for choices they might have begged us to reconsider.

Yizkor asks a harder question than, Do I still feel connected to my parents? It asks: Have I remained honest enough to hear them, even when their remembered voice challenges the person I have become?

When Recognition Runs the Other Way

Here, however, we must make an essential distinction. Some people standing at Yizkor were raised by parents who were loving and decent, but not observant. When the child began keeping Shabbos, keeping kosher or taking on more mitzvos, a parent may have said, 'I do not recognize you anymore.'

In such a case, fidelity cannot mean returning to the parent's level of observance. The child did not abandon the parent. The child carried forward a Jewish spark that the parent may not have known how to develop.

Olam HaEmes is the World of Truth. We do not claim, as Steinberg does, that our private theories become true there merely because we believe them. We mean something altogether different: the neshamah is no longer restricted by the confusions and limitations of this world. A parent who did not understand the child's Shabbos, kashrus or commitment to Torah can now see those mitzvos in their true light.

Then recognition moves in the other direction. The child does not reshape the parent. The parent, encountering truth, can finally see the child clearly and say: I recognize you. You did not reject me. You carried our Jewish story farther than I was able to carry it.

Yizkor therefore speaks differently to different children. If our parents gave us a life of Torah and mitzvos, we must change where necessary so that they can recognize us. If we became more observant than our parents, we may take comfort that in Olam HaEmes they can recognize what we became - and perhaps understand that our change honored the deepest Jewish part of them.

What Faithful Continuation Looks Like

Jay Litvin, who wrote movingly during his battle with cancer, once asked whether people become disposable after they die. Would life simply continue as though they had never been here? Would the laughter return so completely that the person would eventually disappear?

Then he thought about Rav Gluckowsky, his teacher and friend. Litvin had never met Rav Gluckowsky's father, yet he felt that he knew him. The father accompanied his son almost everywhere.

Rav Gluckowsky quoted his father's Torah whenever he spoke. When he told a story, he told it the way his father had told it. In shul, people recognized the niggunim his father had sung. His father's photograph hung in the living room. Family occasions commemorated him. The school benefited from educational principles passed down from a man who had taught children in Toronto for forty years. Rav Gluckowsky seemed consciously busy becoming the son his father had hoped he would become.

Later, a widow told Litvin what happened at the gathering marking her husband's first yahrzeit. Their daughter read a letter she had written to her deceased Abba. She told him everything that had happened during the year: her piano recital, her brother's first bicycle ride, and the day their mother had finally become strong enough to return to work. She even described how she knew her father would have reacted. Abba, you would have laughed so hard. Abba, you would have told us your famous story. Abba, how you would have enjoyed the music.

Litvin understood that the deceased are not disposable. Their mark is carried in the hearts, speech and laughter of those who remain. His essay was published only after his own death, when his family decided that his words should continue speaking.

That is faithful continuation. It does not mean freezing our parents in the past, becoming copies of them, denying their faults or transmitting their wounds

unchanged. It means allowing what was true, holy and loving within them to continue producing goodness through us.

Sometimes honoring a parent means continuing a mitzvah. Sometimes it means preserving a niggun, a family minhag, a standard of honesty or an instinct for chesed. And sometimes it means healing what the parent was unable to heal, so that their pain does not become the inheritance of another generation.

But in every case, it requires honesty. We may develop beyond our parents. We may see matters they could not see. We may have to make choices they never faced. Yet we dare not use their silence to make them endorse everything we have chosen.

Will They Recognize Us

In Foehrenwald, the survivors removed their kittels because their murdered parents had no kittels. They wanted to be recognizable.

For us, the question is not what we wear. It is what we have become.

Would our parents recognize the way we speak to our spouses? Would they recognize our Shabbos table? Would they recognize the honesty of our business dealings? Would they recognize the way we treat siblings? Would they recognize what we have done with the opportunities for which they sacrificed? Would they recognize the Jewish home they struggled to place into our hands?

A yahrzeit candle is precious. Kaddish is precious. Tzedakah and Torah learning bring elevation to a neshamah. But the greatest monument a child can build is a recognizable Jewish life.

And that may demand a significant change. Not a sentimental thought that disappears when Yizkor ends. Perhaps there is a mitzvah our parents cherished that we have allowed to fade. Perhaps there is a family relationship they would beg us to repair. Perhaps there is something dishonest or destructive in our lives that has made us unrecognizable. Perhaps there is a wound we inherited that we must finally stop passing forward.

Before Yizkor ends, each of us should hear one sentence in the voice of someone we miss. Not the sentence we wish they would say. The sentence they actually taught with their words, their sacrifices or the way they lived.

Then let us choose one action that will make that sentence visible in the coming year.

The second letter in the father's house was not merely a request to remember. It was a request to return: My child, remove what has made you a stranger. Let me see your face again. Let me recognize you.

At Ne'ilah, we will open the third letter and ask what must begin. But at Yizkor, we open the second letter and ask what must continue.

May the neshamos of our parents and grandparents look upon us and recognize something of the faith for which they prayed, the goodness they tried to teach, and the sacrifices they made. May the mitzvos we perform, the relationships we repair and the Jewish homes we strengthen add new lines of merit to their still-open books.

And when, after 120 years, we arrive in the Olam HaEmes, may those we love come forward and say: I know you. You carried something of us with you. You remained our child.

Yizkor asks not only whether we remember them. It asks whether they will recognize us.

Source Notes

- **Three Letters mashal:** Expanded adaptation used in the completed Kol Nidrei drash. The original has not been located in the Dubno Maggid's printed works. A related anonymous version titled Hatzalah Kefulah appears in a Dirshu booklet for Parashas Eikey, pages 30-31, citing Sippurim MehaChayim 7.
- **Foehrenwald account:** Reb Leibel Zisman, as related to Rabbi Simon Jacobson and reproduced by Rabbi YY Jacobson, Yom Kippur Insights, TheYeshiva.net. Historical setting: Foehrenwald DP Camp, Yom Kippur 1945/5706.
- **Books of the living and dead:** Chasam Sofer al HaTorah, Parashas Nitzavim, passage 69 in the Sefaria text, beginning 'Ve'al pi devarim eilu navin.' The Chasam Sofer describes the gilyon haneshamos, in which a person is judged together with the spiritual roots extending through earlier generations. See also Sanhedrin 104a, 'Bara mezakeh abba.'
- **David D. Steinberg,** Daddy, Am I Worthy Enough to Say Kaddish for You?, TheTorah.com, June 1, 2025.
- **Jay Litvin,** Are We Disposable?, Chabad.org, published April 14, 2005 after the author's death.