BELIEF

Yizkor After the Black Sabbaths

This year, we need to come together to mourn our communal losses

BY SHLOMO M. BRODY

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NEXT WEEK, ON THE EIGHTH DAY OF PASSOVER, JEWS AROUND the world will gather in synagogues for Yizkor. While this

Next communal memorial service takes place four times a year—also happening during Shavuot, Yom Kippur, and Shemini Atzeret—this Passover will mark the first Yizkor since the attacks of Oct. 7. What can we, collectively, say?

To find an answer, it's helpful to understand the roots of Yizkor.

Imagine a community in which two of its members—we'll call them Reuben and Simon—died in the month before Passover. Both were well-liked, respected family men who died young, at the age of 46. Yet Simon died from a tragic accident, while Reuben was murdered—along with many others—in a pogrom. That Passover, in the midst of the festival prayer services, the community recited a special prayer to "uplift the soul" of Reuben and memorialize his loss. Privately missing the presence of their own loved one during the holiday, Simon's family insisted the

next year that they, too, could memorialize him during the synagogue services. The fact that Simon wasn't a martyr, they said, doesn't mean his soul—and memory—doesn't merit recognition.

This, in a nutshell, is the likely emotional impetus for the murky historical development of the Yizkor memorial service. Today, Yizkor is mostly known for the memorial prayers recited by individuals for deceased family members. Frequently overlooked are the *communal* memorial prayers recited. This year, those need to come to the fore again as we remember together for the first time since Oct. 7.

As with many ritual customs, it's hard to trace a linear historical development of this festival memorial ritual. At its core, the Yizkor service comprises two short prayers that beseech God to favorably recall a loved one in Heaven, with one of them

including a charitable pledge in their merit. As professor Shmuel Glick has shown, the notion of prayers and charity for the deceased emerged in the early medieval period, albeit with some controversy. It wasn't obvious to all scholars that such prayers were efficacious or theologically appropriate. Can we really help the dead or impact the World to Come? Some suggested Yom Kippur as a special day on which atonement could be achieved for both the living and the dead. Others felt that death was a finite endpoint; you cannot rectify deeds once you've left this world.

A turning point toward broad acceptance of praying for the deceased seems to have come in 1096 CE. During the First Crusades, Rhineland Jewry was attacked by Christian crusaders on their way to the Holy Land. They demanded that Jews convert to Christianity. Many who refused were murdered; some took their own lives rather than convert. In the wake of this

trauma, the *Av Ha-Rahamim* ("Father of mercy") prayer was written. The prayer beseeches God to remember "the pious, upright, and blameless, the holy communities, who laid down their lives for the sanctification of His name." It further calls on God to take revenge for their spilled blood and retaliate against His enemies.

Initially, this prayer was only recited on the Sabbath before the holiday of Shavuot, around the time when many of these massacres took place. After the pogroms of 1348-49, when many Jews were slaughtered in the wake of the Black Plague, *Av Ha-Rahamim* was also added on the Saturday before the summer fast of Tisha B'Av. It became known as the "Black Sabbath."

After the 1648-49 Chmielnicki massacres in Poland and Ukraine, another prayer emerged, known as *El Malei Rahamim* ("God who is full of mercy"). Besides praying for the martyrs to

enter the Garden of Eden, it includes the memorable line: "We beseech the Merciful One to protect them under divine wings, and to bind their soul up in the bonds of life." In the following years, the prayer was adjusted to apply to martyrs from other communities, victims of the great 1689 fire in Prague, and other calamities.

Beyond prayers, the post-1096 martyrs were memorialized in a communal book known as a *sefer zikaron* ("Book of Remembrance"), or *Memorbücher* in Germanic languages. The list of names was introduced with the prayerful wish: "May God remember [*Yizkor Elohim*]." Alongside the martyrs, communal leaders or benefactors were listed. These names would then be read aloud in the community. Reading the book turned into a communal ritual.

These prayers all emerged as a form of collective commemoration. Today, *Av Ha-Rahamim* remains a communal memorial recited on every Sabbath, but it has become a generic prayer for all martyrs, largely decoupled from the incidents of 1096. The Yizkor and *El Malei Rahamim* prayers, in contrast, are utilized during all individual remembrances and even at funerals. How did this happen?

It's not entirely clear. Starting in the 17th century, Yizkor was added to the prayers of three major festivals: Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. The springboard for that expansion might have been the custom of giving charity on each of these holidays, in fulfillment of the biblical notion, alluded to in the traditional Torah reading, of not coming "empty-handed" before the Lord on these special days. Once charity was being offered, it became an opportunity to donate in memory of a particular loved one, perhaps akin to what was already practiced on Yom Kippur.

Most probably, it seems that prayers written for communal loss simply fit the emotional needs for mourners to commemorate personal loss. Even if your loved ones are not martyrs, the desire to help them in Heaven—and recall them on the holy day—is deeply felt.

In this respect, it pays to note that Sephardic Jews, to this day, never adopted the communal Yizkor prayer. These rituals marked tragedies in Ashkenazi lands. Yet Sephardic Jews did develop an individual memorial prayer, known as a *hashkava*, that prays for the soul of the deceased. This is traditionally recited at funerals, during shiva, on the annual memorial day (sometimes called the *meldado*), and any time their descendants participate in the Torah reading (aliyah). Like their Sephardic brethren, Ashkenazi Jews needed a moving prayer to fulfill their emotional and spiritual needs, independent of how their loved one died. Today, of course, Yizkor has become a highlight on the

ritual calendar, a service that even brings unaffiliated Jews out to the synagogue.

That's not a problem per se. But it's regrettable that we've lost sight of the communal origins of this memorial prayer. Given the many travails of Jewish history, it's natural for Jews to no longer commemorate, if not forget, the massacres of 1348 or 1648. Yet we've also had more recent tragedies that we should not easily erase.

Following the Shoah, many synagogues began to recite a special *El Malei Rahamim* for Holocaust victims. There are different variations, but most commemorate "the souls of the 6 million Jews, victims of the European Holocaust, who were murdered, slaughtered, burnt and exterminated for the Sanctification of thy Name, by the German Nazi murderers and their helpers from other nations." Alas, in recent years, it seems that a few

synagogues have regrettably stopped saying this memorial. Perhaps there will come a point when we no longer feel the need to specially mark the Holocaust—1096, 1348, and 1945 will be things of the past. To my mind, we are far away from such a time. When survivors and their children are still alive, it's critical to maintain this commemoration so that their grandchildren and great-grandchildren will continue to bear witness to this atrocity.

The coming Yizkor recitations need to focus on our newest communal loss: the nearly 1,500 souls that we've lost in Israel since Oct. 7. When the cuts are so deep and the wounds so fresh, we need to memorialize those souls, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, who died at the hands of our enemies. Of course, we can still mark our private, individual losses. The heart is big enough

to encompass personal and national mourning. Much of the world seems to have forgotten what happened on that new Black Sabbath. We owe it to these brothers and sisters to come out, en masse, and remember what we have lost.

What should we say? There are different versions being circulated, but I personally will be reciting an adaptation of *El Malei Rahamim* composed by IDF Chief Cantor Shai Abramson. A bilingual PDF version is available on the Ematai website.

> God, full of mercy, Who dwells on high, grant fitting rest on the wings of the Divine Presence—in the heights of the holy, the pure and the brave, who shine like the radiance of heaven
> —To the souls of the holy ones, residents of Israel—men, women, and children—who were killed, murdered, burned and slaughtered by the vile Hamas murderers, and who sacrificed their lives in the consecration of God's name in the

vicious attacks on the dwelling places of the State of Israel; and To the souls of the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, the officers of the Israel Police, and the members of the security services who sacrificed their lives for the consecration of God's name and died a heroic death in battles defending the people and the land. For this we pray for the ascent of their souls, may they rest in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, Master of Compassion, shelter them in the shadow of Your wings forever, and bind their souls in the bond of everlasting life. The Lord is their heritage. May they rest in peace and may they receive their reward at the End of Days.

And let us say:
Amen.

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo M. Brody is the executive director of Ematai and the author of *Ethics of Our Fighters: A Jewish View on War and Morality* (Maggid Books).

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