



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5772 • 2011

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 8, 2011
Yom Kippur - Yizkor

**Burning Parchment,
Soaring Letters**



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5772 Enter the Heart"*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Yom Kippur - Yizkor >

Burning Parchment, Soaring Letters

October 8, 2011

YOM KIPPUR 2011

Burning Parchment, Soaring Letters

ABSTRACT

You will never look at a Jew quite the same way again after hearing the haunting story about Salamon Abshalom, who on the Eve of Yom Kippur with a noose around his neck, proclaimed the Godliness of the Jewish People even at a time when God seemed to be totally absent.

This riveting story - of a forgotten act of *Kiddush Hashem* - dramatically explains the mysterious words of Rabbi Chananya - one of the ten martyrs we remember, *Eileh Ezkerah*, on Yom Kippur. As Rabbi Chananya was being burned alive by the Romans with a Torah scroll wrapped around him, his dying words to his students were: "The parchment is burning and the letters are soaring."

What do these enigmatic words mean? What is Rabbi Chananya telling us?

It teaches us the true meaning and the awesome power of *Yizkor*.

To appreciate our gift of remembering, imagine what things would be like if we had no memories...

1. To Remember

As we stand on this most awesome day, it is a good time to appreciate and embrace the most awesome thing we can do - remember - or, as we say in Hebrew, *Yizkor*.

Why do we remember? On a basic level, it seems like the *mentshlich* thing to do - to pay tribute to our parents of blessed memory, to those who dedicated their lives to us, who nurtured us from birth, who protected us and gave us the ability to turn into independent adults. *Yizkor* is the least we can do for them - to honor their memories and give charity in their name.

But there is more to it. Just look how *Yizkor* captures the hearts and imaginations of our people. Even those that do not attend other services will appear for *Yizkor*, because it is a prayer service that has the power to touch all hearts and souls.

So let us reflect on this awesome power – the power to remember – and its connection to the holiest day of the year, which is Yom Kippur.

I should add that these words – about our remembering – are relevant to everyone here, not just those orphans who will remain in the synagogue during the *Yizkor* service, but also to those who thank God are blessed to have their parents alive today. May they be healthy and well for many years to come.

To remember, as we shall see, is a sacred duty for every one of us.

2. “These I Remember”

We can better appreciate the power of *Yizkor* – the power of “Remembrance” – when we read today the tragic yet enigmatic story of the Ten Martyrs.

In a section called the *Avodah* – in which we reconstruct the service of the High Priest in the Holy Temple on the holiest day of the year – we recite a prayer aptly named, *Eileh Ezkerah*, “These I Remember,” in which we invoke the memory of the Ten Martyrs who were slaughtered by the Romans in unspeakable ways.

Ezkerah comes from the same root as *Yizkor*, and both express the same idea – to remember, to never forget, to invoke the memories of our sacred ancestors, in this particular case, those brutally murdered while sanctifying God’s name.

Eileh Ezkerah consists of thirteen passages, one more chilling than the next, describing in graphic detail the horrific story of how a cruel Roman Emperor executed the ten of the greatest sages of that time, and perhaps of all time.

One of the ten martyrs was Rabbi Chananya ben Tradyon. Here is how his death is recounted:

Then [the tyrant] commanded them to bring out Rabbi Chananya ben Tradyon from his place of study. They burned his body [wrapped in a Torah scroll] on a pyre of bundled vine-twigs and placed wet layers of wool on his chest to prolong his suffering. When these were removed from him, he was immediately consumed together with the Torah scroll.

The source of this sad episode is the Talmud,¹ where more details are included. As Rabbi Chananya was being engulfed in the flames, the Talmud tells us, his students asked him: “Master, what do you see?” Rabbi Chananya replied: *Gevilin nisrafin v’ha-otiot porchot*, “The parchment is burning, and the letters are soaring.”

What do these enigmatic words mean?

At first glance Rabbi Chananya seems to be referring to the Torah scroll that he was wrapped in. He seems to be emphasizing the eternity of Torah, as if to say that even when the parchment is burning, the Torah’s essence and teachings, its letters and lessons, cannot be destroyed – they continue to rise up to the heavens.²

But if Rabbi Chananya was speaking strictly about the Torah scroll, what relevance does it have to this story? After all, many Torah scrolls were tragically burned in history.³

The fact that Rabbi Chananya made this dramatic statement with his last breath, as he was being consumed by flames – and in response to his students’ question “What do you see?” – makes it obvious that Rabbi Chananya was sharing with them, and with us, something very profound. He was at once addressing his own heartbreaking death, as well as all those who have died (and will die) sanctifying God’s name.

Indeed, we can say that Rabbi Chananya was referring to *every* death and teaching as a great lesson about the power of memory and love.⁴

¹ *Avodah Zarah* 18a.

² A similar statement is made by the Talmud about the first set of tablets that Moses broke (after the sin of the Golden Calf): *luchos nishboru v’otiot porchot*, the “tablets broke and the letters soared” (*Pesachim* 87b).

³ Perhaps the most notorious one by Apustumus (one of the five tragedies, equated with the breaking of the tablets, that took place on the 17th of Tammuz) – see *Mishne Taanit* 26a-b.

⁴ Especially considering that the death of every individual, and especially a *tzaddik* like Rabbi Chananya, is actually compared to the “burning of a *Sefer Torah*.” Talmud *Shabbat* 105b. *Moed Katan* 25b.

3. 600,000 Letters

Each of us is a Torah scroll⁵ – our body represents the parchment, and our soul the letters.

Rabbi Noson Shapira, the great 16th century Kabbalist, writes⁶ that the word *Yisrael* (Israel) is an acronym for *Yesh shishim ribiu oisiyos l'Torah* ("There are 600,000 letters in the Torah"), for each soul corresponds to and is an embodiment of the letters of the Torah.

Upon birth, when the soul enters the body, the parchment and the letters are one. And our mission in life is to live up to our calling and align our parchment bodies and all their limbs and organs with the letters of our soul, so that together they are one seamless living, breathing "Torah scroll."

Simply put: When we stretch out our hand to help another, to give someone charity ... when we use our mouths to speak kind and compassionate words to one another ... when our legs carry us to do a mitzvah ... when we use any other part of our bodies to do what we were created to do – to make our corner of the world a home for the Divine – then, in effect, we become parchments or vehicles, that channel, express and manifest the Divine in this world.

Then, when we have reached our time, and our soul departs – even as the parchment is consumed, in the words of Rabbi Chananya – the letters soar on, onward and upward.

And it is our sacred duty to always remember that – to remember the departed of the distant (or not so distant) past as living souls, floating letters, that continue to hover in the heavens forever and ever.

Most of all, our sacred responsibility is to create a home for these letters, to live up to their legacy, to become (in effect) a new parchment to these homeless, floating letters.

⁵ See previous note.

⁶ In his classic *Megaleh Amukot*, Section 186.

4. Yom Kippur in Auschwitz

Let me share with you an amazing story of a few such floating letters that have recently found their home – a story that captures the essence of what it means to be a Jew, a story which expresses the power of *Yizkor*, a story that can help us appreciate Rabbi Chananya's parting words.

This story is told by a man called Michael Klein,⁷ one of the Jews saved by Oscar Schindler, who for forty years chose never to speak about his experiences in the concentration camps, until one Yom Kippur eve, when he realized the need for *Yizkor* – to remember and to break his silence.

And this is what he remembered:

It was back in Golleschau, a satellite camp of Auschwitz, where Michael had been imprisoned forty years earlier. About twenty-five forced laborers and he were marching down the slippery mountains to return to the camp, with the Kapo leading in front and two SS-guards with machine guns in the back. The walk downhill was tiring and difficult after a long day's work in the quarry on the mountains. By the time the exhausted men got to camp, it was completely dark and Yom Kippur had already commenced. Entering the camp yard, an area enclosed by barbed wires, Michael saw an unusually large number of SS guards waiting for us with machine guns directed toward the prisoners. Fear penetrated his heart. Could they have possibly decided to murder them all on Erev Yom Kippur?

⁷ Michael was born into the family of a Chassidic rabbi in a small town in southern Hungary. His secular education ended at sixth grade, but he continued to study at the Yeshiva till age fourteen, when the Germans occupied Hungary in 1944. He had just turned fifteen when he was deported with his parents and ten brothers and sisters to the Ghetto, and then to Auschwitz. Only the author and two older sisters survived. Michael was one of those saved by Oscar Schindler.

By the time the war ended the author was seriously ill with tuberculosis. He spent the next six years in tuberculosis hospitals, during which time he struggled not only to stay alive, but also to educate himself, studying English, German, mathematics and physics on his own. Finally, in 1952, he entered the University of Colorado, majored in engineering-physics, and graduated first in his class. He earned his PhD in theoretical physics at Cornell University in 1962, He became a professor of physics, and has published scores of scientific articles.

Soon all the prisoners were made to line up for muster, to be counted to ascertain that no prisoner was missing. Everyone was tensely waiting for what would happen next. Their thin, striped prisoners' clothing gave little protection against the cold northern wind. While they stood, shivering, a door to a nearby building opened.

I will let Michael's own words tell the rest:

"My friend Salamon Abshalom was let out. He was barely able to walk; his hands were tied behind his back. An SS guard took him to the back of the camp yard. In the semi-darkness I barely discerned the gallows at the other end of the barbed wire, about thirty feet from where I stood. The SS Commander of the camp read a proclamation that Salamon Abshalom would be punished for trying to escape. He was led to the gallows and made to climb onto what looked like a stepladder. The noose was tied around his neck.

"We stood paralyzed, in bewildered despair. How could the Heavens allow this to happen on this holy Yom Kippur evening? Did the Germans set up the execution specifically for Yom Kippur to humiliate the God of Israel and His people? The silence of the Heavens screamed out in our hearts and in our souls. The desecration of the God of Israel, of the people of Israel, of Yom Kippur, and the humiliation of man created in the image of God proceeded in silence as the German hangman, the Camp's SS commander, stood over Salamon Abshalom.

"Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a powerful, high-pitched voice rang out over the camp yard. It sent chills down our spines, as we heard the cry of *Sh'ma Yisrael, Hear O Israel!* It was Salamon Abshalom making the eternal proclamation of the Jewish people's belief in one God. The flow of time seemed to have had suddenly slowed, and those two words seemed to stretch on and on, penetrating our hearts. It seemed to take a long time from the beginning of the two words to the end. The SS hangman, hearing the words, cut off Salamon Abshalom's affirmation by extinguishing his last breath.

"Our spirits were electrified. In defiance of the Germans, Salamon Abshalom spoke for all us who stood there on that holy Yom Kippur evening. He became our spokesman and appointed representative. His outcry of *Shema Yisrael* broke the silence of the Heavens, decried God's failure to interfere, and demonstrated the Godliness of the Jewish People.

“With his prayer of *Shema Yisrael* arising from his last breath, he raised all of us standing there to the highest spiritual level. Even as his life was extinguished by the brutal murderer to whom nothing was holy, he still proclaimed the eternity of the Jewish People, in defiance of evil, in defiance of the Germans, in defiance of the silence of humanity, and in defiance of the silence of the Heavens. Salamon Abshalom proclaimed the Godliness of the Jewish People even at a time when God seemed to be totally absent.”

Salamon Abshalom helps us appreciate Rabbi Chanaya’s immortal words: You can hang my body, but you will never kill my soul. You can murder me in cold blood on Yom Kippur Eve, in from of all my fellow Jews, but I will go down sanctifying God’s eternal name – *Shema Yisroel!*

Was there ever a Shema recited in darker circumstances?

On Yom Kippur we recite the Shema many times, but none like the Shema that we say at the closing of Neilah – as the sun sets on the holiest day of the year. At the highest point of the highest point of the year we declare our absolute faith in G-d and our absolute commitment to everything G-d stands for. The Shaloh, the great medieval 16th century sage, writes: **“When the Shema is recited aloud and with heartfelt intention, every Jew should have in mind giving up his soul for the sanctification of God’s name. This intention will be considered as if he had indeed actually withstood the test to sanctify God’s name.”**

For Salamon Abshalom Neilah came a bit early in the year 1944.

For forty years after witnessing Salamon Abshalom give his life while sanctifying God’s name, Michael Klein never spoke about his memory of that moment or any of his war experiences. He felt that none could understand his pain. His loneliness and isolation were overwhelming and almost unbearable. He felt like a stranger even among his friends, who never knew what he went through. But then he realized that he was wrong. As one of the very few who survived Golleschau, it was his duty to let the world know of Salamon Abshalom’s martyrdom. As he put it:

“By choosing to be silent all these years I had betrayed Salamon Abshalom and all those that perished by withholding the information even from those who could identify with his actions and cherish his martyrdom. By being silent I had contributed to forgetting their memory.”

So forty years after the most painful events in Jewish history, Michael Klein honored the memory of Salamon Abshalom by telling his special story and letting the floating letters of his soul come down to earth to inspire and empower others.

This testimony was almost forgotten. But forty years later ... *Yizkor!* Salamon Abshalom's singular unprecedented act of *Kiddush Hashem* was remembered by Michael Klein, who in turn shared it with the world. And I in turn share it with you. And you in turn will hopefully share it with your families and friends.

Mi Kemacho Yisroel Goy Echod B'Aretz, "Who is like Israel, a unique nation on earth?!"

Who would ever imagine that in the darkest moment in history – when God seemed totally absent – a Jew, with a noose around his neck, "proclaimed the eternity of the Jewish People, in defiance of evil, in defiance of the Germans, in defiance of the silence of humanity, and in defiance of the silence of the Heavens."

Unbelievable! Simply unheard of.

My friends, no words, absolutely no words, can capture the *emes* of this story.

That is the power of *Yizkor*. And that is the power of the floating letters.

5. Rabbi Chananya's Message

Rabbi Chananya, in the throes of indescribable suffering, at the verge of death, taught his students the greatest lesson in life, and taught us the powerful significance of *Yizkor* (and *Eileh Ezkeroh*). And this is his message:

No matter what you perceive is happening in this world, down here below – even when you see the parchment burning – know that the letters soar into the heavens above, forever and ever.

Even though at the time you see the Romans putting holy martyrs to death, don't be deceived by the moment, by the here and now. They can only take our bodies but, even as they do, God preserves our letters –

our souls. For now they remain preserved in the heavens, but the day will come when they will be returned to the parchments of new Torah scrolls that will be written.

And long after the Romans will have disappeared from the earth, we Jews will be here to tell the story – to say *Eileh Ezkerah*, to recite *Yizkor* – and to remember all these floating letters. And not just remember, but to create living monuments and dynamic vehicles that will serve as parchments and scrolls for these letters.

Which is why we pledge charity in the *Yizkor* prayer.

One may ask: What does material money have to do with remembering a departed soul? And the answer is: Memory alone is not enough. Memory has to be concretized through the building of physical institutions – parchments and scrolls – that embody the floating and soaring letters.

On a lighter note:

A visitor to Israel attended a recital and concert at the Moscovitz Auditorium. He was quite impressed with the architecture and the acoustics. He inquired of the tour guide, “Is this magnificent auditorium named after Chaim Moscovitz, the famous Talmudic scholar?”

“No,” replied the guide. “It is named after Sam Moscovitz, the writer.”

“Never heard of him. What did he write?”

“A check,” replied the guide.

6. The Power of *Yizkor*

Now we can better understand the power of *Yizkor*. It’s not just remembering – it is writing new Torah scrolls to capture millions of soaring letters that have been floating for centuries, for millennia, waiting, waiting for us to give them a resting place on earth.

Like one Holocaust survivor told a reporter, taking out a photo album and proudly beaming as he pointed to all his grandchildren: “This is my revenge.”

We Jews don't blow up cafes or vent our rage on others. We build. We build families, institutions - we produce living heirs and living bodies for the souls that were ripped away from us. We write Torah scrolls so that these floating letters can finally come home.

Torah is "our life and our sustenance" (as we say in the *Maariv* evening prayer). It is the divine blueprint for life, our operators manual, which gives us our purpose and directs us how to best live our lives, to fully realize our great potential and fulfill the mission for which we were sent to this earth.

This is also one of the reasons that when *Yizkor* is recited, the Torah scrolls are held up on the *bimah* (platform), and some have the custom to clutch the handles of the scrolls, to help connect our memories in this material world not to death but to the living, soaring, letters.

This is what Rabbi Chananya ben Tradyon imparted to his students - and to all of us as we read and remember his story today.

7. At This Hour

We gather here at this hour because people we love have died - the parchment that was their physical being has been consumed. But we are also here with a conviction that the essence of who they were is still present in our lives, still hovering in the air above us.

When we remember how they danced at a *simcha* ... when we look at a picture of them, or try to live up to their example ... when we find ourselves working through some pain they caused us, or laugh in memory of their laughter - all these memories are letters from their lives that are still deeply present for us.

Our grief at their physical loss can feel as sharp as whatever Rabbi Chananya suffered, but this day his words remind us to pay attention not just to the parchment in ashes, but to the letters that do not die.

As we say the words "Remember God the soul of my father (or mother) who departed from this world" and as we utter his or her name, the entire span of time that we were honored to spend with that parent

passes before our eyes. Millions of moments – some conscious, most unconscious – flood our brain. Not the details, but the memories of one winding story, the sum total of a life, impossible to describe in words.

Tears may roll down our cheeks, as we recall their names. But remember that this is the power of *Yizkor* – to remember. Not just to remember the past, but to remember the present – the letters soaring somewhere out there. And not just to remember, but to recreate and build a home for these letters.

Would it have been better to wipe our memories clean and forget our fathers and mothers, and by extension all the pain and grief left by their loss?

No. We orphans were given a great gift – the gift of memory. We have the power to remember our parents and invoke their names before God. We have been blessed with the power of eternity – the ability to perpetuate their letters and write with them new stories inspired by our parents' lives.

The “soaring letters” – *otiot porchot* – can also be read as “blossoming letters” (from the word *perach* meaning “flower/blossom”). For the letters of our parents' souls blossom in our lives.

- They blossom in the child who will carry their name.
- They blossom when a student two generations later quotes their teaching.
- They blossom when we light a *yahrzeit* candle and share a memory.
- They blossom when their commitments to Jewish life, to integrity, to service, stand as explicit examples that push us towards goodness just when we want to give up or give in.
- They blossom when, despite our grief, we can laugh again.
- And what makes it most exciting – we have the power to make them blossom in so many different ways, determined by our choices and actions.

8. Yizkor Today

Today, we are blessed. Unlike in the time of Rabbi Chananya, we are not being persecuted and burned by our enemies. But we still experience the pain of death – which is compared to a burned *Sefer Torah* – albeit not under the same tortuous circumstances. Still, death is death and the loss affects us in very profound ways.

We can take solace in *Yizkor*.

So let us clutch the Torah to our hearts as we recite this immortal prayer, and let us not let go. Let us embrace the Torah today and in our daily lives. As we connect the parchment below with the letters above, we turn those floating letters into living, breathing, walking Torah scrolls in the shape of each of our lives (and our children's lives).

As we perpetuate the legacy of our departed parents, we create living parchments for the fluttering letters of their souls. [Amen.]

9. Moment of Truth (Optional)

Life's daily grind can wear us down, to the point that we can forget our priorities. *Yizkor* is a moment of truth. A moment that reminds us of what we could be, what we ought to be, what we are capable of being.

When we remember the departed souls of our loved ones, we appreciate the true realities of life in ways that we do not appreciate when those souls were with us.

Recently, someone came to consult with me with a dilemma. His father had recently passed away. And a few weeks before his passing, his father had asked him to come for a visit. Because of his busy schedule, the son never ended up visiting, and by the time he got around to plan a trip to see his father it was too late.

"I was an idiot," cried the son to me. "My father was always there for me. I can only imagine if it were the other way around – had I called him to come to visit me – he would have been on the first flight. And I did not have the courtesy to simply change my plans. In retrospect, I could sense in my father's that it was urgent and he felt disappointed that I didn't show, but at the same time, he didn't want to pressure me."

“Now it’s too late. What do I do? I can never repair this mistake.”

“Yes, you can,” I told him. This Yom Kippur go to shul and say *Yizkor*. Remember and honor your father. Say his name and when you do, apologize. And then commit to giving charity to a cause that your father would be proud of. Build something in his name. Tell him that you are now visiting him – a bit late, but still: you finally showed up.

One of the only mitzvahs we can perform after death is honoring our parents. *Yizkor* is not just a time of remembering; it’s a time to repair, to correct. A time to build homes for the floating letters – and some of our floating indiscretions.

During *Yizkor* we can speak to our parents and tell them: “I apologize for forgetting you. I apologize for neglecting you. Today, I remember and will always remember what you did for me. And I will build and shape parchment for your soaring letters.”

On this most awesome and holy day let us do the most awesome and holy thing possible: Remember those before us, the prices they paid, the sacrifices they made, not just as a tribute to them, but as reminder to us of what it means to be alive – to be truly alive.

And above all – let us bring their soaring letters alive on earth again, through committing to their enduring legacy, as we clutch the Torah closely to our hearts and determine to be walking Torah scrolls on earth. Amen.