Helping and Maintaining Our Relationship with the Deceased – Part 2

Learning Torah is the greatest single merit — it can heal the sick and even change the laws of nature.

Learning Torah is the greatest single merit l’iluy neshama, seven times more beneficial for the neshama than for one to only lead the davening or say the Kaddish (Yosef Omitz from Rav Yosef Norlingena, a contemporary of the Bach in the 1600s).

The Zohar explains that — “Every facet of creation, from the lowliest creature to the loftiest angel, continues to exist solely through the spiritual life force emanating from the toil in Torah.” (Bereshit 47a and Vayeishev, brought by the Nefesh HaChaim in section 4).

And the Nefesh HaChaim says — “Acceptance of the yoke of the Torah hakedosha lishma l’amita (holy Torah with complete purity) elevates oneself above this entire world.” (4:18).

Many gedolim (great Torah scholars), like the Netivot and the Yesod v’Shoresh Ha’Avodah, requested in their tzva’ah (final will and testament) that their sons, students, and friends should all learn mishnayot for the zechut and tikun of their neshamot. Rebbe Akiva Eiger even asked that this request be publicized in the newspaper — “My students and my friends should learn all throughout the first year, one perek of mishnayot every day for the zechut of my neshama, and then on the yartzeit every single year.” (L’iluy Neshama, p. 38).

The Radvaz in his tzva’ah (final will and testament) spelled out the critical importance of learning Torah with a remarkable request to his sons — “Be careful to learn a daf (full page) of gemara every day that you say Kaddish. And if there is any day that you, G-d forbid, have to miss this learning [of gemara], be extremely careful (tizharu me’od me’od) not to say Kaddish on that day at all, because it will not give any nachat ruach to my neshama at all. Be careful with this.” (Ibid. p. 37).

Mishnayot learning has been universally adopted as a customary practice for those wishing to help l’iluy neshama (Aruch HaShulchan, Yoreh De’ah 376:13, Be’er Heitiv Orach Chaim 1:6).

While every mitzvah helps l’iluy neshama, mishnayot learning [the letters of “mishnah” spell out “neshama’] seems to particularly help. (Divrei Sofrim 1:376:535).

Mishnayot help to achieve a kaparah (atonement) — both for the one learning them, and for the one that they are being learned for. (Chidah and Rav Tzadok HaKohen quoted in The Neshama should have an Aliya, p. 57).

HaRav Shaftil, the son of the Shelah, in his tzva’ah (final will and testament) wrote — “Fortunate is the one who is familiar with mishnayot. I have a tradition that whoever is expert in mishnayot will never see the opening of Gehenom.” (Brought at the end of Yeish Nochalin).

The Chafetz Chaim wrote in Torat HaBayit — “I saw in the sacred writings how much they praised the learning of mishnayot, since it is the foundation of Torah She’ba’al Peh (the Oral Law). They wrote that Asher ben Yaakov Avinu is the appointed official in charge of mishnayot, and whoever is well-versed in mishnayot will not even see the opening of Gehenom.” (End of sixth chapter).

Rabbi Hebel discusses different customs for learning mishnayot — learning particular mishnayot, learning according to the name of the niftar, learning individually or with a minyan, etc. In any case, the Gesher HaChaim assures us that — “whatever combination of mishnayot [one chooses...
to] learn will certainly provide a tremendous benefit *l'iluy neshama.* (The Neshama should have an Aliya, pp. 58-63).

*Motzaei Shabbat* (Saturday night) is considered to be a particularly ideal time for one to learn *l'iluy neshama.* It helps the *neshama* to deal with the end of the rest and reprieve from judgment that it had just received on Shabbat. *Erev Shabbat* (before Shabbat) as well as on Shabbat itself are also emphasized as important times for learning *l'iluy neshama.* (Ibid. p. 62).

*Ben Ish Chai* wrote that the positive impact of *Talmud Torah* on Shabbat is enormously greater than on a weekday. (2nd year, *Shemot*).

Learning Torah is also very helpful for those that are sick. The *Machatzit HaShekel* said — While we should employ three separate *zechuyot* for one who is sick — *Torah,* tefillah, and *tzedaka,* we need to know that the power of Torah that protects and saves us will be the decisive factor. (Ibid. Neshama, p. 175).

*Rav Chaim m’Volozin* quotes an incident that happened to the *Taz* (one of the classical commentators on the *Shulchan Aruch*):

"It happened to the Taz that a woman was screaming [and pleading] with him — “Please my master, my son is dying. I am pleading to the Torah of my master because G-d and the Torah are all one.” He said to her — “Behold, this is what I will do for you. The words of Torah that I am presently immersed in with my student, I will give as a present to the boy. Perhaps in this *zechut* he will live, since this is what lengthens one’s days.” At that moment, the fever [of the boy] broke [and he recovered]. Rav Chaim, therefore concluded — “Behold, the *zechut* of immersion in Torah and connecting oneself to it, can [even] bring the dead back to life.” (Ruach Chaim on *Pirkei Avot* 1:1).

The *Steipler Rav* said that mishnayot are like *Tehillim* (Psalms) for a sick person. (L’iluy Neshama, p. 176).

The *Chafetz Chaim* sent a message to a wealthy family in America that were considering arranging for their deceased mother to be buried in *Eretz Yisrael* — “Strengthening Torah [with the large sum of money it would cost to transport her body] is certainly a greater *zechut* than her being buried in *Eretz Yisrael.*” (Ibid. p. 184).

*Siftotav dov’vot b’kever* ("the lips [of the deceased] vibrate in the grave") — **one continues to get s’char (eternal benefit) after his passing from this world as long as his words or ideas are still being learned.**

The *Gemara Yerushalmi* spoke about the principle of *Siftotav dov’vot b’kever* — Whenever anyone says the words or ideas of one that has passed away, or learns from his *sefarim* (books), the deceased continues to “live” in this world and earn s’char. (Shekalim 2:5, as explained by the B’nei Yissaschar, Kislev–Tevet, 2:50). Some even say that the deceased is aware of and somewhat connected to the one that is repeating his teachings in this world. (Nitei Gavreil 2:64:11; Zohar — Pinchas).

Publishing *Chidushei Torah* (new Torah insights) of the niftar was, therefore, strongly encouraged by the *Steipler Rav* — “It causes a great nachat ruach to the neshama to make his *divrei Torah* available to the world. His lips will then be moving in the kever.” (L’iluy Neshama, p. 65).

The *Chafetz Chaim* even applied this principle to the case of a wealthy man who strengthened many in Torah — “He merited *siftotav dov’vot b’kever,* since it was through his toil that he
supported ten exceptionally great Torah scholars that learned Torah with great dedication day and night." (Commentary on the Torat Kohanim, in a footnote at the end of the introduction).

**Mitzvot** and learning done l’iluy neshama also help the doer and the learner.

Many recent Gedolei Yisrael held that one doing a mitzvah or learning Torah l’iluy neshama, for the sake of a niftar, lose none of their own s’char for this. These include Rav Chaim Sonnenfeld (in his teshuvot, Shalmat Chaim, siman 321), Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky, Rav Gustman, and Rav Chaim Kanievsky. (All three quoted in Ta’arich Yisrael, siman 19, #39).

These same four Gedolei Yisrael also held that what the niftar actually receives from this mitzvah or learning is not the zechut of the mitzvah or the learning itself, but rather the zechut for having caused these extra mitzvot or this extra learning to occur. (Ibid.).

In addition, Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky, Rav Gustman, and Rav Chaim Kanievsky all pointed out that the zechut the niftar receives for having caused this extra learning of Torah to occur is even greater if tzedaka is given to facilitate it. (Ibid.).

Rav Yavruv, a talmid muvchak (primary student) of Rav Chaim Kanievsky, and the author of L’iluy Neshama, said the following in the name of Rav Chaim Kanievsky —

It is obvious that “b’rah m’zakeh Abba” means that both sons and daughters have a special ability to benefit both their mothers and fathers.

While the mitzvot and learning of anyone that was positively influenced by the niftar will help for his iluy neshama, only the actual child of the niftar is referred to as kara d’avuha, and automatically helps him, independent of any positive impact that the parent had on the child.

As long as the words or actions of the niftar continue to have a positive influence on others (including, of course, his descendents and students), their zechut will continue to benefit him and help his iluy neshama.

Since the learner and mitzvah-doer get no less zechut for having done the learning and mitzvot on behalf of someone else, l’iluy neshama, there is no reason not to try to always do this.

[The aveirot (transgressions) of one’s descendents or students will negatively affect a parent or a Rebbe only if they had actually caused these aveirot to occur].

Rav Shteinman (told Rav Simcha Weinberg) the following —

*B’rah m’zakeh Abba* means that both parents have an automatic zechut in all of the mitzvot that their children do, even if they didn’t cause their children to do those mitzvot, or any mitzvot at all. While the parents may not get the full s’char for these mitzvot [i.e., as if they had actually done them themselves], we need to know that Hashem always gives with rachamim (mercy). This “automatic s’char” applies only with the actual children of the niftar (i.e. the first generation). A Rebbe, however, will get s’char for the mitzvot and learning of his students only if he had actually caused these mitzvot to occur.

Anyone, even one that is not a child of the niftar, can learn Torah or give tzedaka for the sake of any niftar. This tzedaka or learning must be extra and be done specifically for the sake of the niftar. The zechut of this non-child will then benefit the niftar like with the case of Yissachar and Zevulun, but only with the two mitzvot of talmud Torah and tzedaka. It is unclear whether a
requirement for this talmud Torah and tzedakah to benefit the niftar is that it be likely that the niftar would have done these mitzvot himself were he still alive.

Whether this learner or tzedaka giver will lose some of their own s’char from these two mitzvot is a machloket (argument), similar to that with Yissachar and Zevulun. The Chazon Ish held that one does not lose, but other achronim held that one does lose.

Rav Scheinberg also understood that whether Yissachar loses some of the s’char of the Torah that he learned in partnership with Zevulun is a machloket (argument).

The Rema (in Yoreh De’ah) implies that Yissachar does lose some of the s’char, while the Ohr HaChaim (in Ki Sisa) says that each of them actually receives the full s’char.

If one learned or gave tzedaka for two different niftarim — both will receive zechut only if both can be considered to have actually caused the learning. Hashem will then find the appropriate way to give the s’char that each of them will receive.

**Actions done in Olam Ha’zeh continue producing fruit even for one in Olam Haba.**

The Chafetz Chaim wrote — “The Medrash tells us that everyone should pursue a permanent mitzvah for all generations. There is no better one than having children and students who are steeped in Torah and yirat Shamayim (fear of Heaven) who will continue having more children and students like this. All of [the zechut of] one’s children, students, and students of one’s children will then be calculated back to the parent [or Rav] that began it all. There is no limit to the s’char in the upper worlds for one who is zocheh to this.

When it comes to negative consequences, the verse (Bereshis 4:10) says [after Kayin murdered Hevel] — “The voice of the bloods of your brother are crying out to me” — his blood and the bloods of all those who would have descended from him.

This is all the more true regarding good consequences, which are always greater than negative ones; all of the zechut will certainly be credited back to the one who began it all. The verse that expresses this is — “Lokeach nefashot chacham, The wise one collects souls” (Mishlei 11:30) — the real chacham makes sure to acquire nefashot (souls), because they are the acquisition that lasts forever. (End of Torat HaBayit).

The Chovot HaLevavot wrote — “Even one who approaches the spiritual perfection of the prophets will not attain the zechut of one that guides others to the service of Hashem. His zechuyot are multiplied every day and at all times by the zechuyot of all of those [whom he helped].

A virtually perfect person [but who improved only himself] is like one who sold a single item for ten times its value. The one who guided others [whose zechut is being multiplied by every one of the many that he had helped] is like one who sold a multitude of separate items for a smaller profit margin. His total profit will, however, [end up] being enormously greater than the first one...as it says — “And those who turn the many to righteousness [shall shine] like the stars, forever and ever.” (Ahavat Hashem, Ch. 6).

The Gra wrote — All of the mitzvot of one who was corrected by another will be credited to the one who corrected him; he will get this s’char as if he had done them himself. (Mishlei 12:14).

The Gemara declares that there is — “No menucha (rest) for tzadikim even in Olam Haba.” Since the actions that they did in this world never stop producing fruit, they (the tzadikim)
continue to go from one accomplishment to another, according to the quality of the actions that they left behind them. (Brachot 64a).

*Medrash Rabba* — “The one who loves mitzvot is never satiated with mitzvot” — Every person who runs after mitzvot but has no permanent mitzvah for all generations, what satisfaction do they have? You can know that this is true from Moshe. With all of the mitzvot, tzedaka, and kind deeds that he did, he still established a permanent mitzvah for all generations, as it says that he separated the first three of the refuge cities for the Jewish people. (Vayikra Rabba, Acharei Mot 22:2).

The *Alshich* wrote — Since there is no limit to the eternal benefit of Olam Haba, it is even possible [for us] to contribute *l'iluy neshama* for Moshe Rabeinu. And every extra bit [that we do] makes an [eternal] difference. (Kitzur Alshich, Esther 9:22).

The *Chafetz Chaim* wrote:

There are people who make a gravestone of expensive marble as a memorial for an eternal memory for those who have passed away. They think that this will create great satisfaction for the soul of the deceased. How mistaken are they with this thinking! In reality, after the soul of the deceased has separated from this world, it recognizes there in the world of truth, the ultimate goal of Torah and mitzvot. It sees that this is the precious commodity which is relevant in all of the worlds and therefore, even the smallest mitzvah that is done in this world is more precious to it than gold. The soul feels very bitter towards itself for having squandered the days of its life on the striving for empty pleasures and illusory honor that it needs to give an accounting for. If so, what type of satisfaction is it able to have when it sees that those [still alive] waste all of their energy [on an expensive gravestone]?

It would be much better for them to place down a simpler gravestone and the money that is saved should then be used to purchase *sefarim* (books) to donate to a *beit medrash* (study hall), with an inscription that it should be in memory of the soul of the deceased. Alternatively, one could establish a permanent *gemach* (free-loan fund) in memory of the soul of the deceased. Through this his soul will be greatly elevated, since every single loan that will be given out will then add more *zechut* for him.

One should [try to] vividly imagine if he were, G-d forbid, thrown into a fire or into other painful difficulties, how great would be his desire and longing for those [still] alive to intervene for his sake, with whatever means are possible, to save him from this terrible punishment. This is exactly how one should view his own ability to do for the souls of the deceased, to work with all of his abilities. This is especially [true] during the *shiva* and *shloshim* when the judgment is much more severe. We need to increase Torah, tzedaka, and chessed for them according to our abilities, and with this we [will be able to] save them from the judgment of Gehenum, and bring them to life in Olam Haba.

The *Chafetz Chaim* then quoted the Shelah who brought many statements from Chazal [to support this] and concluded — “One who gives *tzedaka* for the soul of the deceased, even if he is not related, and all the more so if one is related, as long as the deceased was not evil, he certainly accomplishes a great salvation and tremendous benefit for his neshama.

The *Chafetz Chaim* himself continued — Therefore, if one's offspring pass away, G-d forbid, during the days of their youth, and have left no descendants in this world, it is most appropriate to establish a mitzvah that will last for all generations as a memorial in their memory, if one has the ability to do so. They will then be remembered eternally for righteousness.
And even if one does not have the resources for this, one should, at the very least, donate some book that the community needs in their merit. The name [of the deceased] should be inscribed inside, and every time that someone learns from it, it will bring benefit to the soul of the deceased. (Ahavat Chessed — Chelek 2, Perek 15).

**Conclusion**

I want to conclude with an idea that I originally spoke about many years ago, which is very appropriate to this topic of *l’iluy neshama*. It is from the *Aish Kodesh* — a collection of talks that the Piaszesner Rebbe gave to his chassidim in the Warsaw ghetto, the notes of which he then buried before he was killed, and the ghetto was destroyed. He explained that —

“Every neshama (soul) that has passed away from this world [desires] to maintain a relationship with those still dwelling in this physical world of action. Therefore, besides the saying of *Kaddish* and the learning of *mishnayot* for those who have passed away, it is a tremendous kindness when we additionally keep these *neshamot* in mind while we are involved in doing *mitzvot* and learning Torah. We should not merely try to remember them, but rather bind ourselves to them in order to actually do the mitzvah and learn the Torah in partnership with them. They will thereby become “clothed” [in a sense] with a body and, in the realm of action, capable of learning Torah and doing *mitzvot* [once again] and thereby revealing a much greater level of *kedushah* (sanctity). What an incredible kindness it therefore becomes to allow some aspect of every departed soul to reside [once again] within the midst of the Jewish people, to [actually] be engaged in Torah and *mitzvot* together with those [still alive].”

The beautiful message this contains is that we actually have the ability to continue our relationship with our loved ones that have passed away, specifically with our Torah and *avodat Hashem* (service of G-d). What are they now lacking? A physical body to carry out their exalted aspirations in terms of physical actions in this present world of action. And that is exactly what we can give to them.

The boundary between *Olam Ha’zeh* and *Olam Haba* is very much a function of our intentions and awareness. When we work to learn Torah and to do various actions *l’iluy neshama* for the deceased, we find that the distance between ourselves and these souls becomes much less than we would have ever imagined. And virtually everything that G-d created in this world is a potential vehicle to be used for the *zechut* of those in the next world. It all depends upon our decision to use it to elevate ourselves and others. (*Parshat Pikudei/Shekalim*, 5700 — March 9, 1940).

The Chafetz Chaim wrote — “The *ikar tikun* (essential benefit) for the neshama is when we strengthen learning Torah every single day and also do chessed. (*Shmirat HaLashon*, part 2, final section, chap. 1).

He explained — “The *middot* we express determine how [Shamayim] treats us” (*Mishnayot Sotah* 1:7-9). Every mitzvah which is done helps the deceased, especially the mitzvah of chessed, since it awakens the trait of kindness above and then Hashem relates to the *nifratar* with chessed in all matters. (Ahavat Chessed — Chelek 2, Perek 15).

The final inspiration which emerges from the essay in the *Aish Kodesh* is that not only are we able to continue giving to the deceased, but there is actually a way for the deceased to be able to continue giving to us as well. The extraordinary level of Torah and chessed that is done in memory of the deceased is often possible only through the elevation and inspiration received by those in this world through their connection with those in the next world.

Learning about how we can help the merit of the deceased opens up an entire world of ideas on this extremely rich subject. It profoundly changes the way that we think about the continued
existence of the neshamot (souls) in Olam Haba (the world to come), and our ability to maintain an ongoing relationship with them.

I am greatly indebted to the many talmidei chachamim (Torah scholars) who helped me to find and understand the multitude of sources which I presented. I want to specifically mention two of them — Rav Yavruv, Talmid Muvchak (close student and disciple) of Rav Chaim Kanievsky, whose book L’iluy Neshama was invaluable for my research, and Rabbi Hebel, whose very helpful book — The Neshama Should Have an Aliya was published almost exactly when I began exploring this topic. Both of them also took the time to answer many of my specific questions afterwards.

Hashem should grant us the siyata d’Sh’maya (Heavenly assistance) to actively maintain our precious relationship with all of our loved ones, through our increased involvement and dedication to Torah and mitzvot. And Hashem should help it to be a two-way relationship as much as is possible — with them helping to elevate us to continually greater heights in terms of our awareness in this world, while we provide the physical vehicle for them to continue to grow closer and closer to Hashem in the world of complete truth and clarity.

And Hashem should grant all of us the siyata d’Shimaya that our children, all those we positively impact, and all of our good deeds, should continue producing more and more good, and that, after me’ah v’esrim (120 years), it should all be an enormous zechut for each of us that will last forever.

This should be l’zechut ul’iluy nishmat Ruchama Rivka, a”h, bat Asher Zevulun