

A Letter to Dad

by Rabbi Todd A. Markley

The Torah warns us against several methods of communicating with our dead. We are cautioned to avoid augurs, soothsayers, and diviners – advised neither to partake in the ways of magicians nor to follow the counsel of those who speak with ghosts.¹ To paraphrase these Torah verses: “Beware of charlatans who claim to be talking to your departed loved ones on your behalf.”

What the Torah does not prohibit is our own continued communication directly with our loved-ones. We need not solely utter words of memory and prayer for them when we gather for a memorial service like this one. We can – and many do – speak with our dead at grave sites and at cherished family vacation spots. We may find ourselves talking to the departed at mundane moments: in our cars, while cooking dinner, or getting ready for bed. And we most certainly might find words for those we’ve lost passing our lips at peak spiritual moments: Break-fasts and *sefer* tables, times of birth and of fresh loss, when we have challenges and need their support and especially when we have joys we wish to share.

Our communication with those we’re missing in our hearts might also take the written form. Allowing the thoughts on our minds and feelings in our hearts to pass our lips can be a spontaneous pouring out of our souls. But to take the time to put those thoughts and feelings in writing brings with it more time for consideration and exploration, whether the words are free-flowing or crafted with exquisite care. There is different weight to the words when they can be seen, in addition to being heard. Such a letter to a loved-one might be for your eyes only or for others to share in, might be read aloud at a place that holds memory or may never be spoken at all. It might look something like this:

Dear Dad,

The High Holy Days were always a special time for us. For so many years as a kid, I sat at your side, occasionally complaining of my boredom. I know it was a glorious shock to your system to spend the last decade and a half of your life watching me lead, and preach, and teach at these services. But I missed getting to sit with family at this time of year, so when we adopted the Reform movement’s new High Holy Day prayer books at TBS – and the *Yizkor* service now included the kindling of seven memorial candles – I invited you to join us on the *bima* as our candle-lighter. For you - making connections between words of Torah, between legal cases, and most especially between people caused your whole being to light up. You seemed the ideal candidate for the job of kindling the flames that keep this community connected with the memories of those whom we’ve all loved, and you played the role with grace for several years.

¹ Deuteronomy 18:10-11

Yet, even then, when I extended you the invitation, I knew that I would pay a price for asking you to light these candles. I knew then that – someday – the tradition would end, and this service of memory would find me missing you all the more. I was right, but I'm glad that I invited you to share the *bima* with me nonetheless.

You'll be glad to know that I've brought in ringers in your place this year. They will kindle the flames that you once lit, just as they do in countless other ways every day of their lives.

We love you and miss you,
Todd

By definition, your letters will be different...shorter, longer, filled with memories from the past or with updates - both mundane and earth-shattering – from the present. You might want to provide updates on the victories and crushing defeats of favorite sports teams or simply to let them know how fortunate they are to not be here for the 2024 election cycle. Maybe there were words left unspoken, and it's time to get them off your chest. Perhaps there are apologies you feel compelled to make in the spirit of this season, or – for that matter – forgiveness you are now ready to extend.

Regardless, I invite you to consider trying this spiritual practice out for yourselves in the days and weeks ahead, if you'd like. I'd love to hear about the experience if you do.