



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Ki Tetze 5770

By Aviva Presser Aiden

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In *Parshat Ki Tetze*, the Torah describes the mitzvah of *yibum*, the levirate marriage, which is invoked when a man dies without children. *Yibum* requires that the man's eldest brother marry the widow and father children that will bear the name of the deceased, in order that the lineage not be lost from Israel.¹ Acknowledging that this role can be difficult or at times impossible to perform, the Torah provides an alternative: In the event a man could not, or would not, accept the responsibility of *yibum*, *chalitzah* is done, a ritual in which the brother must publicly declare that he will not accept this responsibility. The widow is then free to marry outside her deceased husband's family.²

In the modern day, *yibum* is practically nonexistent. How then, can we approach this *mitzvah* without relegating it to the pile of the obscure and irrelevant? It begs a reimagining, enabling contemporary Jews to relate it to our own experience of death, descendants and legacy.

We can find such a reimagining in Rashi's commentary to *Parshat Noach*, at the beginning of the Torah. The story of Noach begins with the verse: "These are the descendents of Noach; Noach was a righteous man." Rashi explains the unusual juxtaposition of Noach's descendents to his righteousness. He suggests that this phrasing is written thus to teach us that "the primary offspring of the righteous are good deeds."

This perspective suggests that a person's "offspring" can include not only the physical descendents that carry on his genetic legacy, but also the deeds and causes that perpetuate his spiritual legacy. Thus, when someone leaves the world, the mitzvah of *yibum* suggests that others should take up the 'widowed' causes he has left behind, ensuring that the person's spiritual legacy will endure.

The Civil Rights Movement was one such cause that lost a great founder and leader, and was taken up and carried forward by another. In 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The group was created to harness the moral authority and organizing power of black churches to conduct non-violent protests in the service of civil rights reform. King led the SCLC until his assassination in 1968, after which, his associate Ralph Abernathy took over leadership of the organization. Abernathy took King's work forward and to new levels, keeping the dream alive, and allowing King's work to continue bearing fruit even after he was no longer there to ensure it was produced.

The role of the proverbial levir doesn't always ensure kudos and acknowledgement; after all, the children of the levirate marriage are named for the deceased, not for their biological father. We see a parallel phenomenon in our reinterpretation: how many people have heard of Ralph Abernathy, compared to those

¹ Deuteronomy 25:5.

² Deuteronomy 25:7-10.

who recognize the name Martin Luther King? Clearly, the fight for civil rights has been named after King, the 'elder brother,' while Abernathy's own role in his life's work is relegated to the mere footnotes of history.

Few of us are called, as Abernathy was, to be the anonymous soul devoting years of life bearing the mantle of another's work. But there are small ways in which we can achieve this immortality for those whose lives and work we cherish. Donating to causes they valued continues and extends that which they worked to build up. Volunteering for an organization they founded or supported can achieve similar goals. By striving to extend the gifts our loved ones gave to the world, we can live this reimagined mitzvah of *yibum*, and ensure the continued presence of those gifts, and their memory, in this world we live in.



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