

Yiskor, 5773

Yitgadal v'yitkaddash, sh'meh rabbah...

Just the sound of those three words, for many Jews, opens a floodgate of emotions: loss, longing, comfort, belonging, fear...

One can not overstate the emotional freight of *Kaddish*.

Kaddish is so evocative yet few Jews know even what the words mean, let alone its origin and history. *Yiskor*, when we remember all those we have lost, seems a most appropriate time to learn about *Kaddish*. To me, the *Yiskor* service is an elongated form of *Kaddish*, a defiant nod to finitude; yes, all that comes into being most go out of being; all that lives must die, but... great is life, The Giver of Life and the lives of our loved ones who live on in us. *Yit'gadal v'yitkadash, sh'me rabbah*.

Let's start with the words:

“Exalted and hallowed be God's greatness in this world of Your creation. May Your will be fulfilled and Your sovereignty revealed in the life of the whole house of Israel speedily and soon. And let us say, amen. May You be blessed for ever, even to all eternity. May You, most Holy One, be blessed, praised and honored, extolled and glorified, adored and exalted above all else. Blessed are You beyond all blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that may be uttered in this world, in the days of our lifetime, and let us say amen. May peace abundant descend from heaven with life for us and for all Israel and let us say, amen. May God, who makes peace on high, bring peace to all and to all Israel, and let us say, amen.”

Did you notice? There is not one mention of death in the *kaddish*. In fact, *Kaddish* is a doxology, an extended praise of God, with what I call, a messianic flourish, an appeal that God will reenter history and make heaven on earth now, in our time. (*Oseh shalom...*).

Here come the flood of questions: how can *Kaddish* not be about death? What does it mean to praise life and The Creator of Life in the face of death? Where does *Kaddish* come from? Where does its' power lie?

We will start with a little history which, I'm sorry to say, will be less than satisfying because like so many things Jewish, *Kaddish* is so ancient, we don't have a lot of certainty about its origin or its development over time. What do we know?

Kaddish is very old; its origins probably go back as late as the 1st century BCE. As the prayer developed over time the words changed a bit; mostly there were additions, and its use evolved. Many scholars believe that originally *Kaddish* was recited at the end of a session of Torah study. Over time *Kaddish* moved from that use to also being associated with honoring deceased Torah scholars; after a study session in the scholar's honor, the group would recite *Kaddish*. At some point communities stopped differentiating between scholars and everybody else so that eventually *Kaddish* was recited for all those who passed away. It appears that this evolutionary process was accelerated during the Middle Ages due to the misery—Plague, Blood Libel Crusades - and from that time on, *Kaddish* was firmly associated with remembering the dead.

One confusing thing about *Kaddish* is that there are actually 5 forms of the

prayer. This is not the place to explore the other uses of *Kaddish*, but I do think it's helpful for you to know that there are many forms of *Kaddish* and that the form I am speaking about right now is the Mourner's *Kaddish*, or *Kaddish Yatom* literally, the Orphan's *Kaddish*.

Perhaps the most famous story in our tradition about the use of *Kaddish* and remembering the dead is about Rabbi Akiva, who is one of, if not the greatest, Sages of the Talmud. It goes something like this:

Rabbi Akiva, while walking past a cemetery at night, sees a ghost carrying a large burden of wood on his head and he asks, "Why do you labor so?"

Responds the apparition, "Do not detain me because my superiors will be angry. I am a dead man. Every day I am punished by being sent out to chop wood for a fire in which I am to be consumed."

Rabbi Akiva, clearly troubled, asks, "My son, what was your work in the world from which you came?"

"I was a tax collector," answers the ghost, "I would be lenient with the rich and oppress the poor."

Rabbi Akiva then asks if there is a way to save him. The ghost tells Rabbi Akiva that his only salvation would be if he had a son who would say *Kaddish* and have the congregation respond, "*Amen–Yehi shmei rabba mevorach l'alom ulalmei almaya*-let God's great name be blessed forever and ever."

So, Rabbi Akiva sets out to save this man. Returning to his town, he asks

about the tax collector. While the townspeople curse the tax collector, they also tell him that he had fathered - unbeknownst to him - a non-Jewish son. Rabbi Akiva finds that son, brings him into the covenant, teaches him to pray, and equips him to say *Kaddish*. After the passage of some time, Rabbi Akiva brings the boy into the synagogue where he says *Kaddish* and the congregation responds “*Amen, Yhei shemei rabba...let God’s great name...*” At that very moment, the man is saved from his eternal punishment and thanks Rabbi Akiva in a dream.

Wild story! It is also possibly the source of the Jewish folk belief that by saying *Kaddish* for our loved ones in the first year after they die, we atone for any sins they committed in this world that they are suffering for in the *Olam Habah*, the World to Come.

From the very beginning, this understanding of *Kaddish* was disputed by the Rabbis, but maintained by the people. (Like *Kapparah & Kol Nidre*)

I have trouble relating to the literal implications of the story, but on the plane of metaphor there is great wisdom to be mined here. As the renowned scholar and orthodox Rabbi Morris Lamb writes in his book, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*:

“the *Kaddish* is a spiritual handclasp between the generations, one that connects two lifetimes. What better consolation is there for the mourner than the knowledge that the ideas and hopes and concerns and commitments of the deceased continue on in the life of his own family? The son's recitation of *Kaddish* represents a continuation of that life; it snatches the deepest worth of the individual from the cavernous jaws of death.” (pg 158)

I love the picture of the “handclasp”, as if the distance between those we love and lose and our self, is not so great, like a veil, which we can reach through and touch our loved ones, at least in spirit.

There is a saying from our tradition, *mah zero b'khayim, af hu b'khayim, As long as one's children live, so do the parents.* True for teachers and students or any kind of mentoring relationship....

That to me is the meaning of *zikhrono livrakha /May they be remembered for a blessing;* in as much as we incorporate what was good and enduring about our loved ones in our lives, they are not dead rather, they live on in us.

It also seems true that children can redeem the memory of their parents, they being a continuation of the family legacy.

Think about the immigrant experience and our ancestor's aspirations for the next generation. They worked their fingers to the bone so that we could become doctors, lawyers, etc.

There are a few other practical things I want you to know about *Kaddish*.

Traditionally *Kaddish* is only said for one's close relatives – mother, father, sister, brother, child, spouse – and, only men are obligated to recite *Kaddish*...

For a parent, you are supposed to say *Kaddish* for 11 months..., for other close relatives, 30 days. To recite *Kaddish* according to *halakha*, you need a *minyán*...

Reform Judaism gives Tradition a vote but not a veto in our lives; informed

choice is our ideal, so we do not necessarily feel bound by these rules, still, there are some things we can learn in struggling with them.

For example, not all losses are the same. I want to be cautious here because I don't think anyone can know what another person is going through, and I bet more than a few of you here are mourning for people who would not technically be considered, close relatives. Yet, in general, losing a parent, God forbid, a sibling or a child, is a larger emotional earthquake than losing a friend.

This came up at Shomrei Torah the year before I arrived. The question was "Can you say *Kaddish* for a pet?" This, I believe was a question of the 7th Grade class the year our then part-time rabbi, Shelly Waldenberg (he shared the pulpit with Rabbi Michael one year) submitted the question to the Reform Responsa Committee for an "official" reply. What do you think they said? "No."

You know how much I love my dogs, yet I have to agree with the committee; a dog is not the same as a human being let alone a family member. Yet, I know there are folks who say *Kaddish* for their pets; who are we to judge their loss?

Another lesson to learn is the solace and power of being in community. While I would never deny someone the ability to say *Kaddish* by themselves, that does not take away from the value of being in community especially when you are mourning. There is nothing lonelier than being a mourner. It is such a singular experience; no one really knows what we are going through... It is also intensely narcissistic for good and for ill.

As hard as it is to be around people when we are raw with grief, community for the grieving can often be a kind of safety net, making sure we don't just fall into the abyss of death and loss. There is also comfort in knowing that even in our singularity; even though we ultimately walk through the valley of the shadow by ourselves, we are not alone.

For me, *Kaddish* is a handclasp from one generation to the next and a hug, a communal embrace that transcends time as if all our ancestors are here standing with us, saying with us, “*yitgadal, v'yitkadash, sh'meh rabbah.*”

But what about the words? How do we make sense of the words?

In truth, I do not think the words matter that much; *Kaddish* functions on a symbolic level. Judaism has few symbols and *Kaddish* is one of them...(The *Torah, Hannukia, Kol Nidre, Magen David*). As a symbol it encompasses everything –personal and communal. That's precisely why the flood gate of emotion opens just hearing the sound of the first few words: *Yitgadal v'yit kaddash sh'meh rabbah.*

Nevertheless, we can and should make meaning out of the words. This is my understanding of their meaning:

We praise life and The Source of Life, even in death to make clear that our loved ones lives and ours are not defined by death, but rather by the life they lived and the life we live. The lasting memory, the way we want to remember our dead is not in the way they died – *hasv'halilah!* – rather, in the way they lived.

The Messianic flourish, the prayers for *shalom* are there, mostly for emphasis; our ultimate goal is to transcend death all together and create heaven on earth! On a more mundane level, the repetition of shalom/peace is a charge for us to make peace in various ways including with our dead who we may still struggle with. This is how Anita Diamant puts it in her book *Saying Kaddish*:

“There are many kinds of peace. *Kaddish* speaks to both inner peace and to the peace of the whole world. And, because of the connection between *Kaddish* and the ties that bind families together, it is also very much about *shalom bayit* – peace within the home, within the family.”

Every death leaves unfinished family business; saying *Kaddish* in the memory of a loved one is one way that mourners forgive the dead and themselves...*Kaddish* helps replace grudges and guilt with shalom – peace for the mourner, peace among the mourners, peace for all mourners of Zion.” (Pg. 20)

Kaddish is a complex experience: we are here for so many reasons...

Some are remembering parents long gone, others bear fresher wounds. Others lost a sibling or a child or a close friend. Many are remembering more than a few people. As Rabbi Michael used to say, “loss is accumulative...”

For some, the memories evoked now are nurturing, as if you are having a cup of tea and some *ruglach* with your *bubbie*, your grandmother. For others, remembering is painful, hard, a struggle, the reopening of a wound.

Our differences are precisely what brings us together in this moment of vulnerability. We need each other now more than ever. The handclasp is not just from us to our dead but also with each other; together we can stand, alone, at least some of us, would fall.

I will close with the renowned Jewish poet, Marge Piercy's free rendering of *Kaddish Yatom*:

Look around us, search above us, below, behind.
We stand in a great web of being joined together.
Let us praise, let us love the life we are lent
passing through us in the body of Israel
and our own bodies, let's say amen.

Time flows through us like water.
The past and the dead speak through us.
We breathe out our children's children, blessing.

Blessed is the earth from which we grow,
blessed the life we are lent,
blessed the ones who teach us,
blessed the ones we teach,
blessed is the word that cannot say the glory
that shines through us and remains to shine
flowing past distant suns on the way to forever.
Let's say amein.

Blessed is light, blessed is darkness,
but blessed above all else is peace

which bears the fruits of knowledge
on strong branches, let's say amein.

Peace that bears joy into the world,
peace that enables love, peace over Israel
everywhere, blessed and holy is peace,
let's say amein. (From The Art of Blessing the Day)