

The Mourners' Kaddish: Lighting a Candle in the Darkness

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Last week I was invited to hear Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speak at the 92nd Street Y. It was a moving gathering, particularly because of the presence of Elie Wiesel who introduced the Prime Minister and spoke of their longstanding relationship and the important nature of the Prime Minister's role in history. Elie Wiesel noted that any decision that the Prime Minister makes for the State of Israel is always impacted by the memory of Jewish suffering. And, when Netanyahu took the stage and praised Wiesel's life devoted to preserving memories and testifying of the horrors of the Holocaust, he reminded us that "all it takes for a memory to be erased and lies to be propagated is for misstatements to go unopposed."

Today is a day of remembering our past year, our past deeds, our past sins, of commission and omission....and it is the day to remember our loved ones who have died and left this world. How can we maintain their memories? How can we make sure that we do not sink into the darkness and despair that suffering and death can bring, so that we can stand tall to recite the Kaddish and speak of the deceased in a way that honors his or her memory?

Netanyahu told a story of being summoned to meet the Lubavitch Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, on the eve of Simhat Torah 1984 / 5745. Surrounded by a packed house of hundreds of Hasidim, the Rebbe spoke with Netanyahu and offered him words that seem to have inspired his work in the UN when he was the Israeli ambassador and inspired his mission to this day as he delivered a powerful speech last week before the United Nations.

So the story with the Rebbe goes this way...by the way, I was a bit disappointed to have traveled into the city during the week before Yom Kippur to hear the Prime Minister, only to have to listen to a story about the Lubavitch rebbe. For some reason, no one tells such stories of people being summoned and receiving wisdom from the Chancellors of JTS or the heads of United Synagogue?!

But, let's hear the story. The rebbe told Netanyahu that he was going into a house of lies, a very dark place and that he must remember that when you light a candle in a pitch-black hall, that one small flame will be seen from afar. Netanyahu's mission was to light a candle for truth and the Jewish people, and really this is what we are all about. We light candles in the darkness. We speak truth to lies. We invoke justice in the face of oppression and persecution. We seek equality in a place of discrimination.

We light candles in the darkness. We give priority to life over death. I love the halacha, the legal ruling, that when a funeral procession and a wedding party meet at crossroads in the street, the wedding party must go first. We light candles in the darkness. When a person dies and lies on their death bed, there is a tradition that we light a candle and place it near their head. We light candles in the darkness. When we mourn, and our soul is heavy. When we grieve and can only see tears and pain, we light a candle in the darkness.

We literally light memorial candles on every occasion of memory. There is no prayer to be said. It is not a commandment from God to light the candle. It is a tradition which we have learned from our people, from our past and from our suffering. We light a candle in the darkness, because life can not be consumed by grief, sadness, misery and fear.

The mourners' kaddish is a beautiful prayer that lights a candle in the darkness. We stand up and say the mourners' kaddish—after someone's death, during the period of mourning, on the anniversary of their death—the *yahrzeit*—as well as at special times of the year—Yom Kippur and the harvest festivals-- Shemini Atseret, Pesah and Shavuot. We stand up and recite these words:

Hallowed and exalted may God be throughout the created world. May God's sovereignty soon be accepted, during our own life and the life of all Israel. And let us say: Amen.

Let us praise God' name throughout all time.

Glorified and celebrated, lauded and worshipped, acclaimed and honored, extolled and exalted may the Holy One be, praised beyond all song and psalm, beyond all tributes which mortals can utter. And let us say: Amen.

Let there be abundant peace from Heaven with life's goodness for us and for all the people Israel and let us say: Amen.

May the One who brings peace to the universe bring peace to us and to all the people Israel. And let us say: Amen.

If we read over these words and analyzed them without the context of mourning and death, we would not think that the mood was meant to be grim. The one who utters these words seems very happy with God – God is praised, blessed, celebrated, good – God's goodness is beyond description, beyond anything that we could say....And yet, as the mourner says these words, often from a place of sorrow and anger and pain...how can their expression be reflective or, rather, is it meant to be transformational?

The experience of being at a loss for words could match our mood as mourners. Our inability to understand and explain what has happened and why. Our inability to feel any sense of power in the face of something greater than us—the force of life, the Creator who created this world with all its faults, including the experience of death.

Some of us come to the mourner's kaddish with a sense of relief and blessing. Our loved one lived a full life and died a good death at a good age. Our gratitude can ring out in our praise of God and our inability to sing God's praises fully.

Some of us come to the mourners kaddish with an overwhelming sense of pain and suffering. We are angry that our loved one was taken from us. We can not find any reason for our loss, any reason for their absence. The words of kaddish can be bitter on our tongues. How dare God demand praise in this moment. But, over time, the fullness of kaddish could provide some healing. Over time, the beauty of Kaddish's imagery might heal our pain, might offer us redemption.

If the world seems dark, without meaning or purpose, the words of the Kaddish could light our way. They could remind us that there is goodness in the world, that there are people who need us and work that we need to do. If we are lost and cannot find our way after the death of a loved one, the kaddish brings light to the darkness and gives us a mission. Just as we pray to God for peace, we must work as God's partners for peace, for healing in our lives, in our families, in our communities and in our world.

If we are feeling alone, the tradition of Kaddish links us with the generations and with our community. When we recite the kaddish in the ancient Aramaic, we recite the words that were said by our ancestors, are said by others in the community, and will be said by the next generation in our honor. We are not alone when we say the kaddish. Our loved one is present in our life in the moment we rearrange our day to say kaddish, move our schedule around to find a minyan...by saying Kaddish we keep our loved one in our life, our thoughts focused on them, to honor them, remember them and never forget them.

And we are feeling alone, and want to retreat/withdraw, stop the world so we can get off....the kaddish draws us into a circle of ten. The Kaddish connects us with the minyan that is sustained for and by those who have lost loved ones. We stand to say kaddish and are meant to feel supported by the community's response to our words, by the others who have suffered similar losses and can now recognize their fellow mourners and offer their support.

The kaddish prayer lights a candle in the darkness. It makes no mention of death, but rather of life and peace, Goodness and God's glory. It occurs to me that maybe all the praises of God are meant to comfort us and lead us to focus on the good, on the blessings, on praise for God and praise for the one whom we have lost, one of God's creations. Just as God is blessed, praised, honored, extolled and adored, worthy of blessings and praise, provide or blessings...so was our loved one. The Kaddish shines light on the blessings we enjoyed because our loved one walked the earth with us.

The Kaddish leads us to a place of peace. It guides us to accept God's rule over the earth and our lack of power and control. The Kaddish leads us to grow in faith, to accept the presence of God in the gaping hole where the departed's love and attention once were. The Kaddish shines a light on the future and looks forward to a time when healing, wholeness and peace will once again be experienced. The Kaddish offers us hope, the longer we recite it, the more it works on our soul, heals our wounds and strengthens our spirit.

On this Yom Kippur may we honor our loved ones by reciting the Kaddish. May we remember them as they were. May we remember the blessings we enjoyed because they were a part of our lives. Let us praise God for their lives, and dedicate ourselves anew to the task which unites the generations: to continue our traditions and labor for a better world, defined by peace.
And let us all say: Amen.