

I didn't say Mourner's Kaddish last night and this morning, the first time in 11 months when I was at a service, when we had a minyan, when I didn't say Kaddish. Before I started saying Kaddish for my father, I tried to avoid saying Mourner's Kaddish as much as possible. I didn't want Mourner's Kaddish to become a routine, something that I led because I was the rabbi. When I began saying Kaddish, I wanted it to feel differently than it had before I was a mourner. And now that I am no longer saying Kaddish, I will again try to avoid saying Mourner's Kaddish in order to preserve the sanctify of the holy experience of what it means to say Kaddish as a mourner.

Over the past year my experience of saying Kaddish has been dynamic. There is no simple, one size fits all answer to why we say Kaddish or why we join together to recite memorial prayers four times a year at Yizkor. Sometimes I said Kaddish because it felt good to be with my ancestors. When I was at Beth El in Minneapolis where I grew up, I was in the synagogue that my father and my grandfather belonged to. I sat in the seats in the approximate location where I used to sit and play with my father's tallit and I watched the Bar Mitzvah family and remembered when it was me sitting there next to my parents watching my sisters on the Bima. Kaddish cements a link between my grandfather, my father, and me; and when my children are sitting next to me, I felt four generations beside me. Saying Kaddish and during Yizkor when we recite memorial prayers, we are inviting generations of our family members to join us. We might remember when they used to visit us for the life cycle events of our children or we might remember when they sat next to us when this congregation met in a previous building. You might be remembering sitting next to them in a different congregation in a different city or you might be remembering sitting with them in a different faith community. When you recite Kaddish or memorial prayers here today or any day, they are all invited to join you. Kaddish and Yizkor have broad shoulders, broad enough to hold the memories of all of our loved one who we invite to join us here.

I made a point when traveling to visit a synagogue to say Kaddish, not because I was in a place associated with my ancestors but because it was a chance to plug into a Jewish community to fulfill an obligation. I was in Milwaukee twice in the past year and went to a Conservative synagogue. By the second visit, the third morning I was there, the regulars recognized me. It doesn't take long to become appreciated by a morning minyan. That second visit I ran into an old friend from Minneapolis who was visiting from Los Angeles who I hadn't seen in at least 15 years. He was there by chance visiting his mother, and was also saying Kaddish for his father, so I was able to renew a friendship and we were able to help each other make a minyan. I didn't necessarily feel like I was connecting with my father but I felt good about taking advantage of the opportunity not only to say Kaddish but to enable others to do so as well. I go to minyan not only to fulfill my own personal selfish desire to pray and say Kaddish, but to make sure that I am fully present and supporting others as well. The obligation and ritual of saying Kaddish is comforting precisely because it places the mourner in the midst of a community of people who understand loss. I didn't know them and they didn't know me, I didn't know their loss, their grief, how recent it was, whether it was a spouse, a parent, a sibling, or a child, but those of us who stood for Mourner's Kaddish shared each other's pain.

The most unexpected parts of my Kaddish journey over the past year were all the times that I would say Kaddish while wondering what effect the words I was saying were having on my father's soul. I would imagine his soul present in the room, hovering over me, taking comfort

from the words of Kaddish. I don't know whether Kaddish soothed or elevated my father's soul, but it did so to my soul. There have been times, many times over the past year that I have been deeply saddened precisely when the time came to say Kaddish. But the truth was that I had been internally off-kilter and the moment of mourner's kaddish simply allowed my grief to bubble to the surface where I could recognize it for what it was. Over the past year, I recognized periods during which my reactions were off, times when I was emotionally unstable. I found that reciting Mourner's Kaddish and shedding a few tears served as a kind of emotional system reset.

But aside from what Kaddish was doing to my soul, I kept returning to these thoughts of what effect Kaddish was having on my father's soul, the most ancient of reasons to recite Kaddish. Although Mourner's Kaddish feels like an ancient prayer, it dates back only to the 13th century.

The 13th century *Midrash Or Zarua* tells the following story. In a dream, Rabbi Akiva once saw a man, his face blackened from coal dust, running while carrying a very heavy load of wood on his shoulder. Rabbi Akiva asks the man to stop. "Why are you working so hard," he asks him. The man answers: "Please don't detain me lest my supervisors be upset with me. You see, I am from the dead. Every day I am forced to chop, gather and carry this heavy burden of wood."

"What did you do in life to merit so heavy a punishment?" Rabbi Akiva asks him. "I was a tax-collector. I used to favor the rich and oppress the poor." "But tell me," Rabbi Akiva persists, "have you discovered, in that world, any way in which I can help you, anything I can do to alleviate your pain, your burden?"

The man answers: "All I can say is what I have heard: If I had a son who could stand up in the congregation and proclaim publicly: *ברוך אתה המבורך* - 'Blessed be Adonai who is to be blessed' - to which the people would say: *ברוך ה' המבורך לעולם ועד* - 'Blessed be Adonai who is to be blessed for ever and ever' - if I would have such a son, I understand that my sufferings would ease. But I left no son. Yes, when I died, it's true, my wife was pregnant, but even if she had a son, there would be no one to teach him..."

That is all that Rabbi Akiva had to hear. Upon awakening, he resolves to find out as much as he can about this man and the child that he never knew. He finds the town in which he lived, and that, indeed, he did have a son, a boy who was abandoned by the community, uncircumcised and unschooled. Rabbi Akiva personally provides for his needs, circumcises him, teaches him, until he is able to stand up in shul and say *ברוך אתה המבורך*. This he does, and the congregation blesses him. He then continues: "יהא שמה" and the congregation responds: "רבה מברך..." This is the first recorded instance of a Mourner's Kaddish recited by a son for a parent. The man again appears to Rabbi Akiva in a dream and blesses him, for now is he able to rest peacefully.

Mourner's Kaddish is redemptive. It is an obligation precisely because it saves the soul of the person for whom it be being said, and it requires witnesses. Years ago, I suggested that those who are not reciting Yizkor memorial prayers, who have customarily left the room during this part of the service, should consider remaining. Kaddish requires not only a minyan, but also affirmation. When we who are saying Kaddish say *v'imru Amen*, we hope that someone answers, "Amen." When we say, *v'yamlikh malkhutei b'hayekhon uv'yomekhon uv'hayei d'khol beit yisrael, ba'agala u'vizman kariv v'imru amen*, "May God's sovereignty soon be accepted during our lifetime and the life of all Israel. And let us say, amen." We hope that someone will respond, "Amen, may His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity" because this is the response

that will release a loved one from service working off the sins they bear from their lifetime, according to this theology.

If we have a room full of mourners, we have no one to say Amen to the Kaddish. It becomes a kind of berakha L'vatala, a blessing in vain. The last time I said this, more than 20 years ago, I got a bit of pushback from those whose family custom was to leave during Yizkor. The custom is based on a bit of superstition that one who is blessed to have a living parent shouldn't tempt the evil eye by remaining in the room while prayers are said by those who are mourning a parents.

As I had been reciting Mourner's Kaddish, I thought of my father's soul, and I thought about whether each time I said Kaddish his soul would be elevated. I was also aware that the reason that we cease saying Kaddish at 11 months is that only the most wicked of individuals takes a full year to work off the burden of sin and be fully elevated into heaven and we never imagine that our loved one will require the full year to achieve the blessings of *gan eden*, the Garden of Eden. I couldn't imagine that my father's soul would be delayed even close to 11 months, except I needed him close to me for the extra 11 months for myself. So I have imagined his soul hovering nearby as a comforting presence and my recitation of Kaddish slowly easing it away from me, even if he has not been working in the burning coal mines chopping wood for the past 11 months.

I tease Stuart for being unable to complete the chanting of Kol Nidre without breaking into tears. But what a blessing it is to be able to be in a community in which one can shed tears safely. The same group of people who provide support during shiva, who provide support during a serious illness, provide a comforting and understanding presence if and when a few tears trickle down your cheek when you recite a Yizkor memorial prayer or can't get through shehehiyanu after Kol Nidre. We might recite Mourner's Kaddish to elevate our loved one's soul, we might recite it to soothe our own troubled souls; we might recite Kaddish to connect with others experiencing grief, or we might recite Kaddish to be in the same physical place as our loved one or to recreate that place in the the space of our imaginations. Our Yizkor memorial service is a brief pause in which we give ourselves the time, just for a few moments, to immerse ourselves in the memories of those whom we love, who are no longer with us.