

Rabbi Daniel Berman
Temple Reyim
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Yitgadal v'Yitkadash: These Words We Know

Lshanah tovah and gmar chatimah tovah.

May we all be sealed for a year of blessing, healing and strength.

More than any others, these words we know.

yitgadal v'yitkadash shme raba

I first heard the words of kaddish in my home when my mother's mother Esther died. It was the year before I left to live in Israel. I knew the words only theoretically at that point. When my mother said kaddish, I wondered what it was like to chant these words. I never imagined I would need them.

Until then, these words only belonged to people I didn't know. One of our shul's older members, a very quiet woman, always said mourner's kaddish. Every Shabbat she stood up and chanted the words. She was a survivor of the Shoah. I remember wondering if she repeated these words in the morning, afternoon and evening every day. If they were her only words of prayer. Or if she had any other words at all.

*B'alma divra chirutey vayimlich malchutey bchayachon uvyomeychon uvchayei dchol beit yisrael
ba'agalah u'vizman kariv v'imru, Amen.*

Even the slightest shift in the emphasis of a syllable or a misplaced pause during kaddish can be jarring.

There are two ways to experience the change.

It can be an opening, allowing in light that had not yet come through, so that we chant the prayer with a particularly open heart. This may be true when saying kaddish many years after a loss of a loved one who lived fully, and aged gracefully, who died in his or her time. Though painful, we anticipated that they would die before we do.

Or it can be agonizing - a departure from a rhythm that's the only thing keeping us together; a reminder how little we can rely on if we can't even get these words right. This may be particularly

true when saying kaddish soon after the loss of a loved one who died before his or her time. Unexpectedly. Tragically. We never imagined we would have to still be living when it came time to bury them.

There is no pattern to how we grieve for those we love. Kaddish will hit us differently - unexpectedly - much of the time. That's the only thing we know.

Yheh shmeh raba mivarach, l'ulam ul'almei almay.

Many years ago now, I left my home after graduating high school to live in Israel. After spending the first months on a kibbutz in the desert and then the winter in Jerusalem, I moved north to the lower Galil, to work in a religious youth aliyah village, called Neve Amiel. The village specializes in education and therapeutic support for children suffering from the trauma of immigration, displacement and abandonment. Most of the children at Neve Amiel were recent Ethiopian immigrants.

Many were orphaned, having lost their parents while in Ethiopia, or to violence or illness during a month-long trek to refugee camps in Sudan, where they were rescued and brought to Israel.

Though living now in a religious setting, most of the children were not from religious families. They were studying Torah and learning Jewish prayer for the first time. The tropes and rhythms of torah reading, prayer, and blessings were new.

My job was clear: I was there to help the children learn Hebrew to support their integration into Israel. Of course I spent most of my time going for walks and playing games and learning from them. They were far better teachers of Amharic than I was of Hebrew. My greatest contribution, I think, is that, together with another volunteer from North Carolina, I taught them how to play baseball. I will never forget the images of these children hitting a ball I pitched and running straight down to second base, and continuing on to center field, with all the other children following them, trying to catch them.

I became very close friends with a boy just a couple of years younger than me named Gadi. Gadi had been at Neve Amiel for a little more than one year. He had one older family member who lived outside Haifa. The rest of his family had died.

Despite my admittedly weak protests, Gadi brought me tea and biscuits every morning at about 6 am. I made sure go to bed hungry every night just to be able to eat biscuits early in the morning. He'd sit next to me and hold my hand until I finished.

In the late spring, I saw Gadi reacting very angrily, almost violently, to a leader of the youth village.. He had just told Gadi that his sole family member had died.

The next morning, Gadi came to my room at 6 am. He asked me to stand with him.

yitbarach vyishtabach vyitpa'ar vyitromam vyitnasch

same tones. same rhythm.

A month later, my father's father, my grandfather Max, died. Observing the mitzvah of a quick burial, his funeral was held soon after he died. Living in an observant community, and being across the ocean, I didn't learn of his death until after Shabbat, and didn't have an opportunity to attend.

6am the next morning. Gadi, with biscuits and tea, and a group of Ethiopian children were standing next to me, helping me rise.

vyithadar vyitaleh vyithalal shemeh d'kudasha b'rich hu

These words we know.

We know their sound, their rhythm. We heard our grandparents or our parents chant them. Our children, our siblings, and our friends have sounded out, choked out, wailed out these words.

They are not just familiar or learned; they are ingrained, embedded in a collective consciousness of a people across the world that has turned to this prayer for 1000 years to sustain them and give them a ritual that will hold their loss.

Four years ago, Bible scholar and author James Kugel, who has taught at Harvard and now at Bar Ilan University in Israel, published his most personal book entitled, "In the Valley of the Shadow: On the Foundation of Religious Belief."

He wrote the book after being diagnosed, at age 54, with an aggressive form of cancer. Despite his illness, Kugel was intrigued by this new state of mind; it seemed to reveal something basic about the religions that he had been studying for years.

"I drove into Cambridge for my annual physical exam," he wrote, "and when I emerged an hour and a half later, I knew I had a pretty serious case of cancer...They told us that, with proper care, I could expect to live at least another two years without debilitating symptoms.

I was, of course disturbed and worried. But the main change in my state of mind was that—I can't think of a better way to put it—the background music suddenly stopped. It had always been there, the music of daily life that's

constantly going, the music of infinite time and possibilities; and now suddenly it was gone, replaced by nothing, just silence. There you are, just one little person, sitting in the late-summer sun, with only a few things left to do.

Life became very local: the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen. The people who love you loom large; their love is as tangible as bread. As for you, you are small. Your life is winding down now, and you can clearly see its end point; your life has become a compact, little thing. Good-bye.”

Then, making the ancient psalm his prayer, he wrote:

“O my God, do not take me halfway through life.
Your time stretches from age to age;
Long ago You created the earth, and even the sky is the work of Your hands;
Though they disappear, You will exist still.
Adonai, hear my prayer, and let my cry come before You:
Do not hide Your face from me in my time of trouble; hear me
When I cry out, and answer me soon.”

Kugel tapped into a conception of life in ancient times: the individual’s place in the world was understood as a temporary and finite piece of the network of the universe.

Over time, that conception changed. In pre-modern Western religious thought, the place of the individual grew, the world now viewed through the prism of his or her own all-encompassing presence.

When we are in our small self, Kugel wrote, we are able to perceive God’s presence that is outside and greater than ourselves; but when we are “big,” imagining ourselves as filling all of reality, it is harder to access God’s Divine presence.

Kaddish transports us, radically, into the ancient story. We no longer fill all of reality. God is outside of and greater than we are. Eternal, life giving, and transcendent.

Reaching out to this transcendence at the very moment of loss may be the only thing that allows us to endure the numbing encounter with placing those we love back into the earth.

l’elah mikol birchata v’shirata tushbichata v’nechamata da’amiran b’alma v’imru amen.

It’s often surprising and confusing saying kaddish for the first time after a loss. The prayer doesn’t mention death, mourning, or healing. It’s not reflective or personal.

Kaddish can stand in dizzying tension with the feelings of mourning: uprooted, disoriented, angry. It can be painful to exalt God's name. We may only be able to chant kaddish during times of loss for one reason: These words we know.

yiheh shlama raba min shamaya v'chayim aleynu v'al kol yisrael v'imru amen.

When someone you love dies suddenly, tragically, as so many of us have experienced, often we are counseled to understand grief and its stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Why do we ignore the first stage, I have wondered: surviving. breathing.

Once we can begin to grieve, we can focus on the love bond. But when trying to survive, how do we sort out threads of memory, guilt and sadness that confuse our identity with the identity of the one we lost? How do we separate the two selves? Or do we stay intimately and inextricably mingled so that we are experiencing our own death while alive?

Must all this be felt in silence?

Or are there words? Something to just grasp onto and not let go, which will soon be with us again, as the day wanes?

oseh shalom bimromav.

As an interfaith chaplain at Mass General Hospital during my rabbinic training, I sat with a young non-Jewish family. Their mother was being taken off life support momentarily. There was no father. Their mother held their family together for many years. They were distraught. They sat closely together and held hands. When the doctor came in to tell them she had died, they thanked him and they kneeled to pray: God, take our mother by the hand. Guide her gently. Shepherd her sweetly as her soul departs.

I was mesmerized by the consolation they received from the image. I wondered, do we have a prayer to gently guide and shepherd?

In traditional Jewish thought, saying kaddish fulfills two principles: honoring the one who has died, and honoring and comforting those who live. In reciting kaddish, the mourner becomes the shepherd. The soul of his or her loved one has left the body, and is on a journey towards a place of shalom. Kaddish guides that journey.

This is the great gift of Yizkor: we are together with the *neshamot* of those we have loved and lost. As we say kaddish, we are their loving companions, their shepherds.

And their *neshamot* are hovering, protecting, comforting and loving. ***If we're open to it, we can feel the souls of those we've lost next to us as we remember their lives.***

We imagine the person we have lost, not yet at rest, not yet in shalom, yearning for the loving touch of a shepherd who is not a savior or prophet but present, still, lifting up the soul and dignifying it by calling out the words”

hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu v'al kol yisrael v'imru amen.

We remember.

Nathan Matz

Paul Sorkin

Henry Linschitz

Herb Shulman

Carole Klevan

Sylvia Apelbaum

Ronald Richards

Aaron Marcus Kadish

Phoebe Altman

Esther Schneider

Gerald Albert

and

Corinne Ertel

During this Yizkor, may those you are remembering be a blessing for strength, for healing and for meaning.. May you be enriched by their memory, even as you acknowledge the pain of their loss. May their *neshamot* continue to echo through our lives and this sacred space.