

## WHEN STANDING 'ALONE' IS AN ACT OF COMMUNITY

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In Judaism there are only two prayers: the *Shema* and the *Kaddish*. Everything else is commentary. I make this bold generalization not from a theological perspective. I have no doubt that there are many rabbis and Jewish thinkers who would take serious issue with my oversimplification. I say this because these are the prayers everybody knows (even if they don't know all the words). These are the two texts with which all Jews are expected to have an intimate familiarity. And not coincidentally, they both revolve around death.

The *Shema* is supposed to be the last words on the lips of the Jew. And the *Kaddish* is the first text the mourner is required to recite following death of a loved one. And yet these two texts evoke in us very different reactions. Simply put: *Shema* is easy and *Kaddish* is hard.

*Shema* is easy to recite. As children we are taught to say *Shema Yisrael*. Only six words, it is the first prayer we learn when beginning our encounter with Judaism. Just show up here on Simchat Torah and watch as our consecrants stand beneath the *chuppah* in the middle of this sacred space, in the face of the Torah scrolls, and recite the *Shema*. It never ceases to get to me. (I even remember the day I first recited it — standing on the *bimah* of Detroit's Temple Beth El — 59 years ago.)

By contrast, we are rarely if ever prepared to recite *Kaddish*. It is the one prayer we hope never to have to say. And its challenging text notwithstanding — the prayer is not in Hebrew but rather Aramaic with more than its share of tongue-twisting multi-syllabic constructs — the recitation of *Kaddish* symbolizes pain and loss, the fragility of life and the emotional vulnerability that is life's constant companion. *Kaddish* is no one's favorite prayer.

It's interesting to note then that the *Kaddish* says absolutely nothing about death. As a matter of fact, this so troubled early Reform Jews (for whom everything in Judaism had to make sense) that they even composed a separate paragraph about the "dearly departed" that they included into the middle of the *Kaddish*. And they even wrote it in Aramaic. Anyone who grew up in a Classical Reform congregation might recall the opening words of paragraph 4: *Al Yisrael v'al tzadikaya v'al kol mahn d'itp'tar min alma hadein kirutay d'Elaha*. (And here you thought the regular *Kaddish* was hard to say.) The Union Prayer Book renders this awkward Aramaic: "To the departed whom we now remember, may peace and bliss be granted in life eternal."

But the *Kaddish* is not a prayer about death. It is a doxology. A praise of God. And in various forms — either abbreviated or elongated — it appears throughout the liturgy: as a space-divider between various sections of the service; as an affirmation of the reverence with which we embrace the study of Torah; as a supplication of the worship leader to accept our prayers; and — as we all know — as a praise of God to be recited by the mourner, or as the mourner is formally identified: *Yatom*. Mourner's *Kaddish* is technically known as *Kaddish Yatom*. The "Orphan's" *Kaddish*. And the reason it is to be recited following death and on the anniversary of death, so I have been taught, is to fend off any doubts we might be harborIng about God when we are most spiritually fragile. Don't lose faith, especially now. *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah*. May God's name be glorified and sanctified. Or, as it came to be rendered in Christianity, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name."

Tonight I have chosen to speak about *Kaddish* because, following several years of extended discussion, the Religious Living Committee has decided to slightly adjust our practice as to how we recite *Kaddish* in congregational worship.

As many of you know, traditionally only the mourner recites the prayer. And with the exception of the second paragraph -- *Yehei sh'mei Rabbah m'vorach* -- the only words the non-mourners are supposed to say are *Amein* (and one *B'rikh Hu*). Moreover, it is only the mourner who is supposed to stand. The rest of us remain seated. And this is the norm in all of traditional Judaism. But somewhere along the way Reform Judaism decided that everyone should stand and everyone should say *Kaddish*. Perhaps it was intended as a standing in solidarity with the mourner. Perhaps it was to avoid the embarrassment of the mourner if they did not know how to say the *Kaddish*. And then, in the years immediately following World War II, the custom of everyone standing and saying *Kaddish* became virtually sacrosanct in Reform as the returning rabbinic chaplains said, having seen first-hand the horrors of the Holocaust, that no Jew today has the privilege of not reciting *Kaddish* after Auschwitz. To this I have added my own caveat that we should all say *Kaddish* for the countless members of our people for whom no members of their families survived to say *Kaddish* for them. *Kaddish* became a way to forge a solidarity among the Jewish people, a way to bridge the gap between that tragic generation and ours.

But, as many of us have felt, along the way we paid a price for our noble inclusion, and that was our failure to identify the mourner in communal worship. For all our efforts to make us feel at-one with each other and with those who perished in the *Shoah*, we just kind of grouped everyone together when it came to acknowledging the memories of those who have preceded us. And so, even though we read a list of names, no one really knows to whom those names belong. And so, when someone comes into the sanctuary to say *Kaddish* because they are in mourning, unless they are known to us or unless we know that they are in mourning, they just get lost in the crowd. And their mourning, albeit in a very public setting, is more than private, it is anonymous. And after many years of struggling with this matter, the Religious Living Committee said, it's time for a change.

I want to share with you a story.

"For nearly thirty years, a phantom haunted the woods of Central Maine. Unseen and unknown, he lived in secret, creeping into homes in the dead of night and surviving on what he could steal. To the spooked locals, he became a legend — or maybe a myth. They wondered how he could possibly be real. Until one day last year, the hermit came out of the forest."

These are the opening words of Michael Finkel's compelling tale in last month's issue of *GQ Magazine*. It is the true story of Christopher Thomas Knight — or as he has come to be known — the North Pond Hermit. No one really knows exactly how long he lived in seclusion. Even he isn't sure. The last thing he remembers before walking into the woods was the Chernobyl nuclear accident. And in all that time he only uttered one word. To a hiker who happened upon him, just by chance. The hiker said "Hi." And Chris said "Hi" in return. That was it. One word in almost 27 years. So that when he was finally caught and arrested for all the burglaries over the years, he could hardly speak.

How he survived is nothing short of a miracle. On cheese and bacon and junk food he had stolen from nearby homes. And stolen sleeping bags. And stolen books. He learned to go to sleep when the sun went down and to awaken in the middle of the night so as not to freeze to

death in winter. He listened to the sounds of chickadees announcing the onset of spring. In all that time took no medicine, never received any kind of medical attention. His eyesight deteriorated. As did his teeth. He fattened himself on candies and alcohol in the late autumn in order to survive the harsh Maine winters. And as difficult as it was — the physical and emotional suffering at times were unbearable — he never gave serious thought to ever returning to society. He was committed to spending the rest of his life alone.

When asked why he fled from the world, he did not answer. He just left home one day, walked into the woods, and was gone forever. Until May of 2013. When he was finally caught. And while the reactions of his burglary victims were mixed — from "let him go" to "lock him up and throw away the keys" (for some felt that worse than the items he took from them was their peace of mind) — he confessed to thirteen counts of burglary and theft and was sentenced to seven months of imprisonment. By court order he must meet with the judge weekly, avoid alcohol, and find work or go to school. He now lives with his mother and is forbidden to return to the woods. Any violation of these terms will result in a return to jail for seven years.

When asked by Mr. Finkel what he had learned, Chris embraced the notion that he was a "hermit" yet refused to philosophize about his isolation. "Anyone who reveals what he's learned [in seclusion] is not (by his definition) a true hermit." And when asked about Thoreau who spent two years at Walden, Chris dismissed him with a single word: "Dilettante."

"But you must have thought about things," Finkel asked. "About your life, about the human condition." And to this Finkel writes that Chris became surprisingly introspective. "I did examine myself," he said. "Solitude did increase my perception. But here's the tricky thing — when I applied my increased perception to myself, I lost my identity. With no audience, no one to perform for, I was just there. There was no need to define myself; I became irrelevant. I didn't even have a name. I never felt lonely...I was completely free."

I find Christopher's story a remarkable tale. Almost something out of a story-book. Although it's not so clear if this is a happy or a tragic ending. He has been reunited with his mother who thought he was dead. But he inhabits a world that is entirely alien. How can we not but sympathize with him? There's almost a romantic quality to him. But there's also a tragic quality to Chris. While his notion of "losing his identity," of being at-one with nature and becoming, in his words, "completely free" might have a ring of enchantment, while it might seem spiritually ideal to be so much at peace with his soul, his isolation runs contrary to everything we Jews believe.

The story is told about a woman who sells all her worldly goods and books passage on a steamer to Tibet to meet the great Maharishi. After a month at sea, she arrives in the foothills of the Himalayas, hires a Sherpa guide, and embarks on a ten-day trip up to the mountain-top retreat. When she reaches the summit she says, "I would like to speak with the Maharishi." "The Great Seer only receives visitors once a week. You must wait five days." And so she waits. When the day finally arrives she goes to the shrine where he sits in meditation and is told, "You must wait until the sun reaches the horizon." So she waits until the end of the day. Finally, she returns and is informed, "You may only say three words." She pauses for a moment and says, "I can do that." Escorted into the sacred chamber, she assumes a crossed-legged position before the Maharishi. She lifts up her head, looks him in straight in the eye, and says: "Sidney — Come home!"

I've always loved this story because, notwithstanding our affinity for spiritual growth, we Jews have always eschewed the monastic life. For Judaism life takes on meaning only through engagement with others. *Lo tov heyote ha-Adam l'vado*. "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18), God says after having created only Adam. So, too, in the law code of Exodus, we are taught that when a servant says, "I love my master and I love my wife and children — I do not want to go free..." he shall be taken to the doorpost and have his ear pierced and belong to them forever (Exodus 21:5). For us life is about belonging. It is about connectedness. So suggests the great 19th century Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch when he wrote:

"One glorious chain of love, of giving and receiving, unites all creatures. None has power, or means, for itself; it receives in order to give; gives in order to receive, and finds therein the accomplishment of the purpose of its existence" (The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel).

In other words, we exist for no other reason than to connect to the other: past, present and future. Or as the psychologist Viktor Frankl taught, life takes on meaning only when we learn self-transcendence, the ability to rise above the needs of the self in the service of the other. While Christopher Walker, the North Pond Hermit, might have found peace in his solitude, his life has been completely devoid of meaning. Until, that is, we were able to share in his story.

When I stand up to say *Kaddish* I am affirming that I am not free. I am not alone. I am connected. That this person whose name is now uttered was important to me, made a difference in my life. And I want you to know that. I want you to know that I belong to this name. And while my recitation of *Kaddish* might be a verbalization of praise to God for this person, a way of saying: "I acknowledge to You God that You placed this person into my life," the act of standing up in the presence of community is also an affirmation that we are all connected, that I am part of you, that we are all bound to each other, and that it is our very connectedness that gives our lives meaning, especially the lives whose names we remember. And when the rest of us stand, let us be clear that we are not just doing that for those who left no one to stand for them. We are doing it as much for ourselves to remind ourselves that those who stand before us are not alone. We need to affirm this, too.

And that if we should choose to remain seated when the name of our loved one is recited, which is understandable, nevertheless while it might be an act of privacy, it is also an act of anonymity. And, to be sure, there are times when this feels right. It is just between us and our loved one. Maybe between us and God. Absolutely between us and ourselves. But unlike Christopher Knight for whom "freedom" means "loss of identity," we are of a people that teaches: "It is not good for man to be alone." We are a faith-tradition rooted in community. And our recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish* — whether it be when we go to the mourner's home or the mourners come to our communal home — the way in which we recite this prayer is our most honored illustration of the compassionate power of community.

A final thought. I'm sure it's just coincidence but in Hebrew the word to stand is *amad*, but when it is turned around and spelled backwards it becomes *damah* which means to shed a tear.

It occurs to me that when we cry our instinct is to hide: to hide our tears, even to hide ourselves. But when we stand, we literally turn our tears around. And while the act of standing might not stop the flow of tears, by standing up — alone — we set ourselves apart, if only for just a moment. Yet by so doing we set in motion the redemptive power of community. And this is the key to opening the gates of healing.