

Parashat Yitro, Rabbi James Proops

This coming week we will usher in the new month of Adar, with Purim just three weeks away, yet next week also brings another milestone for me personally. In just a matter of days the eleven month period of *aveilut* that I have been observing for my late father will conclude. It is hard to believe that almost a year has gone by and even harder to believe that we are still in the throngs of this pandemic. One of the most significant changes that comes with the completion of *aveilut* is the cessation of the recital of *Kaddish* by the mourner. Much has been written about the impact on a person that saying *Kaddish* can have. The dedication to attend minyanim, the public declaration of mourning and the cathartic relief that *Kaddish* can help express. A question that is often raised about this process, is that upon reflection we notice that the words of the *Kaddish* do not connote mourning in any way and do not reference those who we have lost, therefore what is the connection between the recital of this Aramaic prayer which praises God, to our *Aveilut*? One of the keys to unlocking the power of this ancient prayer can be found in comments by the Ba'al Haturim, Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (d. 1340) on *Parashat Bereishit*, which references a *pasuk* in this week's *parasha* of *Yitro*.

The Ba'al Haturim notes that the opening verse of the Torah “בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:” contains within it seven words and twenty-eight letters. He continues to point out that another verse in the Torah, that which introduces the *Aseret HaDibrot* (the Ten Commandments) “וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְיִאמֹר:” also contains a formulation of seven words and twenty-eight letters. He explains that is clearly no mere coincidence but rather a very symbolic correlation that we must pay attention to. There is an intrinsic connection to the creation of the world and the giving of the Torah.

We can understand this connection using the well-known *Medrash* which describes how the letter *Aleph* questioned Hashem's use of the letter *Bet* to begin the Torah. Why would Hashem pass over the *Aleph* for such an honor? The *Medrash* goes on to describe how Hashem placated the *Aleph* by revealing His intention to open the *Aseret HaDibrot* and the giving of the Torah using the letter *Aleph*. What are *Chazal* teaching us through the use of this cryptic and seemingly child-like story of Hashem's conversation with the letter *Aleph*? We learn from this interchange an extremely important principle which governed creation. Despite the fact that chronologically Hashem created the 'first', it is nonetheless to be viewed as 'secondary' to the giving and receiving of the Torah, hence why the Torah is given with the first letter of the *Aleph-Bet* and the description of creation begins with the

second. The message for us, is that the acceptance of Torah is of primary importance, despite taking place two thousand years later.

This principle is described clearly by Rashi in his comment on the *pasukim* regarding the sixth day of creation. The *pasuk* states “וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה - And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day”. Rashi, in seeking to explain the seemingly unnecessary ‘ה’ in וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים points out that, “The letter ה, the numerical value of which is 5, is added to the word וַיֵּרָא when the work of Creation was complete, to imply that He made a stipulation with them that it endures only upon condition that Israel should accept the five books of the Torah (Shabbat 88a)”. It would only be on the sixth (וַיֵּרָא) of Sivan, when *Bnei Yisrael*, would accept the Torah that the entirety of creation would retroactively be given its purpose. Until that point the entire world was waiting for its purpose to be revealed. It was at *Kabalat HaTorah* that *Bnei Yisrael* undertook to commit themselves to lives of morality, *Chesed* and *Avodat Hashem* and at that point that the world had meaning.

We can see therefore that the *pasukim* which respectively introduce the creation of the world and the giving of the Torah are intrinsically linked and correlate one another expressed through their mirrored structure. The Ba'al HaTurim continues that this structure appears in another place, this time chosen by *Chazal*, as the formulation for the most important line in and the pinnacle of the *Kaddish*. We find that the eternal phrase which is proclaimed by the whole congregation in unison “יְהִי שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעֵלָם וּלְעַלְמֵי עַלְמֵיָא - May Gods great name be blessed for ever and ever” also has within it seven words and twenty-eight letters. Of course this is no coincidence but a very specific allusion by *Chazal*. When we join together to Bless the Name of Hashem we, just as at the time of the giving of the Torah, are lending purpose to the creation of the world. In the words of the Ba'al Haturim “All who answer *Amen Yehei Shemei Raba...* with full strength, make themselves partners in creation with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and is it like (they are) receiving the Torah at *Har Sinai* ”.

We can therefore see, in answer to our original question, as to why we say *Kaddish* during our period of *Aveilut* or on a *Yartzheit*, that far more than a memorial prayer the recitation of *Kaddish* is a *Teffilah* of great depth, meaning and symbolism. When we say *Kaddish* we are connecting the creation of the world and the giving of the Torah. In a deeper sense, we are providing a link between the physical and the spiritual realities that exist. Whenever we engage in *Avodat HaKodesh*, whether *Teffilah*, learning Torah or *Mitzvah* observance, we engage the spiritual

reality and are continuing to fulfil the purpose of creation. When we say *Kaddish* this fulfillment is intensified through a succinct verbal declaration. If we want to provide merit to the *Neshama* of the deceased or involve ourselves in something in this world with which we want the deceased to be associated with, there can be nothing more appropriate than bringing and fulfilling purpose to the world. It is through the Blessing and Praising of God's Name that we are able to achieve this.

As I approach the last few days of my formal *Aveilut* not joining together with my fellow *Aveilim* to say *Kaddish*, with whom such a strong bond has been established, will certainly be a strange feeling. Yet it is my hope that through the daily recitation of *Kaddish* I have added to the merit of and elevated the *Neshama* of my dear father, in the upper realms. However, as we have seen, the power of *Kaddish* goes way beyond its affiliation with mourning and it is incumbent upon us all to utilize every opportunity we have to proclaim יְהוָה שְׁמִיהָ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעֵלְמָא וְלְעֵלְמֵי עֵלְמָא with intention and conviction. Through these assertions may we increase Holiness and continue to invoke meaning and purpose in the world around us.

Shabbat Shalom