

Thoughts as the End of Kaddish Nears

Next Thursday will mark the end of eleven months that I have recited the orphan's Kaddish in honor of my mother, Isabelle, of blessed memory. Unless there is a yartzheit observer in the room, I'll likely be asked to daven from the amud at morning minyan, or if not, I'll be called to the Torah. At breakfast following minyan the minyanaires will join me in a small l'chaim in Mother's honor, even though none of us will really want a drink so early in the morning. Then, driving to work, I'll think about Mother, her last days in our home, and whether these months of Kaddish really made any difference in the fate of her soul.

Kaddish certainly did make a difference in me, in my thinking about Mother, and in my relationship to the kehillah we call Shearith Israel.

I've always loved praying. It reminds me of sitting next to my daddy in shul as a boy; I can hear his voice, even smell his breath. It gives me a much needed reset from the flurry of life. It helps me feel part of something larger than myself. I haven't always been a regular in shul, though. There were times when the divergence between Jewish ideals and synagogue realities pushed me away. There were years when a meditation cushion seemed a better way to find quiet.

My daddy's death brought me back. I remember standing next to my Uncle Alfred at shiva minyan and telling him I felt hypocritical davening as a mourner because I wasn't so good a Jew. He looked at me warmly and said, "What matters is that you are here." A few weeks later, I was at Shacharit in Syracuse and afterward a man came up to me and asked, "What was your loss?" and he encouraged me to stay for some herring. It was the first of many mornings in shuls where I was made to feel at home even though I didn't know anyone. After that, I couldn't stay away.

This year has been different. When Daddy passed, I didn't live in a city with a daily minyan, so my Kaddish was for the most part a weekly recitation punctuated with Torah study. This year I'm

blessed with a minyan that meets 14 times a week. So, my day has begun a little earlier and my appointment book has an early block that takes a pretty good reason for me to erase. Also, 27 years ago my siddur knowledge was thin; this year, I had the running start of Rabbi Zelony's tefilah class.

I've found that quietly speaking to my G-d as the sun rises is a remarkable way to start each day. After the mechanics of the liturgy become familiar, there are moments when you can leave the printed text and the sense that someone is listening becomes real. Maybe that someone is Hashem; maybe it's Mom or Dad. Maybe it's all of them. Maybe it's just me. It really doesn't matter, because I have things that need saying. Hearing myself say them makes the day different: more purposeful, more focused, less alone. The chance to ask for the recovery of my cancer-struck 8-year old cousin makes it seem that I've done something worthwhile regardless of what the first morning e-mail brings.

Our tradition says that my Kaddish will help Mother's neshama to rise in the afterlife toward Gan Eden. How do I know if that could be true? With certainty though it has prolonged my time with her. Each day I think of her. Each day I tell her something I didn't think to say when she was alive. Memories flow by, and some days I realize something she wanted to say but didn't. The thud of dirt on the coffin is meant to be final and undeniable. But, then I stand in minyan and think of Mother every day, and she's still a powerful force that speaks to me.

This conversation is made possible by a room of Jews who know exactly what is happening. With few exceptions, each of them has been through it him or herself. They came to my home just after Mother died. They gently encourage me to lead what prayers I can. Most importantly, they make sure they are in the chapel at the announced time, and sometimes they scramble to find a tenth who will join us.

During the 11 months, I've davened with various kehillot across our country and abroad. Each is welcoming in its own way. Kehillah Shearith Israel is different though. It's my kehillah, with minyanaires who have become my friends. They come from many walks of life: they have different

circumstances, different politics. Several fled the Nazis and are here only by Hashem's grace. I know of their losses, and share in their simchas. When one is taken to the hospital, we pray together for his or her recovery. In some ways we're like a family. Isn't that the genius of the tradition?: that you a given another family just when you feel alone.

Bruce Stiftel

Atlanta, 5773