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Being a Kaddish

One Sunday morning, when Rabbi Herbert Bronstein was nine years old (he was just Herbert Bronstein back then), his father took to him to his store. When a customer asked, “And who is this young gentleman?” Herbert’s father answered, “This is my Kaddish.”¹

In those four words, “This is my Kaddish,” this father was conveying so much, none of which his nine-year-old son understood at the time.

In a literal sense, he meant, “This is the child who will say Kaddish for me.”

He was also communicating and establishing the expectation and obligation for young Herbert that he was to say Kaddish for his father.

And, by implication, he was reminding himself and his young son of his mortality, that some day, he would die.

He may even have been making a comparison to any other children he had--Herbert would be the one who would say Kaddish for him; the others might not.

Whose Kaddish have you been? Whose Kaddish are you? Did you know you would be? Did they know you would be? Who will be your Kaddish? Do they know? Do they know if it matters to you or if it doesn’t especially? If you don’t have a Kaddish, do you want one? Could you imagine asking someone to take on that commitment?

Yom Kippur is, in many ways, a rehearsal for death. We dress in white, perhaps in a kittel (this white robe I’m wearing) and tallit, the garments in which a Jew is customarily buried. We don’t eat, and refrain from so many of the things that define life. But the reason we contemplate death is in order to appreciate life, and to live better. We think about who we need to remember, about how we want to remember them in the ways we live our lives, and how we want to be remembered.

I don’t know what prompted Herbert Bronstein’s father, on that day at his store, to refer to his son this way. Maybe he’d just been to a funeral, or observed a *yahrzeit*.

In my line of business, I meet with families before funerals. I go to a lot of funerals, and a lot of shivas. And I speak every week with people saying Kaddish for loved ones, whether during the period of mourning or for a *yahrzeit*. And I learn so much from every single one of you. I learn about you, and I can’t help but learn about myself too.

I find myself thinking often about the stories I would tell in a eulogy about my parents, and the stories and words people might say about me.

I find myself wondering how I will say Kaddish for my parents. Will I do it every day, three times a day, or somewhat less? When I talked to my father about this on Monday, he said, “Only three times a day? Why not four!”

¹ Herbert Bronstein, “My Kaddish,” in *Kaddish*, Ed. David Birnbaum and Martin S. Cohen (New York: New Paradigm Matrix Publishing, 2016), p. 223.

He was joking, obviously. But only sort of, as he immediately reminded me that the Jerusalem Talmud teaches, "All who elaborate on the funeral of a parent are to be praised" (Moed Katan 3:8).

But my dad then said, "What this is really about is that nobody wants to be forgotten." Having someone say Kaddish for us is a way of not being forgotten. It's a way of being remembered.

Our congregant Susan Gartenberg told me recently about a line from the song Glorious by the singer Macklemore that goes: "...I heard you die twice, once when they bury you in the grave / And the second time is the last time that somebody mentions your name..."

This is a perfect articulation of an old idea--I googled it and found antecedents to it going way back. We all want our second life--the time in which we are remembered, to be as long as possible.

But remembering someone is not the original reason for saying Kaddish for eleven months for a parent.

Kaddish was originally understood as a way to affect the fate of the souls of our loved ones. There's a familiar but ancient idea that death is a journey, not only from, but also toward, that death is a gate rather than a wall, and that the still-living--especially a child--can affect the fate of their loved ones--especially parents--by reciting prayers for them.

The earliest version of this in our tradition comes from a story about Rabbi Akiva. While out for a stroll, Rabbi Akiva comes upon a dead man being afflicted with terrible punishments. Rabbi Akiva gets the man's child to say prayers, perhaps Kaddish, in synagogue, thus ending the man's punishment and relieving his suffering (Kallah Rabbati 2:9).²

The Talmud also teaches that "for all twelve months after death, the body remains and the soul rises and descends. After twelve months, the body ceases to exist and the soul rises and cannot be forced to descend" (Shabbat 152b).

So, saying Kaddish in some way can perhaps quicken the ascent upward, reduce the painful descents downward, and relieve suffering.

But this was not compelling to my grandmother, who did not say Kaddish, except maybe at shiva, for her mother, my great-grandmother, in October 2009, when my great-grandmother died at the age of 106. My grandmother was, like so many of us, a rationalist, but also like so many of us, a rationalist who never missed a Yizkor. Saying Kaddish wasn't critical to her, and her children saying Kaddish for her wasn't a value for her either, not that she would have opposed it. She had four children, and didn't understand any of them as "her Kaddish."

Less than a year later, in July of 2010, when my grandmother herself left this world, my father said Kaddish for her almost daily for eleven months. And it wasn't because his mother wanted him to, although a part of her would have been pleased, both to know my father was doing what he needed to do to mourn, and also to know that she was being remembered. No, my father said Kaddish because he knew it was what *he* needed to do.

The reasons people say Kaddish or don't say Kaddish during a period of mourning are so varied.

² For a thorough analysis of this story and other versions of it, see "Death is But a Dream," Martin S. Cohen, in *ibid.*, pp. 67-88.

As I've heard from some of you, you said Kaddish because you knew it was what your parents wanted--you were their Kaddish.

Writer Leon Wieseltier minced no words in explaining why he said Kaddish for his father: "Because it is my duty to my father. Because it is my duty to religion.... Because it would be harder for me not to say Kaddish. I would despise myself. Because the fulfillment of my duty leaves my thoughts about my father unimpeded by regret and undistorted by guilt."³

This echoes the words of King Claudius to Hamlet (Act I, scene 2)

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father:
But, you must know, your father lost a father;
That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow.⁴

Shakespeare and Wieseltier both understand a kind of obligation to the generations that preceded us.

I've heard other people say that they said Kaddish despite their parents' wishes.

I've heard people say they said Kaddish for one parent, but would never do it again.

I know so many people who have found comfort in the regularity, and the community of coming to minyan. And so many people keep coming after they're done saying Kaddish. My father is one.

And I know people, like my grandmother, who did not say Kaddish for their parents. She, like so many people, figured out how to mourn in her own ways.

We all want to be remembered, but we also want those mourning us to cope with our loss in healthy ways. Kaddish can for many people be a healthy way of coping, but it's not the only way. I remember once telling an older woman to stop coming to morning minyan when she was saying Kaddish for her father who had died at a very old age. She was ruining her health and exhausting herself getting up so early every morning.

Despite the Jerusalem Talmud, mourning can be taken too far. Claudius first validates Hamlet's mourning, as we saw. But then he continues,

but to persevere
In obstinate condolment is a course
Of impious stubbornness...
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven.

Too much of a sad thing is not good either--not to us, and not to God.

So in the end, what does it mean to be a Kaddish?

Being a Kaddish means remembering in a Jewish way.

³ Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Knopf, 1998), pp. 25-26, quoted in "Reflections on Saying Kaddish," Herbert A. Yoskowitz in *ibid.*, p. 286.

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 284.

Being a Kaddish includes a theological piece. When a person dies, in addition to the personal sadness of the survivors, “the community is also sad that the deceased did not succeed” in the task we each have, l’taken et ha-olam--to repair the world, suggests Rabbi Yitz Greenberg. The world is still unperfected, and God is still in some sense not yet King. But when a child recites Kaddish for a parent and expresses the hope that *v’yamlich malchutei b’chayeichon uv’yomeichon*, that God will establish God’s kingdom in your lifetime and your days, what they are saying is that while the deceased may not have succeeded, they have left behind someone who still strives to achieve that goal.⁵

Being a Kaddish also includes an emotional responsibility. On June 9, 1982, Patricia Fischer’s son, Gregory, was killed in Lebanon while serving in the Israeli army. She writes about hearing from one of her son’s friends how she and others of his friends had spent several evenings together during the college winter vacation following his death but they had hardly spoken of Greg, for they were afraid to upset each other. What this mother realized was, as she wrote, “that to be a Kaddish is to be willing to suffer the grief of remembering.”⁶ *“To be a Kaddish is to be willing to suffer the grief of remembering.”*

Although it was Greg’s mother who took that on, and not his friends, I do know people who take on the responsibility of being the Kaddish for friends who have passed away.

We can also “inherit” being a Kaddish. When my parents are no longer able to say Kaddish for their parents, I will become my grandparents’ Kaddish, and maybe even my great-grandparents’ Kaddish. This is what it means, to be a Kaddish--to be a living Jewish connection between the past, recent or distant, and the present.

Whose Kaddish have you been? Did they know you would be? Whose Kaddish will you be? Do they know you will be?

Who will be your Kaddish? It may not be your own child. And there can be more than one. Do they know? Would you tell them?

In a few moments we will be saying Yizkor. And for every person you remember, you will be their Kaddish.

⁵ Martin I. Lockshin, “An Unlikely Prayer,” in *ibid.*, p. 349-350.

⁶ <http://www.reformjudaismmag.net/301pf.html>