

Kaddish

Kol Nidre 5778, September 29, 2017

Rabbi Neil S. Cooper

About a month ago, a solar eclipse traversed the middle of the United States. A solar eclipse is one of the more bizarre natural phenomena one can experience. Those who witnessed the full effect of the eclipse (my sister and brother-in-law went to Iowa for a good view) describe it as a deeply spiritual event. Some who were interviewed used terms like “awe-inspiring”, “humbling” and “deeply moving”.

We tend to take for granted the orderly flow of nature. This is the reason we include in our evening services a reminder of the natural order of the universe when we say:

“creating day and night, [for rolling] light before the darkness and the darkness from light.”
(*Siddur Lev Shalem*, The Shabbat Evening Service, p. 39.)

Although the eclipse itself lasted only for a few minutes, one woman who was being interviewed confessed that she found the experience frightening. She shared with the interviewer that she found that the moment of total darkness at mid-day unsettling.

Although I was not located in the path of “maximum effect”, the notion of a solar eclipse felt to me, as well, a bit frightening, almost like a transgression of the laws of nature. Darkness is for nighttime. Darkness does not invade the space occupied by light. Darkness during the day feels unnatural. I would feel the same way, for example, if things, for a moment, fell up rather than down. We are comforted by the reliability of the natural world. A solar eclipse undermines that reliability. Even a brief confrontation with disorder and chaos, can leave one feeling as if one were afloat and drifting. I had a very similar feeling almost a year, to the day, of the solar eclipse, when my father died.

When my father died a year ago, I felt as if the moorings of my being, tied securely way back during my childhood, had been severed. Even at my age, the age at which one begins to receive routine mailings from Social Security and Medicare, I felt adrift. I felt as if the natural order of my life had been overturned. At that moment, standing beside his bed, I felt as if my world had been overtaken by a solar eclipse, a blockage of the sun’s rays, a suspension of the natural order. When my father’s soul left him, I wondered if his soul fell up as it flew away. Again, I quote our liturgy, our lives are “like a fleeting dream, like scattering dust, like a vanishing cloud”.

I don’t want to speak of about death this evening, especially not at the outset of Yom Kippur, which is a day devoted to life. Yom Kippur is about renewing our souls and beginning a new year with a clean slate. Instead, I would like to speak about life after death, not the life of the soul after it leaves one’s body. I want to speak about my life after my father’s death. More specifically, I would like to speak the Mourners’ Kaddish.

The Kaddish is a well-known passage, recited, as you know, by mourners at several different points during each of our services. It is a prayer that has come to be associated with death, as if it is a prayer for the dead. And although that may be the popular view, the prayer itself makes no mention of death. Rather, it is a prayer in which we praise God.

Originally, during the period of the Talmud, Kaddish was not associated with either death or mourning. Its original form was as a response to be recited at the close of a Rabbinic lesson. After a Rabbi would complete his teaching, the Kaddish provided a message of comfort to the students.

The word Kaddish is an Aramaic word meaning holy. The prayer speaks of the Holiness of God's name. It includes a paragraph expressing the hope that God will hear and answer favorably the prayers we recite. In the Scholars' or Rabbis' Kaddish, what we call *Kaddish D'Rabbanan*, one paragraph honors those who study Torah.

Kaddish, in fact, became so comforting and popular that it has been added, in shorter or longer forms, to signal the end of a section of the liturgy. It is also repeated by the mourners, as a source of comfort at the end of each service.

This history may or may not be of interest to you but, either way, history does not explain the power of these ancient words when recited by the mourner. The translation of the Kaddish tells us what the words might mean in English. Reading the Kaddish out loud, however, throughout this year, became for me a daily source of strength, inspiration and profound meaning which transcended the words.

This evening, I would like to elaborate on the Mourners' Kaddish in three ways. I would like to speak of the power of saying Kaddish as daily ritual. I'll speak of what became, for me, the transcendent power inherent in the words of the Kaddish. And I will speak about the power which resides in a community which convenes in order to allow others to say Kaddish. I begin first with the daily ritual of reciting the Mourners' Kaddish.

The power of a daily ritual. Committing oneself to the performance of a daily ritual may seem, at first, a daunting promise to keep. The truth, however, is that one doesn't really need to commit upfront to perform a ritual each day for a year (or, to be more accurate, one says Kaddish for a parent for only the first eleven of the twelve months of mourning). Saying Kaddish can be seen as a daily commitment which one renews each day. But even if one commits to say Kaddish for only one day, on that day, one must adjust other daily routines in order to be where one needs to be, at the appointed time, to say Kaddish. When we re-order our lives, even for only a day, we upset our own natural order. When our lives change in profound and important ways, that change often results in a change in the natural order of our lives.

On *Rosh Hashana*, we read how Abraham prepared to depart for the mountain upon which God would instruct him to sacrifice Isaac. There we learn that:

Abraham arose early / Va'yashkem Avraham BaBoker.

The midrash suggests that Abraham did not always wake up early. But here he did. He changed his routine in order to perform God's will, in order to prepare to sacrifice his son. Abraham's life changed in profound ways as a result of God's command. He changed his routine as his life was about to change.

For those who are not used to going to a service every day, this new routine can be jarring and, at times, a burden. I have come to understand, however, that this is, in fact, part of the power of saying Kaddish. The discomfort required to accommodate one's life to a new routine reflects the painful accommodations we must make to move forward with our lives.

For eleven months, I arose each morning to join our daily minyan. This change in my routine was a reminder that my life had changed. Kaddish requires us to devote a few moments each day to remember the person who has died. Some may say that they don't need such a ritual to accomplish that goal. Their loss is so deep, so palpable and present in their thoughts each day, they think of their loved one without the reminder provided by the Mourners' Kaddish. Personally, however, if not for Kaddish, I would not have focused daily, in a structured and supportive environment, on the loss of my father had I not performed this daily ritual in his memory.

Mourning is a process to be embraced. It is not an ordeal to endure and "get over". Yet, to embrace mourning is, I believe, counter-intuitive. It is natural to seek ways to alleviate and hide our pain. It is natural to look for ways to be more comfortable rather than less comfortable. But that inclination could be quite harmful. Pain should be accepted at times rather than avoided. The mourning rituals of Jewish life ask us to stay with our pain and discomfort.

When we sustain a physical injury, when something hurts, our body is talking to us, asking us not to ignore our pain but to acknowledge it and to keep that pain with us in order to give your body time to heal. Numbing the pain and continuing to use that injured part of your body can result in greater pain and injury later. Emotional pain is not much different.

An article in the "New Yorker" a number of months ago (March 21, 2017) recounted a story about Alex Mack, star center for the Atlanta Falcons. Mack broke his fibula at the end of the regular season (this was the second time he broke that bone. The first was in 2014). This type of injury would normally preclude one from playing for six to 8 weeks. But the Falcons were playing in the Super Bowl in two weeks. And so, on the day of the Super Bowl, as reported by Adam Schefter, he started the game. It was the Super Bowl after all and, football players are celebrated for playing through pain.

When we mourn, we cry because our hearts are broken. Yesterday our hearts had been filled with life, laughter and hope. Today we are empty. In the place of yesterday's full heart, a gaping hole is all that remains. But sadness and tears should not hide behind a "stiff upper lip". There is a process of grieving, a process which requires that we confront what has occurred, without sugar-coating or denial. It is in response to that confrontation with our pain, when we acknowledge and embrace that pain, the heart begins to heal. Ignoring that hole will not cause it to disappear. Once we deal with that empty space, that hole can slowly be filled again.

The death of my father was very sad for me on many levels. It was sad because from that moment on, I was an orphan, living without either of my parents. My father's death was painful also because of the empty void it created within me. Truth be told, some of that pain had been there for years before his death. There was never a time when I did not love my father, but there were many times when I was angered by a response, hurt that I was unable to be more a primary, rather than secondary focus in his life. I was sad because I didn't have the time that I needed to rectify those aspects of our relationship which needed fixing. Neither did he.

Over the past year, I have wrestled, at different times and in different ways, with the powerful role which my father played in my life. Saying Kaddish gave me a daily moment for meditation and reflection.

I thought of lessons which I might have otherwise overlooked. I remembered small incidents and vignettes which I had not recalled for many years. Kaddish brought those memories back to me.

Reciting the Kaddish has required an awareness of a painful loss each and every day. Each morning, when I stood to recite the Mourners' Kaddish, I could not ignore or overlook the pain. I am grateful to the Kaddish for providing for me a reminder of a pain which I might have otherwise denied or ignored. That was the power of this daily ritual for me.

Transcending the meaning of the words. The words of the Mourner's Kaddish, as I have mentioned, say nothing about death, pain or loss. The words extol and praise God. Traditionally, the mourner recites these words, leading the congregation with words of praise. And here, I must point out the irony that it is the mourner, more than any other person in the congregation, who has the best reason to be angry and to resist praising God. Following the painful loss of a loved one, it is natural to express anger, often toward God, and to resist thanking God. But it is that fact which makes the practice so powerful. Kaddish requires that the one who has been injured and broken be the one to help others overcome their pain.

As a rabbi, I often have conversations with members of our congregation who are struggling with sadness or depression. Perhaps they are emotionally or physically exhausted. And when they ask for advice regarding regaining their strength and optimism, I often tell them to extend their hand and help someone else.

When you are tired, reach out to someone who has fallen behind.

When you are filled with anger, extend a hand to someone who needs to be comforted, someone who needs joy in their life.

When someone is needed to help, rather than wallowing in sorrow, the mourner leads the way toward healing.

And what happens when you do? In the process, when one who is impaired reaches out, when one who can't walk is asked to lead, that person rises to the occasion. That person finds new strength and energy. I believe that, in a very similar way, those who recite the Kaddish in their moment of despair, serving as models to others. In the process, they will find the comfort and healing they have needed all along.

The words of the Mourners' Kaddish mean far more than a translation could render. The words are more like signs, whose pronunciation and cadence designate the mourner as a leader, as a model for the rest. Those who recite the Mourners' Kaddish inspire others. While refusing to retreat into the darkness created by such a loss.

The power of community. It is a uniquely Jewish characteristic of mourning to organize and orchestrate a ritual which requires both the mourner and the community to be there for each other each day. In our community, Ben Stein, with help from Ray Verbit, organizes many of our daily *minyanim*, assuring that leaders are present to lead and that there is a minyan, a prayer quorum of ten Jewish adults present, necessary for the mourner to have the opportunity to recite the Kaddish. Members of our congregation who have been supported by the community as they recited Kaddish for a loved one who died recently

or in observance of a *yahrzeit*, cannot adequately thank Ben or our fellow congregants who together make this possible.

Here I must interject a communal dilemma. There are two traditions with respect to the Mourners' Kaddish that can, on occasion have the effect of dividing rather than unifying. In some communities, like ours, the mourners stand but the congregation sits. This allows all present to identify the mourner and extend words of comfort to them. Elsewhere, the entire congregation may stand for the Kaddish as a sign of support for the mourners. They reason that mourners should feel the support of those who stand with them.

Of course, there are some in our community who, despite the prevailing custom to remain seated, stand. And, at other synagogues you may find that most choose to stand while only a few sit. And here, I am aware that this divergence in practice can become a serious point of conflict in a synagogue community where uniformity and decorum are valued. These divergent practices can also be the source, at times, of humor.

A rabbi, new in the community lead Shabbat services for the first time. A large group of congregants came to services. When it came to the Kaddish, the new rabbi instructed, "and we now stand for the Kaddish". Half the congregation stood and half the congregation remained seated, staring nastily at the standing pietists. Seeking to avoid controversy, the next week, when they reached the Kaddish, the rabbi announced, "we will remain seated". Half the congregation remained seated. The other half defiantly stood ("fire and fury" in their eyes).

To resolve the conflict, the rabbi decided to pay a visit to the nearby Jewish home for the elderly where the rabbi emeritus, Rabbi Cohen, lived in a lovely, one bedroom, assisted living apartment.

The new rabbi spoke and Rabbi Cohen listened intently. The new rabbi began, "Rabbi Cohen, is it our tradition to sit for the Mourners' Kaddish?" "No", said Rabbi Cohen, "that is not our tradition". "Oh", said the young rabbi, "then it must be our tradition to stand for the Mourners' Kaddish". "No" said Rabbi Cohen, that is not our tradition. Now the young rabbi was at a loss: "Rabbi, you must help me. We have half the congregation standing, half remain seated and everyone is angry and fighting with everyone else". Rabbi Cohen smiled and responded: "Yes, now I remember, that is our tradition"!

Our community has been there for me every day for this past year, every morning and each evening. And throughout this year, I have felt the power of the Kaddish drawing us together as a community. It is not possible to say Kaddish without others with you. And often, those who come to our daily minyan come, not to say Kaddish, but to give those who mourn the chance to say Kaddish, during their year of mourning or on a *yahrzeit*. To all I express my humble gratitude.

Here I add one final point about the Kaddish: **The portable nature of the Mourners' Kaddish.**

During most of the year, I am, of course, here in our synagogue. But on those occasions when I was not at Beth Hillel I looked for services and opportunities to say Kaddish, in order to assure that I could say Kaddish every day. And so, for example, while in Israel, I attend all sorts of synagogues, Orthodox and Conservative. This year, during our trip to Eastern Europe, I said Kaddish with our group of travelers from our synagogue who joined our trip, many of whom are here tonight. I will speak more about our trip to Eastern Europe tomorrow, but while there we were all able to said Kaddish in Auschwitz and

Birkenau, in Theresienstadt, at memorials and in graveyards of Jews who lived hundreds of years ago. I said Kaddish as well at the Isaac Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in the world still in use. No matter where I was, whenever I said Kaddish, there was an immediate sense of connection and community, a portable community drawn together by the Mourners' Kaddish.

There was never a time or place in which I could not recite the Kaddish at least once each day. That, however, did not mean that it was always easy to say Kaddish. In fact, on one occasion, saying Kaddish became dangerous, placing me at risk of bodily harm. I'll explain:

First, full disclosure: I am from a Chasidic background on my mother's side. I have always had an affinity and an affection for Chasidism and am continually drawn to the writings of the Chasidic masters. When I speak of Chasidim, therefore, I speak with affection. And so, on an overnight flight to Israel, shortly after take-off, a *chasid* went up and down the aisle foraging for a minyan and I gladly agreed to join them.

"Can you join us?", he asked. "Yes", I said, "and I have a *chi'uv* (a special requirement to say Kaddish, since I was in my year of mourning)". I followed the *chasid* to the back of the plane, to an area the size of the front closet in my home, where 20 prayer-starved *chasidim* had gathered. And, now that I had opened my big mouth announcing that I had a *chiuv*, I was physically jostled into place, right next to the man in the middle of this Chasidic "mosh pit" who was leading the davening.

To those who have seen *chasidim* davening, you know that their style of prayer is very physical and, as I was to be reminded, a full-contact event. I was standing next to the leader who, in a voice so "unrestrained" that the people in the next plane, which had taken-off at the same time as our plane, on their way to Rome, were able to hear us and say "Amen".

As he begins the services, he commences with the *shuckeling*. This is not rhythmic swaying but full-body contact *shuckeling* at a dangerous clip, complete with high pitched voices and flailing arms. I am certain that I was the only one among those gathered in the galley who knew, from NFL reports, about the lasting effects of head injuries and concussions. And here I am in the middle. I am bracing for direct, full contact davening.

As we began, however, I could see, if timed correctly, I could bend forward as the man behind me went down, and stand upright when the man in front of me resumed the normal, homo-sapiens posture. In that way, I made it through, having said Kaddish without physical injury. (And, as a bonus, I think that the guy behind me took a liking to me!). I returned to my seat, shaken but unscathed. Before sitting down, I also benched *gome!*

As I sat down and tightened my seat belt, I smiled as I realized that here, somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, a group of Jews, very different from one another, but sharing history and faith, came together as a community, because of the Mourners' Kaddish. There was no litmus test regarding beliefs. There was no discussion of politics or theology. We simply gathered, at the back of the plane and created our own little community, combining our voices to praise God.

In ancient times, there was a door, called the Mourners' Gate, in the Temple in Jerusalem. One who was in mourning would enter the Temple Mount through a special door designated for mourners. And when others saw someone come through that gate, whether they knew the person or not, they would approach and offer condolences. From the earliest layers of Jewish history, mourning has been a

communal affair. Simply put, whether speaking of our liturgy or our mourning practices, it is not possible to mourn without a community.

When someone in a community sits shiva, the entire community is split: either you are a mourner or a comforter. The obligation to comfort the mourner is a communal obligation. Kaddish, the mourners' prayer, must be recited with a minyan present. The desire to isolate oneself is mitigated by the requirement to say Kaddish. The desire to be left alone is resisted because the community is coming to you to sit, to ask about the deceased or simply to sit with you in silence.

In those moments, over the past year, when I felt the desire to isolate, I could not. At those times, I might have been resentful. But looking back, I appreciate now, even more, the requirement to mourn with one's community.

On this Yom Kippur eve, as we gather as a community, I want to say thank you. When the moorings came loose, you helped to anchor me. You reminded me that our world would return to its normal path and would yet be a source of comfort and stability. Thank you for coming to help when I needed a minyan. Thank you for being there for me. Thank you for being a part of this sustaining, nurturing and loving community. And, please know that, during the years to come, I will be there for you as well.