

## ***Ad Meah v'Esrim; To 120. And Then What?***

There's old story about a Rabbi who was trying to lead a funeral and at the gravesite looked around and asked if anyone had anything to say that was nice about the deceased. Silence. Instead, this one and then that one began telling awful tales about how horrible the man was. The tales of horrible behavior came rushing out. The Rabbi listened patiently and then asked again for one redeeming quality or act that could be shared to honor the deceased. More silence. The Rabbi looked so sad and at a loss. At last, one person stepped forward and said, "Okay, I have something to say for him." The Rabbi was so relieved and urged the man to share. "Please, please tell us." "Okay," said the man, "I think we can all agree that his brother was even worse!"

There's actually a similar story found in a number of ancient Jewish sources. It is about the famous Talmudic sage, Rabbi Akiva, who helped the suffering spirit of a dead man find eternal peace. The man had been one who had committed just about every sin imaginable. Indeed, when Akiva tried in vain to find someone who could say something nice about the man, not a single person offered a positive word. So Rabbi Akiva asked the tortured soul if there was any way he could be released from his suffering.

The spirit replied that that only way to be released from his suffering was for a loved one say “*Barukhu et Adonai HaMevorakh*” and “*Yitgadal v’yitkadash,*” to which a congregation would reply, “*Barukh Adonai HaMevorakh*” and “*Yehei sh’mei rabbah....*” That is, the loved one would lead a congregation in the call to worship and then recite Kaddish. The story concludes with Rabbi Akiva finding the tortured soul’s long lost family member and then teaching him the prayers. At long last, the spirit was released from his torment and found eternal peace.

That story is packed with so many theological challenges that it can be off-putting to our modern sensibility. Indeed, depending on the era you point to on the long continuum of Jewish history and thought, the story would have been considered odd, if not offensive, to many of our ancestors, as well as moderns. But the story was not faithfully recorded in scores of ancient Rabbinic texts because of its theological insights. Rather, its significance is that it tells of an important and intriguing link between our lives and the *neshamot*, the souls of our dead loved ones.

Hillel Halkin’s new book [After One-Hundred-And-Twenty](#) explores the evolution of Jewish thought and practice about death, mourning, and the afterlife. A noted journalist and author, Halkin’s approach on the subject of death and afterlife is rather analytical, if not cynical. As he notes, there

have been radical changes from the time of our Biblical ancestors to the modern era. Thirty-five-hundred years of life experiences, as well as interaction with other cultures, have caused us to think, rethink and adapt accordingly. No doubt, those steady changes of evolving Jewish burial and mourning practices, as well as concepts about the afterlife, are reflective of the fact that death, while inevitable, is beyond our comprehension. Modern Jews are decidedly non-dogmatic about things that are not empirical. We are not dogmatic, but we do look for rituals that are personally meaningful. It is Halkin's own personal struggle to deal with the death of his parents that I found most compelling. Though a learned Jew, he is not particularly observant and as he begins his exploration he is not at all convinced of the efficacy of the mourning rituals. Even years after his father's death, he admits that saying the Kaddish at the rapid pace found in an Orthodox synagogue left him empty. But he did find great solace in the *Yahrzeit* candle. He wrote:

I went over to it. Although the windows were shut tightly, the flame danced back and forth in its pool of melted wax as if something would not let it keep still... "A candle of the Lord is the soul of man," says the book of Proverbs. In Hebrew, a *yortsayt* (sic) candle is *ner neshamah*, a "soul candle."

A candle burns and goes out. This one, too, would sputter and choke at the end of the day. It would contract to a small red spark, flare up tenaciously, shrink to a tiny ember, darken to a sooty black dot. I thought of my father, fighting for each breath in the hospital, and I found myself saying the Kaddish again, this time at my own pace.

(p. 181)

He said the Kaddish again, this time with meaning and a deeper understanding.

The rituals we perform and the prayers we recite are not magical incantations. Rather, they are links that connect us to spiritual dimensions that we can sense but not define. We can sense, we can almost feel the presence of our loved ones, bound gently with us. For some, acknowledging that on-going connection may be, at first or even for a while, upsetting, even painful. They avoid the rituals. They miss the *Yahrzeits* and the *Yizkors*. Kaddish is not said. The candles are not lit. The gravesites are not visited. As if hiding from the painful memory of loss will protect them.

My late colleague, Rabbi Chaim Stern, who hired me from Rabbinic school to be his Assistant and then Associate almost 29 years ago, wrote a most beautiful, but pained poem about mourning:

It is a fearful thing to love  
What death can touch.  
A fearful thing to love, hope, dream: to be---  
To be, and oh, to lose.  
A thing for fools this, and  
A holy thing,  
A holy thing to love.  
For your life has lived in me,  
Your laugh once lifted me,  
Your word was gift to me.  
To remember this brings a painful joy.  
'Tis a human thing, love,  
A holy thing,  
To love what death has touched.

He wrote this bittersweet lament in recognition of the complexity of our human emotions, our human psyche, and our heroic but vain longing to fully comprehend that which is beyond us. In the end, we are left with the ongoing love: to love what death has touched.

Let us embrace that love which is not severed by death. Painful, fearful, a thing for fools? Perhaps. Perhaps for some, at first. But it is also a holy thing. And the rituals, the Kaddish, the *Yizkor*, the *Yahrzeit*, the candle all help us to remember and honor that legacy. Those rituals help us maintain and even strengthen the connections that bind us to those who

have passed and those yet to be. These prayers connect heaven to our world. These prayers strengthen the spiritual essence of those who have passed. These prayers and these rituals thereby contribute to the gift of heavenly peace.

Rabbi Akiva brought peace to that tormented spirit by helping reconnect it to the family. They, too, felt loss. The prayers and rituals were not familiar to them. So he taught them the prayers and the rituals. The emptiness they had been feeling was filled with a new found bond: *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'meih raba*. The solace they sought was found in the congregations' response: *Y'hei sh'meih rabba m'varakh*.

Their souls found peace. And so will we.