Kaddish in our Times

BY

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In Loving Memory of
Our Caring and Loving
Father & Grandfather

אברהם בן לינה ובר ע"ה

נלב"ע ג' ניסן התש"פ

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During this time of upheaval and uncertainty, there are many areas of difficulty and frustration. One of the particularly upsetting and difficult things is that mourners are not able to recite Kaddish for a loved one.

Kaddish is what we call a דבר שבקדושה*, a type of prayer in which God's Name is caused to be praised. Prayers of this type require a minyan, based on the verse,* וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל *, "I should be sanctified among the Children of Israel" (Vayikra 22:32 - see Megillah 23b).*

The Gemara (Menahot 110b) mentions that after the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash, when sacrifices are no longer able to be offered, "one who studies the laws of offerings is considered to have brought an offering." Therefore, it would seem to follow, that if a person is unable to say Kaddish because there is no possibility of a minyan, it would be extremely valuable to study the message of the Kaddish, as it will be considered as if a Kaddish was recited.

Why Mourners Say Kaddish

The source for mourners saying Kaddish can be found in a famous Midrash. (Kallah Rabbati, 2:9)

Rabbi Akiva once saw what seemed to be a man struggling with a heavy burden on his shoulders and bemoaning his lot in life. Concerned that this might be an overworked slave yearning to be free, Rabbi Akiva asked the man what his story was. The oppressed laborer replied that he was the soul of a person who had committed every conceivable sin during his lifetime, and that if he stopped to talk, he would get in even more trouble.

The punishment of this particular sinner was to gather wood, which was used to burn him every day. Rabbi Akiva asked if there was any way to free this soul, and the deceased replied that the only way was if he had a son who would stand in front of the congregation and say ברכו את ה' המבורך *or* יתגדל ויתקדש שמיה רבא *after which the congregation would reply,* ברוך ה' המבורך לעולם ועד *or* יהא שמיה רבא *respectively.*

Finally, Rabbi Akiva asked the man who had survived him; the spirit replied that his wife had been pregnant when he died. Rabbi Akiva recorded the name of the deceased, the man's wife, and his hometown so that he might investigate the matter.

Hurrying to the man's city, Rabbi Akiva discovered that the deceased was particularly reviled by the townspeople. He had been a corrupt tax collector who took bribes from the rich and oppressed the poor. Among his more notorious deeds, the man had violated a betrothed girl on Yom Kippur!

Rabbi Akiva located the widow, who had given birth to a son. So despised was her husband that no one had even circumcised the child. Rabbi Akiva took care of this grievous omission and, when the child was old enough, he taught him Torah and how to pray, including the prayers the man had specified.

As soon as the boy recited the appropriate prayers, his father's soul was relieved of its harsh punishments. The man's spirit appeared to Rabbi Akiva in a dream to thank him for saving him from the tortures of Gehinnam.

The Zohar Hadash (Ahare Mot p. 49) relates the story of a Rabbi who communicated with a neshamah that was undergoing purification in the other world. That neshamah told him בשעתא דאמר בני קדיש קורעין לי גזר דין מכל וכל, *"whenever my son says Kaddish for me, they tear up the evil decree completely."*

From these stories we learn that having a child or any other relative serve as a catalyst for the congregation to praise God, is a great source of merit for the deceased.

Honoring Parents

In reality, reciting Kaddish for a father or mother is a form of כבוד אב ואם, *Honoring one's father or mother, a misvah which does not cease when the father or mother are no longer with us in the flesh. As our Rabbis of blessed memory teach us* מכבדו בחייו ומכבדו במותו, *"one is to honor his father or mother during their lifetimes, and after their deaths" (Kiddushin 31b).*

A child is an "extension" of his father or mother, ברא כרעא דאבוה, *and represents what is left of the father or mother in this world after they have died. By virtue of the existence of his children, a part of the parent's body still exists. Therefore, at the moment when the mourner says Kaddish in honor of his father or mother, he may not realize it, but he is really speaking in the name of his father or mother. It is his father or mother who is imploring the assembled congregation* יתגדל ויתקדש שמיה רבא. *And when the congregation responds,* יהא שמיה רבא מברך לעלם ולעלמי עלמיא, *this is a great zechut for the neshamah of his parents, and the highest form of* כבוד אב ואם.

Committing to Raising Godliness In This World

Although this prayer is recited a number of times in the Tefillah, it is best known as the prayer which mourners say for a departed relative. As such, we would expect to find in the Kaddish words appropriate for a memorial prayer. However, such words are conspicuously absent.

King Solomon says: טוֹב לָלֶכֶת אֶל בֵּית אֵבֶל מִלֶּכֶת אֶל בֵּית מִשְׁתֶּה "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of festivity" (Kohelet 7:2). This is because we can learn very little from festivity. However, when a human life has come to an end, this can serve as a valuable teaching.

During our lives, we are often so preoccupied with the business of living, that we may fail to give much, if any, thought to what our purpose and goal in life is. We are indeed the beneficiaries of great achievements of science and technology, but these can enhance only the "how" of living, not the "why." Technology can give us better tools, but does not tell us what we should make with them. Science cannot tell us what it is that we must accomplish with our lives.

However, when a human life has come to an end, it is inevitable that we reflect, if only momentarily, on what life is all about. A person lived and acted upon this earth. What did he accomplish with his life? In what way did he contribute to mankind? And if he did not make any evident contribution to the world, is it not tragic that he did not do so? This may stimulate one to ask, "And just what am I contributing to the world? What is my mission in life?"

The Torah teaches us that it is our mission to bring Godliness into the world. The Midrash tells us that the Abraham Abinu provided food and drink for his guests. After they ate he would say, "Now you must express your gratitude for the food you ate," and they would thank him heartily. Abraham would then say, "It is not me whom you should thank. The food is not mine. It belongs to God, as does everything else in the world. When we partake of anything in the world we must realize that it comes from God, and we must thank Him." This gave Abraham the opportunity to disseminate the belief in the true God to the pagan world.

As descendants of Abraham, we inherit his mission. This is why God gave us the Torah, so that we should be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Shemot 19:6), and "a beacon of light to the nations of the world." (Yeshaya 42, 6)

Every Jew is a soldier in the army of God. Everyone has the potential to contribute to the ultimate triumph of truth over falsehood, resulting in all mankind coming to know the truth of Divine sovereignty. When a Jew dies, whether he actually contributed much or little to this goal, a soldier in the army has fallen. This is why we, the living, must rededicate ourselves to the achievement of this goal.

Every neshamah is, as it were, a particle of Godliness. When a person dies and his neshamah departs the earth, something of Godliness is now missing. "May the Name of God be exalted and sanctified" is a prayer that the element of Godliness that has left the earth with the person's death be replenished.

What about a person whose life is anything but a manifestation of Godliness? Is it relevant to say even about such a person of the need to replenish the lost element of Godliness upon their death?

A story is told about a Rabbi who demonstrated great love for simple, unlearned people. One student was bold enough to ask the Rabbi "just what is it that you see in these ignorant people that makes you hold them in such high esteem?"

This student happened to be a diamond merchant. The Rabbi asked him, "do you happen to have any of your wares with you?" The student said that he did, and took out a packet which he unfolded before the Rabbi revealing a number of diamonds.

The Rabbi pointed to a large diamond and said, "Ah! That is indeed a very beautiful jewel."

The student smiled. "I am sorry, Rabbi," he said, "but you are mistaken. It is indeed a large stone, but it is full of flaws and is of relatively little value. Let me show you a truly beautiful stone," the student continued, pointing to a small diamond. "Now that is a valuable stone. It has a blue-white color and is free of any flaws."

"I don't think it is more valuable than the other stone," the Rabbi said. "The larger stone is more impressive."

The student said, "Rabbi, to know the value of diamonds one must have the expertise and be a maven on diamonds."

"Exactly my point," the Rabbi said. "To know the value of a Jew, one must have the expertise and be a maven on Jews. You are a maven on diamonds, and I am a maven on Jews."

This story demonstrates that simple, unlearned people may have great value. Every Jew has a precious, Godly neshamah, although it might not be apparent to others. When any person dies, an element of Godliness has left the earth. This justifies the restorative Kaddish prayer, "May the Name of God be exalted and sanctified."

Our Torah writings state that every Jew is represented by a letter in the Torah (Sema 186). If a single letter in a Torah scroll is missing, that scroll is considered defective and may not be used for the Torah reading. It makes little difference whether the missing letter is in the Ten Commandments or in the words spoken by the wicked Laban. Similarly, when a Jew is missing, there is a defect in Klal Yisrael, the body of the Jewish people. This is true even if the missing Jew was not devoted to Judaism.

When we hear the Kaddish being recited and think of it in this way, it should remind us that perhaps the nucleus of Godliness within ourselves may not be fully manifest. Perhaps there is much that we could be doing to reveal the infinite beauty of the neshamah we possess.

Therefore, while we cannot say kaddish – we are taught of other merits for the departed soul. There is nothing greater we can do for the departed soul than to accept upon ourselves an increase in good deeds to be done לזכות, *in merit of, and* לעלוי נשמת, *for the elevation of the soul, of the departed. The relatives and friends should undertake additional Torah learning, particularly, the study of Mishnah, give charity, and increase in good deeds for the soul of the departed.*

The Song of Songs

Kaddish is not just a random assortment of praises to God. Like all the prayers composed by the אנשי כנסת הגדולה, *The Men of Great Assembly, the words are very carefully selected and replete with meaning. Many of them refer to specific Biblical verses, not the least of which is the opening phrase. Siddur Rokeyah (p. 142) calls Kaddish the "Song of Songs."*

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵיהּ רַבָּא - *"May His Great Name be Exalted and Sanctified"*

This refers to the events that will occur during the war of Gog and Magog, during which Hashem will perform amazing miracles before the nations of the world. The war will end all opposition to the revelation of His Glory in the world, as we see in the verse, וְהִתְגַּדַּלְתִּי וְהִתְקַדַּשְׁתִּי וְנוֹדַעְתִּי לְעֵינֵי גּוֹיִם רַבִּים וְיָדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹוָק, *"I will be exalted, and I will be sanctified, and I will make Myself known before the eyes of many nations: then they will know that I am Hashem". (Yehezkel 38:23)*

What are the ramifications of God being exalted and sanctified? To answer that, let us turn back two chapters (Yehezkel 36:23-24):

וְקִדַּשְׁתִּי אֶת שְׁמִי הַגָּדוֹל הַמְחֻלָּל בַּגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר חִלַּלְתֶּם בְּתוֹכָם וְיָדְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹוָק נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יְקֹוָק בְּהִקָּדְשִׁי בָכֶם לְעֵינֵיהֶם: וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן הַגּוֹיִם וְקִבַּצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל הָאֲרָצוֹת וְהֵבֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל אַדְמַתְכֶם:

“I will sanctify My great Name, that is desecrated among the nations, that you have desecrated among them; then, the nations will know that I am Hashem – the word of the Lord Hashem/Elohim - when I become sanctified through you before their eyes. I will take you from among the nations and gather you from all the lands, and I will bring you to your own soil.”

In other words, God is sanctified when He redeems Israel. Our prayer that God be exalted and sanctified is simultaneously a prayer for redemption, as the two things are one and the same!

Hashem used His great Name to create the entire universe and all the spiritual worlds. It is through Hashem’s great Name that He preserves the existence of those worlds, and provides abundant sustenance to all creatures in those worlds. In our current state we are unable to witness this greatness, so in the first sentence of Kaddish we pray, May the great Name of Hashem become exalted and sanctified.

The Importance of Yehe Shemeh Rabbah

The importance of the phrase יהא שמיה רבא מברך, *May His great Name be blessed, is discussed throughout Talmudic and Midrashic literature. Just a few of these occurrences include:*

Eliyahu Hanavi said: When the Jews enter their synagogues and yeshivot and respond יהא שמיה רבא מברך, *Hashem nods His assent and says, "Happy is the King Who has such praise in His house"* (Berachot 3a).

One who replies יהא שמיה רבא מברך, *can rest assured that he has a place in the Next World* (Berachot 57a).

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: all who respond יהא שמיה רבא מברך *with all their might, have their evil decrees torn up... Rabbi Hiya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: Even if one has the taint of idolatry on him, he will be forgiven it...* (Shabbat 119b).

Since the Temple was destroyed, each day increases in curses more than the day before... So what sustains the world? The קדושא דסדרא (recited in the prayer ובא לציון) *and the* יהא שמיה רבא מברך *recited after Torah study.* (Sotah 49a).

When the Jews gather in their yeshivot to hear Aggadah from a scholar, after which they respond יהא שמיה רבא מברך, *God rejoices and is elevated in His world. He then says to His ministering angels, "Come see this nation I created and how they praise Me."* (The angels) *then dress Him in glory and splendor"* (Yalkut Shimoni Mishleh 247).

Clearly, יהא שמיה רבא מברך *is a most powerful prayer!*

What One Can Say When They Are Unable To Recite Kaddish

The following words are written in the Holy Sefer Hasidim (סימן יח): A person who lives in a village without a minyan, or who arrived late after they had already said יהא שמיה רבא should say:

וְעַתָּה יִגְדַּל־נָא כֹחַ אֲד-נָי כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לֵאמֹר: (במדבר יד יז)

And now – may the strength of my Lord be magnified as You have spoken, saying.

וְהִתְגַּדַּלְתִּי וְהִתְקַדַּשְׁתִּי וְנוֹדַעְתִּי לְעֵינֵי גּוֹיִם רַבִּים וְיָדְעוּ כִּי־אֲנִי יְקֹוָק: (יחזקאל לח כג)

I will be exalted, and I will be sanctified, and I will make Myself known before the eyes of many nations: then they will know that I am Hashem.

יְהִי שֵׁם יְקֹוָק מְבֹרָךְ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם: (תהלים קיג ב)

Blessed be the Name of Hashem, from this time and forever.
