

I received the call while sitting on a ski lift on the first Monday back in January. We took off for a few days as a family, anticipating a break from home, seemingly from the pandemic. We rented an Airbnb in the Berkshires near Buttercup Mountain. I remember it was freezing cold and luckily, I had the electric gloves that had been recommended to me. I was sitting alone on the chairlift due to extra Covid precautions.



Carefully, ever so carefully, I took off the gloves without letting them drop into the babbling snowy brook below. I put in my AirPods and took the call from my mother. She told me that my father, my *Abba*, had received a positive test for Covid while he was in the hospital for other medical issues.

I did not know what to say.

Was this the end?

Or would he, like his cousin who survived weeks on a ventilator at the beginning of the pandemic, recover?

I assumed and hoped for the latter.

Over the next week, we worked tirelessly to get him the best care, the best treatments available, speaking with his doctors and nurses, getting updates, and sure enough, he got better. Or better enough to be sent home. Or perhaps that was because the hospital needed his bed for people who were sicker. This was back during the awful January surge of Covid, its peak in the U.S.

We protested to no avail and the next few days were agonizing. How could we get him home safely and ensure he would still get his dialysis

treatment? How could we prevent my mother from getting Covid as they would be in the same, small apartment? Should I come down or would that put me at risk?

It was a confusing and agonizing mess.

My poor *Abba* went back and forth to the ER until he was finally “sick enough” to be readmitted...and then he really was.

* * *

Saying *Kaddish* for my *Abba* this year has been surreal. While I had hoped that my dad would have many more years of life (he had planned them: a final trip to Israel, a couple more family vacations, enjoying Manhattan and its *kosher* restaurants), or at least a couple more years, I had thought about his death. In fact, he and I had spoken about his wishes; what kind of funeral he wanted. He wanted us to sing “*Am Yisrael Hai* – the Jewish people lives”



as we carried him out of his old *shul* and even with Covid, we did that. He asked me to officiate and to be his health care proxy.

These were not responsibilities I took lightly.

I thought about saying *Kaddish*. How I would become like the members of the *shul* who connect with others saying *Kaddish* during the same year. How I would turn around to recite the *Kaddish* in the same direction as the other mourners. Facing the *bimah* would mean this was different – I wouldn't be the rabbi during that time, but a person in mourning just like anyone else in mourning.

I had imagined his *shivahs* – people gathering in my parents’ apartment: hugs and embraces of support. I thought of family coming together, sharing meals. I thought of my grandparents’ *shivahs* – how all the grandchildren spent time together; the cousins forming deeper relationships amidst the sorrow.

As was the case for so many others, very little of that actually happened. There was no *shivah* in person, except for the one night when one of my father’s oldest friends, who did not understand what a Zoom-*shivah* was, showed up at the front door, and I was so startled by an actual person that I could barely explain to him that the *shivah* was only through the internet; but he does not use Zoom.

There were no shared meals. I mourned with my mother alone in her apartment without my wife Sharon, my children, my sister, and her family, my father’s older brother, my extended family, nor anyone else.

But I did experience incredible support from family, friends, and our community. People watched on Zoom, shared memories in smaller breakout rooms, and came to the Zoom *minyan*. I was surprised at how meaningful it was to have people from all over come together – from Israel to the Northeast, from Florida to California. Since my dad served several communities, taught rabbis, and converted over 1,800 people to Judaism, there were lots of people who reached out. That was a gift. And again, I thank you, my Emunah family, for being there for me in so many ways.

But after each *shivah* slot, morning, afternoon, and evening, I would stand up and realize that my mother and I were in an otherwise empty room and none of these people were there in person. I would call Sharon and we would talk, but it was a lonely time.

* * *

While I have taught classes on mourning and sat with those who have experienced losses for years, this was the first time I was the direct mourner. All the emotions that I had talked about were now mine. The waves of sadness that can wash over you and then abate. The intensity of the week of *shivah* and then suddenly, having those supports taken away. The transition to becoming a mourner. Perhaps nothing is as intense as reciting *Kaddish*.

I want to thank Kathy Macdonald for organizing and all those who showed up who made sure that we had a *minyan* in the winter months for *Minhah* on Zoom; that was also a gift. Of course, anyone who makes up the *minyan* when it was on Zoom or now in person, especially in person, performs a great *mitzvah*, building a community for the mourner.

And it was a strange experience when I said *Kaddish* all over the country on Zoom: Zooming into other *minyanim* when I could not join ours. I have been to *shuls* in California, Minnesota, Chicago, Georgia, Florida, and around the Northeast. I have joined *minyanim* in people's backyards in Riverdale, NY, and even said *Kaddish* with our *shul* softball team – maybe that helped us go all the way to the semi-finals 😊.

Most special has been saying the *Kaddish* with my mother in NYC and my sister in Philadelphia; often in the mornings we “attend” Town and Village Synagogue where my father was the rabbi in the 1970s and my mother is a member again. To have my mother and sister in that Zoom or in our



Temple Emunah Zoom, makes me feel their love. It sweetens the sorrow.

But it is hard to say *Kaddish*. It is not an easy ritual. And just like anyone else, I have struggled at times with this practice. It can be exhausting as I juggle all the other aspects of my life. I have a deeper appreciation of how challenging it can be.

* * *

Over the summer, I have been reflecting on the precise meaning of the *mitzvah* of saying *Kaddish*. Interestingly, it is not a prayer about mourning at all. It is a prayer of praise – “*Yehei shmei rabbah mevorakh l’olam u’lolmei olmeiya* – May God’s great name be blessed forever and ever.”

In fact, this prayer was not intended to be a mourner’s prayer. Its origin takes us back 2,000 years when the rabbis would teach a lesson. After the teaching, a student would invite everyone to praise God with the central line of the prayer.

That developed into the *Kaddish D’Rabbanan* – the Rabbis’ *Kaddish* which was written for students and teachers. We still recite it to this day after learning traditional Jewish texts.

Eventually, the *Kaddish* moved into other forms, including the Mourner’s *Kaddish*, which probably originated during the 13th century, after the two centuries of the Crusades in Germany, when entire Jewish communities were wiped out. It is from that period when so many Jews were murdered that a number of our mourning customs, including *Yizkor*, originated as a way to help cope with the overwhelming losses.

In the 13th to 15th centuries, it was called *Kaddish Katan* – the child’s *Kaddish* – but by the 16th century the term *Kaddish Yatom* – the Orphan’s *Kaddish* – took hold, its Hebrew name until this day.

The notion of mourning being related to *Kaddish* is first found in a *midrash* for *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, written about 1,000 years ago.

There, we find a story about Rabbi Akiva.

As he walks through a cemetery, Akiva meets a naked man who appears to be alive, carrying wood on his head. Akiva asks why he is engaging in this challenging work. The man replies that he is deceased. He explains that during his life, he had been a tax collector, but favored the rich and hurt the poor.

Akiva asks the man if he has been told how to end his torture. The man explains that the only way he could be saved is if he had a son who would stand before the congregation and recite “*Barukhu et Adonai Hamvorakh* – Blessed is Adonai Who is blessed!” with the congregation responding: “Amen.” And then the son would recite the central line of the *Kaddish*: “*Yehei shmei rabbah mevorakh l’olam u’lolmei olmeiya* – May God’s great name be blessed forever and ever.”

If all that would occur, the deceased man could be released from his punishment. But the man did not have a son (back then daughters could not recite the *Kaddish*.) Although when the man died his wife was pregnant, even if she gave birth to a son, there would be no one to teach him Torah, especially because his father had been so cruel.

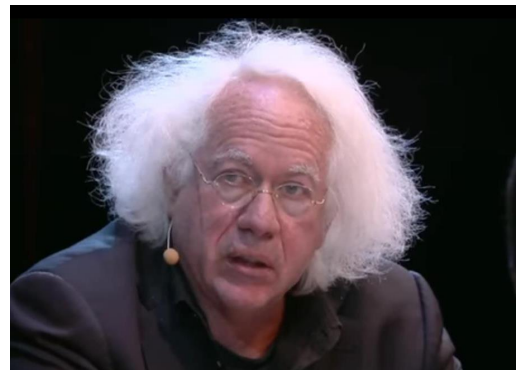
So the great Rabbi Akiva himself offered to teach him, to ensure that if he had a son, he would lead the community in prayer. Sure enough, he finds the son, circumcises him, and sets out to teach him. But the boy is steadfast in his refusal to learn Torah. Akiva fasts for 40 days; and the Almighty opens the boy’s heart to Torah so he can lead the community which responds with the central line of *Kaddish*: “*Yehei shmei rabbah*

mevorakh l'olam u'lolmei olmeiya – May God's great name be blessed forever and ever.”

And at that very moment, the deceased man is freed from his torment. He appears to Rabbi Akiva in a dream, and says: “May God's will be that your soul finds delight in the Garden of Eden, for you have saved me from the punishment of Gehenna.”

Quite a story.

As Leon Wieseltier interprets it in his epic tome on the *Kaddish*, “That the dead are in need of spiritual rescue; and that the agent of spiritual rescue is the son; and that the instrument of spiritual rescue is prayer, notably the *Kaddish*.” *Kaddish* saves one's parents from a nightmarish experience in the World-to-Come. That's why when a son was born, the father would say that the boy was his “*Kaddish*,” the One who could redeem him after his death.



* * *

A week and a half before he died, my father, my mother, my sister, and I, along with our spouses and children, gathered through Facetime, somewhat connected in our three different homes and the hospital. Knowing what seemed to be happening, we shared our love for him. My father spoke about his love for us, his desire that we continue the Jewish traditions, and that we be *menschen*, good people in the world.

Through the tears and the additional sadness that we could not be there with him, we felt a bond of love and the fear of losing someone forever. During the days that followed, I spoke with him on the phone, even

as it became harder and harder for him to speak. Three nights later, he spent an hour with me sharing some of the highlights of his life, the story about his decision to change direction from studying for a Ph.D. in ancient history to becoming a rabbi with new details I had never known. He spoke of what he studied: his love of Jewish history. For him, the survival of the Jewish people was his connection to God.

I will never forget that conversation.

A couple of days later was the last time I heard his voice; it was in a conference call where my father, my mother, my sister, and I were joined by a social worker about the question of putting him on a ventilator. While there was not much hope, we decided to give it a shot.

* * *

For some of us, the *Kaddish* resonates. We recite the *Kaddish* as a responsibility to our parents, to our loved ones, to keep their memories alive. For many of us, it is not the words, but the intention – the desire to have them – their values, their memories, their lives – live on in us. This allows us to hold onto them. Each time I recite it, I try to think of my father: how I miss him, what he would have said or taught me at a certain moment. For me, it is about setting aside the time to remember.

Wieseltier reflects that the *Kaddish* “is not a petition, it is a demonstration of cause and effect....For months and months, the child goes to *shul* to say – no, to show – who his or her parent was. The *Kaddish* is not a prayer for the dead. It is an achievement of the dead.”

To take one’s parent’s life and to lift it up....



Saying the *Kaddish* is continuing a tradition. Lifting up the person in your heart.

Even if they were from a different religion or spiritual tradition.

Even if they were not perfect.

Even if they were hurtful – sometimes, we mourn the parent we did not have.

It is a moment of reflection for us, the mourners. More than the deceased, we need the *Kaddish*. While we use the metaphor of lifting them up, it's really about lifting us.

I also feel a sense of being held. As the mourners in our community stand, we are noticed. We are in solidarity with our deceased loved ones and with each other. Some follow the Sephardic custom of having family members of the mourner stand as well, strengthening the bond of the generations of the family with each other.

And then, almost suddenly, the congregation steps in to recite the central line of the *Kaddish* together with the mourner. I feel this as a burst of support. The congregation demonstrates their solidarity with the mourner. I feel one with the community at that moment; the *minyan* symbolically stating: we are with you, you are not alone.

But, of course, the mourners do continue alone, without the community's voice, since they must walk forward on their own journeys, without others. They have their own experience of loss, and the pain cannot be eliminated by even the greatest amount of communal support.

* * *

Because services are now in our Main Sanctuary, I often stand by my father's memorial plaque



extending my hand or my *tzitzit* or my *siddur* to it, feeling a more visceral and physical connection to his presence.



My mind wanders – I think of mortality – that we are all destined to end. I think of my *Abba* – his teachings and large impact on so many and even his imperfections. I think of my last in-person visit with him: he was eating his classic favorite, a hot pastrami sandwich – sneaking a few of my fries against the dialysis potato ban.



But no matter what I remember, I am pulled back to the fact that I can no longer speak to him or see him.

* * *

As things devolved in the hospital, I decided to come down to be with my mother so she would not be alone. We both took Covid tests and we wore masks until we were safe. My father was not improving on the ventilator; he was getting worse. I desperately wanted to see him one last time so he would not die without any in-person connection to his family.

This was a complicated decision. Should I put myself at risk in order to visit him? In the end, we decided that I could go. I wore a gown, two masks, gloves, and a face shield; since he was on a ventilator, it was also safer since few Covid particles could escape the machine.

He was there, but not fully there. He did not seem to respond to me. I looked around his room, I saw his last notes written on a scrap of paper; the last things he ate – some small *hallah* rolls he had saved from Shabbat. I saw the book he was reading about Jewish customs.

I Facetimed my mother and sister who sang to him and shared their love with him as I caressed his head.

I spoke to him.

I hope that deep down he could hear us.

I cried.

I prayed.

I sat.

And I cried some more.

Finally, I said goodbye. Goodbye in Hebrew is “*L’hitraot* – until we see each other again.” Instead, I said *Lekh b’shalom* – go in peace, go unto God in peace, the Talmudic words of departing from the presence of someone who is at the end.

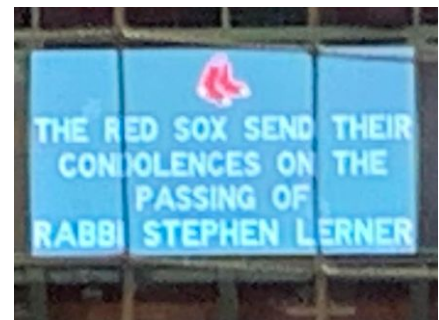
Changing out of the protective gear, washing thoroughly, I headed back, down First Avenue, feeling the weight of the moment.

My father died the next day. On *Tu B’shvat* – the birthday of the trees. He loved trees.

* * *

Yehei shmei rabbah meborakh – May my father be reunited with the Name of All – God’s name, reuniting with all the souls throughout all time.

Oseh Shalom Bimromav hu ya’aseh shalom aleinu v’al kol Yisrael, V’Imru: Amen.



* * *

And, as we transition to *Yizkor*, I invite us to hold memories of our families and friends in our hearts. Take them with us into this moment and know that their presence fills our souls.