

Voicing the Mourners Kaddish

They are only words-I know

How, then, can it be such pain

To say them?

Is it that I would roll the snow

Back from your whitesmooth winter grave

As coverlet-and see your face,

Your form once more before me.

They are only words to say.

How, then, can it be such pain

To say them-can it be the way

I take spring's flowers out to you

When I would give them to your hand.

Though they are only words to say,

These words became such pain to say

Because I would have you alive!

And yet, I speak the words each year.

With tears, I tremble and repeat

The Kaddish-for within that prayer

The best and fullest which was you,

Your dreams and your ideals

Survive.¹

Lucille Frenkel, “Voicing The Mourners Kaddish For My Mother’s Yahrzeit”

What is it about the Kaddish that brings so much emotion to it? At daily minyan, I notice not only who says Kaddish but how they say it. I see our Congregational President choke back tears as he reads these words day-after-day. The Kaddish, said for eleven months after the death of a parent, has so much power behind it.

One would think the Mourners Kaddish is a prayer to the deceased. This cannot be further from the truth: it is a prayer to G-d. The mourners say in Aramaic, the spoken language of our ancestors, *יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא*, may G-d’s great name be exalted and sanctified. The entire congregation joins in a response also said by the mourner: *יהא שמה רבא* *מברך לעלם ולעלמי עלמיא*, may G-d’s great name be blessed forever.

¹ Lucille Frenkel, “Voicing the Mourners Kaddish for My Mothers Yahrzeit.” In *A Jewish Adventure* (Milwaukee, WI: The Eternity Press, 1983), p. 120.

Why do we turn to G-d at a time of such great vulnerability, when we remember a loved one who is no longer physically present? At funerals and unveilings I say this is not for G-d's benefit but rather for ours. After a great loss, when our foundation has been shattered, when the carpet has been pulled out from under our feet, we still strive to believe that the world is good, that there is something to live for and to fight for. The Kaddish gives us this opportunity, to praise G-d's name even at a time when we might be very angry with the הקדוש ברוך הוא, with G-d, for letting our love one pass away. We return to these words after our period of mourning on the Yahrzeit, the Hebrew date of death.

We also say the Kaddish at Yizkor, when we remember our loved one. We always feel the absence of a loved one's presence, but it is often felt most during holidays, when there's an empty chair or our loved one with whom we cooked or who led the Seder is not present. I remember my grandmother making matzah brei in the kitchen, helping my mother with the Seder plate (in particular making haroset) and at the Seder choosing not to read passages which deal with plague or with death.

Although I did not have a Seder with her since I graduated rabbinical school, memories like that will always stay with me.

The past two months are among the first since I came to the Jericho Jewish Center that I have not voiced the Mourners Kaddish. Before, either someone asked me to say Kaddish as their representative, or שליח, or I chose to say Kaddish for 11 months for my grandmothers. When the 11 months for my Grandma Lucille ended, it felt strange to no longer be saying the Mourners Kaddish. As rabbi I often have said Mourners Kaddish along with the congregation on Shabbat but I deliberately decided not to do so anymore so unless necessary for pacing in order to let the mourners' words be heard. Now the only times I say Kaddish are for a קדיש כללי, or communal Kaddish, at Yizkor, Yom HaShoah, and 10th of Tevet, so as to remember both loved ones who died and fellow Jews and family members who were murdered solely because of their religion. It feels dignified to voice the Kaddish to remember them and hold them in our hearts.

I hope that this Passover holiday has been a good one for you, both celebratory and reflective, appreciating that we have reached this point again in our cyclical calendar. Let us now pause to remember the loved ones who shaped us into being who we are, who paved the way for us to follow, whose inspiration we turn to when we have a difficult decision to make and whose wisdom guides our spirits. Before beginning Yizkor I ask that we all turn in your new Yizkor booklets to Page 16 as we read responsively the prayer “As We Remember Them.”