

## **Saying Kaddish: How We Mourn**

This week's Torah portion has a complicated plot that includes a number of rites of passage – matchmaking, weddings, baby-namings – but no deaths, no rites of mourning. Yet death hovers, in a way: Two weeks ago, the parasha began with death and mourning – the death and burial of Sarah.

Last week's story of blessings given to his sons by the blind and ailing Isaac are described as a kind of final gesture: When Isaac sends Esau off to hunt up some game, he says, "Look, I am old, and I do not know when I may die... [Make me a tasty dish] so that I may bless you before I die". After these blessings, Rebekah, fearing for Jacob's life at the hands of Esau, sends him off to her brother's home.

And next week there will be three deaths: Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin; Deborah the nurse of Rebekah dies and is buried under the oak near Beth El (the same place where Jacob – this week - has the dream of a stairway to heaven); and finally the death of Isaac at age 180, buried by his two sons, Esau and Jacob (mentioned in that order). These three deaths – Rachel, Deborah, and Isaac - will occur within a single chapter, almost as if death had been suspended for a while, and now must reassert itself.

This week's parasha, *Vayetzei*, picks up our tale as Jacob leaves home, and his aged father. He will be gone for 20 years. How many times during those twenty years did he wonder whether his father was still alive? We are not told. Of course, the karma will come around to him later, when he believes his beloved son Joseph is dead, and mourns him for seventeen years, until they meet again in Egypt. Somehow, Isaac hangs on until Jacob returns home, with wives and children and flocks and herds. Blind Isaac was dying for twenty years! So, though no death takes place in this week's chapters, there is a sense in which impending death lurks just behind the famous love story – replete with in-law problems – of this week's reading.

Impending death lurks. It is a fact of life, the fact that we dread and learn to accept.

In Jewish tradition, reciting Kaddish is the best-known ritual act of acceptance. Just as, to become bar mitzvah, one must learn to recite the Torah blessings, so as a mourner one must learn to recite the Kaddish. Yet, as we all know, the Kaddish makes no mention of death. This seems to be the one fact that everyone knows about this ancient prayer. It is the “mourners’ prayer,” but it is not about mourning.

The Kaddish will be one part of our January study sessions – four Tuesday evenings. Anita Diamant has written some popular fiction, as well as some very readable guides to liberal Jewish practice. Her best-known novel, *The Red Tent*, is actually an extended midrash on this week’s parashah. For the January-term class, we’ll be using her fine book, *Saying Kaddish* (thank you to Pat Benjamin for recommending it), so I hope you can join in. Consider this both a foretaste and an invitation.

Another thing that many know about the Kaddish is that it exists in several different forms. (You may see a brief summary of its different forms on page 113 of our prayerbook.)

So what is the Kaddish, in brief? It is part “doxology,” that is, a recitation of praise of God. Perhaps even more than this, it is a poem that says, “May God’s kingdom come, may we see redemption for all.” But in saying, “May it come, soon and in our day,” the Kaddish affirms once again the fundamental Jewish understanding that redemption is “not yet.”

Inspired by this week’s love story, the poet Rahel wrote a meditation on love, death, waiting, and acceptance – a kind of Kaddish:

### *Sorrow Song*<sup>1</sup>

Will you hear my voice, my distant one,  
will you hear my voice, wherever you are –  
a voice calling strong, a voice crying silently  
and above time, commanding blessing?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (URJ, 2008), p. 182

This world is wide with many paths.  
They meet narrowly, part forever.  
A man seeks, but his feet fail,  
he cannot find what he has lost.

Maybe my last day is already near, already near,  
the day of tearful parting,  
I shall wait for you until my life dims,  
as Rachel awaited her lover.

(trans. Wendy Zierler)

Perhaps more than anything else, saying Kaddish is an act of acceptance + hope. We accept that the privilege of entry into God's world comes at the cost of inevitable separations. And we hope always that our own lives contribute one more unique piece to the better world that is coming (whether you believe that it is "next" world somewhere else, or whether you believe that it is this world transformed).

When he left home, Jacob left behind his ailing father. He must surely have wondered when the moment would arrive that he would become an "official" mourner. None of us knows just when that moment will arrive. Our tradition does not want us to be perpetually in mourning, so it limits the obligation to specified lengths of time (for example, one year, then reduced by one month), and to specific relationships.

The "acceptance of the yoke of heaven" – *kabbalat 'ol malchut shamayim* – is a phrase usually associated with the Shema. When I recite the Shema, I am taking upon myself the "yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven." But really, there is a more explicit sense in which one does that when, as a mourner, one utters the rhythmic Aramaic words of Kaddish: *Yitgadal v'yitkadash* – exalted and sanctified be the great Name! When an "official" mourner rises to recite Kaddish, and we stand in support and solidarity, we turn ourselves in the direction of acceptance, even when we are not yet ready to accept. We take our place in the long line of Israel, who have accepted the privilege and the task of waiting and of working toward a better world.