

My friends, I lost my beloved mother, of blessed memory, on March 5, of 2015. I finished saying Kaddish for her in February of 2016. About four months later, I lost my father, *alav ha-shalom*. Just this week, I concluded the period of saying Kaddish for my father, although the period of mourning for him continues for another month. The mourning period for a parent is a full year, but we only say Kaddish for eleven months. I am grateful to our President, Sid Dunn, for agreeing to let me mark concluding Kaddish by chanting the haftarah tomorrow in memory of my father. From now on, I will only be saying Kaddish for my parents when we say Yizkor on Pesach, Shavuot, Yom Kippur and Shemini Atzeret, and of course, on their respective Yahrzeits.

It was very painful for me to stop saying Kaddish for my mother. Saying it felt like an ongoing connection to her that was difficult for me to give up. This week, I felt the same about stopping Kaddish for my father, but not as intensely as I did for my mother. This is no reflection on my father, God forbid. He was a good and kind soul. To some extent, it reflects the especially close relationship my brother Duvid and I had with

our mother, who was home with us after she finished her day teaching first grade, while my father worked three and sometimes four jobs. He was a licensed psychologist with a Masters degree, and his license was grandfathered when the requirements changed to a doctorate. That meant he was able to practice, but at a fraction of what he would have been paid with a Ph.D. or Psy.D. However, I think it is easier for me—difficult, yes, but still easier—to conclude Kaddish for my father because I have absolutely no doubt—none—that my parents are together in *olam ha-ba*, the World to Come.

I chose this as my topic tonight because I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that a great many people derive something from saying Kaddish that makes it difficult to stop. How do I know this? The period for saying Kaddish for any relative other than your parents is during the *sheloshim*, the thirty days after burial, the first seven of which are *shiva*. That is correct; we are supposed to say Kaddish for eleven months for our parents, but only for thirty days for the other relatives for whom we are obliged to say Kaddish. That is Jewish law. But an ancient rabbinic sage said, “If you want to know the law, go out and see

what the people are doing.”<sup>1</sup> What I have seen over the years is a great many people say Kaddish for eleven months for all of their relatives, sometimes even for relatives for whom one is not required to say Kaddish.

Therefore, it is evident to me that those of us who are in mourning, and that eventually translates to every one of us, derive a measure of connection and comfort through the recitation of Kaddish. This underscores the importance of attending services. A wonderful Yiddish saying reminds us that ten shoemakers make a minyan, but nine rabbis do not. Being present at services, making sure there is the minyan necessary to say Kaddish, is a great act of kindness on behalf of those needing and wanting to recite the Kaddish.

While I do hope that what I have said will encourage people to attend services regularly, that benefit will only accrue once the text of this sermon is posted on our website. I know that tonight I am preaching to the choir. Encouraging attendance at services is my secondary message tonight, one that you do not need to hear as evidenced by your presence. I do, however, have

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<sup>1</sup> Tractate B'rachot 45a and elsewhere

a message that I hope will resonate with you. It is something I have been saying to myself as I knew the period of Kaddish for my father was nearing its end, and I have continued to say it to myself since I finished. It is the answer to this question: if saying Kaddish makes me feel connected to my parents and gives me comfort, why stop saying it at all?

There is a Jewish answer to this question, and it is a very important one. When we suffer the loss of a loved one, Judaism requires us to mourn. But later, Judaism requires us to stop mourning and move on with life.

Please understand that there are two types of mourning, emotional mourning and halakhic mourning, mourning according to Jewish law. Emotional mourning ebbs and flows after time. My mother-in-law, may she rest in peace, has been gone for over a decade, but it still tore our hearts out that three of Evan's four grandparents were not here to share his college graduation with us. Of course I believe they saw from on high, but it's just not the same as having them with us. But there is another side to the coin. Speaking halakhically, speaking not emotionally but from the perspective of Jewish law that so

wisely guides us through life, we must recognize, at least on some level, that life goes on. Judaism is the anti-Egypt. Egypt worshipped death. Judaism worships life. Even the slogan of the terrorist group Hamas reflects this today, “We love death as much as the Jews love life.” It is true.

My friends, the Torah says to us, “I have set before you today life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose...” and I have long marveled that the Torah does not tell us to choose blessing. It tells us to choose life. We choose life with all of its elements, with blessings but also with curses, with happiness but also with sorrow; we choose life even though by definition life includes death. We are the people who toast with “L’chaim,” to life. Death inflicts on us a wound that heals but is never fully cured, so we turn to the comforting words of the prophet Isaiah<sup>2</sup>: Your sun shall never set; the moon shall not go down—for *Adonai* will be your everlasting light; the days of your mourning shall come to an end.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 60:20