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How Jewish ritual helped me find my way through loss

by Danielle Berrin
2 weeks ago

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The author and her mother, Sheryl Berrin-Klein, in 2010 in Miami. Photo courtesy of Danielle Berrin

I had to press my lips closed, the day after it ended.

The ritual was no longer mine. My duty was complete. But the words, with their cadences and rhythms, their alliterative twists — *yitgadal v'yitgadash* — had become my anthem. For 11 months, I had owned these words, claimed them like land, their cries and God-calls had become, for me, a visitable place.

How could I now forsake them?

The last day I said it, my hands trembled. Deep, heavy breaths rose and fell in my chest. The room felt hot. I'm not ready, I thought to myself. I'm not ready to leave this place — *hamakom* — the place of consolation. When my heart first tore, like the dress I wore to her funeral, the words of Kaddish were what daily sustained me.

Magnified and sanctified ... Magnified and sanctified ...

These words were my poetry, the only sustenance for a soul in retreat, for a child who felt like an orphan. I needed these words, in their mystical, mysterious Aramaic, like food.

May his great name be ... in the world that he created ... as he wills ...

How could I stop mourning my mother? I still needed her. I still needed *this*.

Y'hei sh'mei rabba m'varach l'alam ul-al'mei al'maya ...

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How Jewish ritual helped me find my way through loss | Hollywood Jew | Jewish Journal

In the Talmud, Kaddish is likened to Yom Kippur, described as a prayer of atonement on behalf of the dead. One source even tells us that when a child says Kaddish for a parent, "Any decree against them will be torn up and the Gates of the Garden of Eden opened."

Is it possible that my mother needed these words, too?

It has been more than a year since I buried her. She was 61 when she died. "Young," everyone said. She would have loved that. She also would have loved that the coroner's report began, "The body is that of a 5-foot-5-inch, 127-pound white female appearing younger than the given age of 61 years." It is true that she was very devoted to proper skin care.

Her official cause of death was blunt head trauma — from a series of falls — leaving her with more than one "dark red subgaleal hematoma." But that only tells you how she died; it doesn't begin to suggest the preceding years of decline, the crusade her body launched against itself, or the wrenching struggle of her soul to find some kind of peace. I want to believe she found that peace in death, and that her pain ceased. But the end of her pain meant the end of her life, and, therefore, the beginning of my pain — a pain my family, as her survivors, has to live with every day.



At a shivah minyan for Sheryl Berrin-Klein, from left: husband Donald Klein, son Frank, daughters Jessica and Danielle, and their father, Larry Berrin.

The last time I saw my mother, she lay on a hospital bed at South Miami Hospital, pink-lipped and auburn-haired, her alabaster skin flushed with the final trickle of blood ever to flow through her veins. On life support, she looked just like John Everett Millais' Ophelia — painterly, peaceful, floating gently down some endless stream. The air in the hospital room was so thick you could choke; a disconsolate quiet punctuated by enormous eruptions of grief. I can still hear my sister screaming.

The next week was a dark fairy tale. A funeral. Bereaved children. Devastated spouse. Eulogies. The pounding dirt on her grave. *Shivah*. Platters of food. A greenhouse of flowers. So many people. Noise. Rupture. Alienation. Angst. The phone didn't stop ringing.

When I arrived back in L.A., just before Shabbat, it was as if her death had not happened. No one I'd met in the seven years I'd lived in California was among the nearly 500 people who attended her funeral. Miami was too far, and it had happened too quickly, and I hadn't had the courage or the time to invite anyone. I flew to Miami, put her in the ground, and then returned to everything as it had been, while my world had unalterably changed.

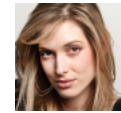
That first afternoon, I sat on my couch, blank and full of dread. What should I do with myself? *Shabbos* was coming, and I was alone. Everything was disorienting. The air was hot, humid. I felt dizzy. Services seemed like the safest, most tranquil place to go. So I stumbled, as if drunk, to Temple Beth Am's Kabbalat Shabbat, the service that welcomes the Sabbath. I had never been there before, but it is just around the corner from where I live, and, at the time, there was nowhere else for me to go. Saying Kaddish would ground me, I told myself. It would force me to stand still in a spinning world.

At this time, we invite all who are mourning to please rise ...

At the end of the service, Rabbi Ari Lucas looked around and kindly asked new people to introduce themselves. He looked directly at me.

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He knew he had never seen me before and invited me to declare myself. But I lowered my head, wishing to remain silent. Death had rendered me closed. I wanted to be alone, anonymous and far away. Loss had diminished me, my spirit shrunk from grief and pain.

But I had a duty. For much of Jewish history I probably wouldn't have been allowed to fulfill this mitzvah, but fortunately I am a Jewish woman living in the 21st century in Los Angeles. Kaddish was mine to claim. As Rabbi Daniel Landes, director of the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, reassuringly writes in "The Puzzling Power of Kaddish": "No one is beyond sanctifying God's name."

Kaddish wasn't a choice. It was my reveille call back to the world of the living. I'd learned of the ritual not in religious school, but from Leon Wieseltier. I devoured his book, "Kaddish," on the plane ride home from my mother's funeral. "Help me, Nachmanides. Help me," Wieseltier wrote. I wasn't entirely sure who Nachmanides was, but that became my prayer, too.

When I walked into Beth Am's daily morning *minyan* 36 hours later, I wanted to do what was required of me, then disappear. I didn't want pity; I didn't want friends; I didn't want food. I wanted to be an island.

But community, just like family, it turns out, is not about what you want but what you need.

Kaddish knows this. It's why a minyan is required to say it; it demands a communal response. And that response, Landes teaches, "interrupts every other prayer, for Kaddish is beyond all prayers."

And so began my ritual of rising to say Kaddish. Each day, I would wake at an ungodly hour to go and do the godly thing, and each day, it hurt like a hangover. At 6:30 a.m., I'd shove my cats from on top of me, roll out of bed, throw on whatever clothes I had worn the night before, grab my *tallit* and walk out the door. And almost every morning on the way to shul, my sister would phone, and I'd say, "I'm late for minyan!"

"You say that every day," she'd tease.

I still don't know how to daven the early morning prayers. "If you don't know Kaddish D'Rabbanan," one of my teachers recently chided about the rabbi's Kaddish, said after completing a passage of study, "that means you get to shul more than seven minutes late. That's the early-bird prayer." As he well knows, I am no early bird, but it is my firm belief that one should always have something to aspire to. Most days, anyway, the whole service felt to me like a prolonged prelude to the Kaddish, as if all the other liturgy existed as an elaborate exposition in service of this sacred supplication. In the Talmud, Wieseltier reminds us, it is said that the whole world is sustained in existence by the utterance of "*Yhei sh'mei rabba m'varach l'alam ul-al'mei al'maya* (May his great name be blessed ...)." Long before Kaddish became a full prayer, that line appeared in early Jewish literature — not quite verbatim, but close — in Daniel, which was written around 500-160 B.C.E.

One of the Kaddish platitudes people often refer to is that there's nothing about death in the prayer. It is, instead, explicitly praiseful, a proclamation of God's greatness. This is a favorite conundrum of the rabbis who love to answer complicated questions: In the face of loss, when you might be doubting the existence of God, how can you praise God? How can there be eternity when death brings finitude? Why believe in something when death brings nothingness? And who decided it would be a good idea to commemorate the end of life with an affirmation that life goes on? For a while, my thoughts were more in line with Nietzsche than Nachmanides.

Then I realized that Kaddish depends on that convergence. "It is about the meeting place of two worlds, human finitude and God's eternity," Rabbis Lawrence Kushner and Nehemia Polen point out in Volume 6 of "My People's Prayer Book." "It brings us out of our sadness and anger by having us utter appreciation and praise just when we are tempted to deny the importance of both," Rabbi Elliot Dorff writes in the same book.

Something extraordinary happens when you force yourself to perform a ritual. In high school, when I was competing in the speech and debate

club, my mother noticed that the more my partner and I performed — up to six times each day at some tournaments — a mastery began to develop, a perfection of the text, which then enabled this transcendent, creative magic to happen. And so it was with Kaddish: I doubted it would transform me at first, but I did it anyway. And at the moment I least believed, God showed up.

God first came in the form of Mike Harris. A white-haired, quietly devout Jew with a gentle soul, Mike knew me no more than a few days before showing up at my doorstep — with his wife, Bev, and two grandkids in tow — offering food and care and a year of free synagogue membership. (I would later joke that the worst part about finishing Kaddish was that now I'd have to pay to join the congregation.) Over 11 months, Mike invited me to Shabbos dinners, taught me how to garden and bought me my first siddur, from Jerusalem, with my Hebrew name inscribed on it in gold. When I first saw my name combined with my mother's — *Leah bat Zalman Leibel v'Sara* — I realized she wasn't lost; she was my link to the world.

Morning after mourning, I felt God's presence through the people praying around me. Through Teri Cohan-Link, who unfailingly greeted any new person who walked through the door, who saw other people's pain and was kind; who blessed me with holiday meals, gave me greens from her garden and hugged me when I cried. And Roberta Goodman-Rosenberg, who for months mourned her own mother by my side, and even included my siblings at her holiday table, throughout the year offering tips on the business of mourning, the ordering of footstones and planning for the final Kaddish Kiddush.

And the rabbis, Adam Kligfeld and Ari Lucas, were often present at daily minyan, quietly davening alongside us, elegant in their warmth, gentle in dispensing wisdom.

At minyan, there were all these Jewish angels everywhere, and Kaddish made me see them. I saw how the minyan *gabbai*, David Kaplan, diligently performed a million tasks, visible and invisible, every single day, to make it possible for Jews like me to do my duty — to mourn, and magnify and sanctify.

And then there was Sam Tuchband, who noticed I walked to Starbucks every morning after prayers and brought me his empty coffee bags to exchange for free drinks at the store. And the adorable Nate Milmeister, the nonagenarian neighbor I never knew I had, whose effervescent *Yiddishkayt* brought levity and light to the austerity of the prayer service. On my birthday, Nate bought me cake; he kept my kitchen stocked with lemons from his yard and never missed an opportunity to practice his old-fashioned coquetry: "You're a sweet bunch of onions!" he'd flirt. Admittedly, I haven't received many compliments like that one.

The truth is, I could write at length about each person in the minyan — because it was with these souls, in that space, through the words of our tradition and in the presence of our Torah, that I found my ethereal mother.

Every morning I could see her out the window, in the skies, in the trees, even in the traffic. And through the words of Kaddish, I could speak to her. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach taught that Kaddish is what the dead would say to us, could we hear them. It's a gorgeous thought, and I often prayed, "Let it be: Let it be that my mother exists in a place so wondrous only praise would spill from her lips could she speak." But what if that isn't so? What if she exists in a perfect, wondrous place but still cries out because she misses her children?

I've come to think of the prayer more as literary manna, a fungible fugue that supplies the seeds for a sublime conversation. Kaddish contains the question and the answer. And, like Shabbat, it is a profound gift to the Jewish people. When we are left to wallow in death's silence, Kaddish may be the only conversation left.

A few weeks before my 11 months of recitation would end, I became very nervous and couldn't sleep. What would I do when it was over? When there would be no more mornings of promptness, of purpose, of complaining to my sister, "I'm late for minyan!" Who else in my life but my fellow "minyanares" had I let see me so raw? Fresh out of bed, hair

unwashed, not a stitch of makeup, dutifully wearing the same things day after day feeling not fashionable, but threadbare. How true are the words of the customary phrase, offered by the congregation to a Jew in mourning — "*Hamakom yenachem etchem ...*" May the place comfort you. My *hamakom* was the Temple Beth Am minyan, where the only expectation was my presence, not my performance; where I was allowed to simply be, just me.

Hard though it was, the last day of Kaddish turned out to be the best day. It was filled with family and friends — my father, sister and brother, who were here from Miami; my "fellow fellows" from American Jewish World Service, who had made a minyan for me so I could say Kaddish during the 10 days we traveled through Mexico; and my best rabbi friend from another shul, who even led davening.

Before davening started, one of the daily minyanaires offered me a blessing. "I hope you found some comfort here," he said. But that last day, I couldn't stop trembling.

My teacher recently taught that Kaddish is like a punctuation mark. Its various iterations — half Kaddish, rabbi's Kaddish, Mourner's Kaddish etc. — bookend each part of the prayer service: After *Birkat Hashachar*, Kaddish; after the *Amidah*, Kaddish; after Torah service, Kaddish; after *Aleinu*, Kaddish; and so on. It's a sign of completion. And it is yet more evidence of the brilliance of Jewish tradition: At the moment of loss, our tradition offers us a prayer symbolic of wholeness.

The loss of my mother has circumscribed my heart with an irreparable wound. It is still impossible to fathom that for a time she was here, and now she is not. It is harder still to contemplate all the things she'll miss, all the years I'll feel deprived of her presence, her wisdom, her counsel, her love. Should I be blessed to marry and have children, they'll never know her. For every *simcha* and every sadness, she'll remain a ghost.

But from all of those losses, Kaddish brought gain.

"You've added many dimensions to this minyan in ways you don't even know," one of the minyanaires said to me on my last day of mourning. "One is, we all know we can get written about at any moment, so we're on our best behavior!"

If best behavior means being committed Jews who are kind to the core *and* religiously competent, then he was right. (I, on the other hand, still can't make it through the whole *Amidah* with this group of NASCAR daveners.) As I told them on the last day, the Temple Beth Am minyan taught me not just what community is — but the highest levels of what it is meant to be.

Several weeks ago, when my childhood friend Steven Sotloff was killed by ISIS militants, I returned to minyan to say Kaddish for him, as well as for my stepfather, simultaneously. That day, my recitation reeked of rage. As our Miami rabbi, Terry Bookman, asked at Steven's funeral, "Is there any sorrow greater than this?"

And yet, even when confronted with profound anguish and despair, Kaddish remained the manna: Kaddish doesn't tell us God is good or fair; Kaddish tells us God is great — big, mighty, inscrutable. Jewish tradition, thank God, knows better than to promise a life devoid of pain. Instead, it offers us the tools — God, community, ritual — to help bear it.

Yit'barakh v'yish'tabach v'yit'pa'ar v'yit'romam v'yit'nasei ...

Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi in Palestine, was once asked how he, a devout Jew, could associate with secular Israelis. And he answered: First comes *yitgadal* — magnification. You have to expand your prayer, your soul, your circle. Then comes *yitgadash* — sanctification. Only once you have broadened yourself, and left that narrow place, can holiness emerge.

The Temple Beth Am daily minyan made it possible for me to *yitgadal* and *yitgadash* — magnify and sanctify — to emerge from a cocoon of grief and enlarge myself through the presence of community, the presence of my mother and the presence of God.

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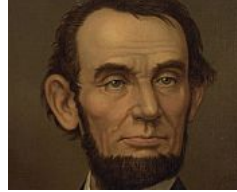
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Lois Copeland · Forest Park Senior High School Baltimore Maryland

The article is beautifully written and spiritually uplifting. My son David, died 14 years ago and have question G-D's existence since. Your article helped me put in perspective the spiritual value of prayer. You honor your mother.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [4](#) · [Follow Post](#) · October 2 at 8:08pm



Dean Hillel Weiss · Top Commenter · Topanga, California

as evident from your poignant writing, your mom's memory is a blessing. may it continue to be so . . .

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LiAmi Lawrence · Tel Aviv, Israel

beautiful!!!

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Marta Twinsoul

Thanks so much (again) for your sharing(s). So touching, so brilliant, so inspiring, so heartfelt, so generous, so soul-full. You are a living monument to your Mother's life. I can feel her "kveling" on the other side of the veil. Infinite blessings to you and your loved ones, soldann/stan
www.oneheartbeing.com

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Salvador Litvak · [Follow](#) · President at Pictures From the Fringe · 254 followers

I was there on many of those days with you, [Danielle](#), and I can attest that you brought a beautiful ruach into the room. I especially enjoyed your questions and the answers you sparked from the knowledgeable and kind people around us. Thank you for writing such beautiful piece about a tough journey. May your mom's memory always be for a blessing!

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Esther Kustanowitz · [Follow](#) · Top Commenter · Director of Digital Content & Story Editor at Pictures From the Fringe · 484 followers

A lovely and touching piece, [Danielle](#), that far too many of us can relate to...may your mom's memory guide you and may you always find support in community. (And a kol hakavod to the [Temple Beth Am Daily Minyan](#) for all they do, so humbly and quietly, every day for those who need a place for Kaddish...)

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David Kunkel · Top Commenter

This. This is one of the things that makes Judaism great, showing the depth of its insights and compassion. And note the wisdom of the Rabbis: Mourn all you need to, all you like, but there is a day when--like it or not, ready or not--you must stop, and rejoin the human family, and get on with the business of life. I read this with my heart in my throat and tears in my eyes. Thank you.

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Laurie Press · Forest Park High School

I lost my mother nine months ago...and reading your article - well, brought a sense of peace to me and for you. How beautifully you described what you went through...and it made me feel as if I am going through it with you...and I am. My mother was almost 93...much older than yours...but, it really doesn't matter an age...a mother is a mother is a mother. And I know she is looking down upon you with love. May your heart keep the peace you have found through those 11 months...and may your Mom's memory be for a blessing.

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Lillian Samson

Beautifully written. The reader can see it came from the heart. I hope you continue to attend the minyan, if not daily then on Shabbat with your family. May you enjoy a wonderful New Year.

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Sandy Price · [Follow](#) · Top Commenter · Executive Director at The American Academy of Pediatrics - Arizona Chapter

I haven't lost my mom, but I cried like a baby through your article. Just beautiful, moving.

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