Doing Kaddish

Anne Brener

I don't know what to do. No. I know what to do. I will open a book. (Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish*)

The book that I opened 30 years ago, following the deaths of my mother and sister, was a black book with empty pages. I etched my life-line in ink into its white spaces and chronicled my kaddish journey. I was writing to save my life. I had no thought that the scratches in my journal would someday provide comfort to others or that what I was writing would bring me to trust the wisdom of the blessing recited upon hearing of a death: "*Baruch Dayan Emet*." ("Bless God, The True Judge.") But the kaddish, as other writers of a genre we will call "kaddish literature" reveal, takes us to unexpected places.

While the words of kaddish and the kaddish minyan provide the *keva*, the fixed choreography of the mourners' prayer, the kaddish is much more than can be perceived from the outside. Kaddish is a place to stand in the midst of an earthquake. It is a wireless connection for fine-tuning a conversation thought to be lost. It is an audacious exhortation to faith when faith has been shattered. And, in the end, it is a sense of connection, wholeness, and holiness recovered from the shards. Kaddish literature describes this inner experience of transformation that takes place within the embrace of the kaddish.

Kaddish literature documents this journey, demonstrating, in each unique voice, the value of the kaddish year. It kindles, to paraphrase Wieseltier, "our candles" for the ones we mourn. It demonstrates the value of taking the time to honor our dead as well as our tradition. We write these books to help us pay attention and to savor our personal experience as we literally "come to terms" with the person whose life has just ended, our role in the community, life on a planet where people die, God, and ourselves. We write these books to encourage others to pay attention too. We write these books because we must.

Kaddish is a place to stand in the midst of an earthquake... Kaddish literature describes the experience.

American culture has taught us to ride out our tough times as individuals. It tells us to steel ourselves against the dangerous emotions and existential questions that inhabit the wilderness of mourning. Kaddish literature shows that the assumptions of American culture about what will happen to us if we stand in community to face our grief are false.

The mourner's blessing speaks of God as *HaMakom*, which literally means, "The Place." It expresses the hope that mourners will find *HaMakom Y'nechem*, a Holy Place of comfort. The kaddish provides such a place, and these books help in the search. Mourners can open our pages for companionship and find role models who have faced the dark places of grief. A kaddish book offers an "amen" to people reciting kaddish.

In the last decade many American books have joined the pioneering literature on Jewish approaches to death and mourning of Maurice Lamm's *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (Jonathan David, 1969) and Jack Riemer's *Jewish Reflections on Death* (Schocken Books, 1976). Lamm's book belongs to the category of halakhic guides that has since been populated by such books as Avner Weiss's *Death and Bereavement: A Halakhic Guide* (KTAV, 1991) and the more liberal *Jewish Mourner's Handbook*, edited by William Cutter (Behrman House, 1992) and Anita Diament's *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead and Mourn As a Jew* (Schocken Books, 1999). These books are manuals, providing legal and practical direction, while Riemer's collection of thoughtful essays and his later book *Wrestling with the Angel of Death: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning* (Schocken Books, 1995) speak with the personal voice that is heard in kaddish literature.

In the recently published *Living a Year of Kaddish* (Schocken Books, 2003), Ari Goldman, a former writer for *The New York Times*, speaks with the sensitive voice of a grieving son and the precision of a journalist. His experiences of mourning his father suggest that focused

grief makes us better people. Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish* (Knopf, 1998) is the magnum opus of this genre. It is a 588-page meditation on the kaddish, through which we are privileged to view the inner life of a brilliant intellectual with the linguistic agility to engage the original texts of Jewish medieval literature in personal dialogue as he mourns his father.

Herbert Yoskowitz's *The Kaddish Minyan: The Impact on Ten Lives* (Eakin Press, 2001) accumulates a minyan of voices in short essays, which describe, after their year of mourning had ended, the unexpected transformations that took place in the kaddish minyan.

In *When a Jew Dies: The Ethnology of a Bereaved Son* (University of California Press, 2001), Samuel Heilman speaks in two articulate voices. He alternately speaks as an anthropologist describing the cultural meaning behind the Jewish practices and traditions regarding death, and as a bereaved son who is an observant Jew.

Despite being a visible and valued member of a community of women, Esther Broner found herself behind a curtain saying kaddish for her father in a traditional *shteible* of elders. *Morning and Mourning: A Kaddish Journal* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) is written with the keen powers of observation, wit, and honesty she inherited from the newspaper man for whom she recited kaddish daily. Raising life to metaphor, she details her daily struggle to be seen by the keepers of the tradition who insist she remain behind the *mechitza*. She reveals the mourner's effort to be heard above the silence of the Angel of Death and to penetrate the curtain that separates life and death.

Whether a mourner stands to say kaddish or grieves in other ways, kaddish literature expresses a hearty "amen."

Anne Brener is a psychotherapist, spiritual director, and lecturer who assists institutions in creating caring communities. She is author of Mourning and Mitzvah: Walking the Mourner's Path *(Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993 and 2001).*

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