<u>On Saying Kaddish for my Father</u>
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When I was growing up I used to say that Passover was my favorite holiday. My mother, who is sitting here with us, would always get angry when I said that. I had no idea the amount of work that was involved with making the kitchen kosher-for-Passover, shopping for all the foods, cooking, cleaning, etc. In later years I came to understand that maybe she was right. Although it was wonderful, of course, to gather together for a Seder. But *the* day of gathering of the year is Yom Kippur. This the day when we are all here together. And Yom Kippur was always my father's favorite holiday.

For various reasons. "It feels so good when it's over," he always used to say. He had professional reasons too. As a rabbi, he appreciated that there was no pressure to end the Yom Kippur morning service at any particular time, because people are not rushing home for lunch. Of course, Nei'ilah had to end on time, but that was the cantor's job. There were also important spiritual reasons why he loved Yom Kippur. *Ashreikhem Yisrael,* Rabbi Akiva says in the Mishnah, "Happy are you oh Israel, for on this day your sins are forgiven." Yom Kippur is the day of forgiveness, of coming back together, of love, as opposed to the judgment and call to repentance that Rosh Hashanah marks with the sound of the shofar. And Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for death. For today we do not eat or drink. We do not take care of our bodies the way we would on a normal day. We act instead as souls do, yearning for acceptance in Heaven. We wear the whites, as we do when we are buried. My father lies in his simple white kittel, the one he used to wear when he would sit over there some years ago. I am wearing his white gown that he wore when he officiated in his synagogues. He is draped in a white tallis, as I am wearing one of his now. I

am now just like my father, as we are like all those we remember, whose souls surround us in this room.

I have been thinking about and remembering my father every day since he breathed his last breath on the third of December last year. Each morning I wake up and look in the mirror and do not recognize the man looking back at me. Not cutting the hair with scissors or razor is one of the ways we mark the year of mourning. Yes, there are leniencies in the tradition to shave after thirty days if one must. Having the opportunity to observe the year this way, though, has been a poignant expression for me of what Leon Wieseltier referred to in his book about saying kaddish for his father as "this injured year whose end I cannot see" (p 57). I am probably the only person for whom my new look is more bothersome than it is for Alla. Cleaning up at the end of the year will be a bittersweet moment. It will feel good, like the end of Yom Kippur feels good. But I think my father a little bit missed Yom Kippur each year, even as he was relieved that it was over. There is something special about these holy hours and this sacred assembly that we cannot duplicate on a regular day. And there is something special, tangible, about remembering a loved one, a parent who made me who I am, through the rituals and routines and restrictions of the *aveilus,* Jewish mourning.

I have been saying kaddish every day for my father since we buried him on Long Island. In a few weeks, that long ritual will end. Every morning as I have said the familiar words, words we will say together after Yizkor, my mind jumps around, stopping to dwell in memories, some recent, some distant. The tradition has been a gift for me. It has gotten me up out of bed every morning, always early. And each day I promise myself a reward of a nice cup of coffee after minyan, and with, of course, a real newspaper.

There were times over the course of the year when I had to be creative in figuring out how to get to a minyan for kaddish. If I was on an overnight flight I had to make sure I would make a minhah/afternoon minyan since I would miss shaharit—the morning service. In Berlin, where I spent seven weeks this summer, I woke up each day to take the subway—they call it the U-Bahn—to get to the synagogue. I took an early bus every morning in Rome for the week we were there, davened at the synagogue, and then sipped a very authentic cappuccino in the old ghetto. That morning in Berlin when I didn't get to minyan (if you were here on the second day of Rosh Hashanah you know where I spent most of that day) I had to interrupt a dinner with colleagues to ask that I recite kaddish in their presence, because for kaddish to "count" it is recited before a minyan of ten. In April, when Ariel and I drove a minivan from Denver to Ridgewood packed with my father's books and papers, we had to plan carefully to stop where I could say kaddish in the morning. Our minyan stop was in Kansas City. (I also got to see Arrowhead Stadium because I like the Chiefs. One of the things being a Jets fan teaches you is that you need a Plan B.) I had to change how we travelled, where I went, so that I could be in a place to say kaddish every day. Wieseltier has a great line in his book that spoke to me: "A few months ago I worried that my mourner's life would interfere with the rest of my life. Now I worry that the rest of my life will interfere with my mourner's life" (p 131).

In Berlin I started each morning reading a few pages in Wieseltier's book on Kaddish as I rode the U-Bahn on my way to synagogue. It is a thick and dense book, meandering around aphorisms, observations, and a careful study of the history of the mourner's kaddish in Jewish tradition. The kaddish is a very interesting choice for the prayer of the mourners. It says nothing about death or the dead. Its Aramaic and Hebrew text is an elaborate praise of God. I have

usually explained the mourner's kaddish as a vehicle for the mourner to affirm acceptance of God's world where we must, at some point, say goodbye to those we love. But the association of the kaddish with the mourner goes back to a more specific reason, rooted in a legend that Wieseltier traces through its various manifestations through centuries of rabbinic texts and commentaries. Once Rabbi Akiva, the greatest sage of the Mishnah, was walking near a cemetery and found a skeleton of a tortured soul heaving wood back and forth with no rest and to no apparent end. When questioned by Rabbi Akiva, the figure explained that after he died he was sentenced to these labors—different versions of the story give different transgressions the man had committed—and could not be released unless he had a child who could declare before the people: "Let God's great name be blessed forever!" but he died without children, although his wife was pregnant, but who could teach his child, if even alive, how to say these things? So Rabbi Akiva took it upon himself to find the dead man's widow, and give a Jewish education to her child, so that the child could lead the congregation in prayer and sanctify God's name, and then the father was redeemed.

The reason for saying kaddish for a parent for eleven months, one month shy of the twelve months of mourning, comes from this story. That if we say kaddish to redeem the soul of a parent, we shouldn't think our parents would need a full twelve months, because how bad could their transgressions have really been? I used to dismiss the story and the traditions that come from it as superstition. Surely the kaddish is for the sake of the mourner, not the mourned! But spending the summer with Wieseltier's book, wrestling with him on how to interpret the tradition, I understand better now. Putting the theology and mythology aside about purgatory and the afterlife, Weiseltier makes sense of the legend as connecting the child to the parent. "I cannot

be sure that my kaddish for my father is proof of his immortality," he writes. "I can be sure that it is proof of his posterity" (pp. 242-243). The child who prays for the soul of the parent proves the presence of the parent's memory in the mind and life of the child. In a sense we establish, we declare, we justify, the parent's memory as a blessing, showing the proof, for here is that person's child, standing up saying kaddish.

Eleven months or twelve months? My teacher Rabbi Mayer Rabinowitz, whom I see regularly these days when I am at minyan in Teaneck, argued some years ago that there are many sources that say that the kaddish should be said for twelve months, and that the observance of mourning should be marked by kaddish. When asked how long to say kaddish, I usually give the option of eleven or twelve months. But I will stop after eleven. My brothers and I had to agree on what to do. And it seems to me that the tradition teaches us to gradually ease away from mourning, from the funeral to shiva, from shiva into the thirty days, from the thirty days into the year, from eleven months into the final month where I will still be a mourner, and then finally, cleaning up this face at the end of November. And I remember talking with my father once about Rabbi Rabinowitz's argument, and my father said eleven months is the tradition. And now, on this side of things, or as my father is on the other side of things, it seems right to bow to tradition.

"I had another thought about the kaddish," Wieseltier writes in his book. "The son's redemption of the dead father, the dead father's protection by the son: is this not an allegory for the power of the present over the past? For the past is at the mercy of the present. The present can condemn the past to oblivion or obscurity. Whatever happens to the past will happen to it posthumously" (p. 144). The past is only our past when we remember it. I have been remembering my father in numerous ways. During kaddish my mind wanders through the

memories. In my dreams he is there and not there, beside me, behind me. And then I read his papers and go into his mind and learn about his memories. Eulogies he wrote for people he loved. Sermons he gave. I want to share these words I found from a handwritten manuscript of a sermon he gave in Mount Kisco, New York, on Rosh Hashanah in 1988:

> *I had the pleasure this summer of travelling with my family in the American West. National parks mostly but also Los Angeles—where I grew up. Las Vegas—where I also lived for a few years.—The San Francisco area—where I spent my college years. And some of these places I had not been back to in over twenty years. I found it to be quite an extraordinary experience—married now—with children—frequenting and visiting all the familiar places of my …my <u>long lost youth!</u> And in each place (this is something Helene said I shouldn't say—because it's <u>embarrassing</u>—but I'm going to tell you anyway)—in each place I insisted on driving around to the different houses I had lived in—the schools I went to (and so forth)—and I took a <u>picture</u>…of myself at each place—together with either David or Josh or Yoni—whoever was closest in age to the age I was when I lived there.—Pretty schmaltzy, huh?*
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> *Well, you can imagine how I was ridiculed by my family—how they accused me of being hopelessly sentimental—(after all, the time we spent doing these things <u>could</u> have been spent at Disneyland! But you know,--it wasn't just nostalgia. Something very interesting was*

going on inside me. I was rediscovering parts of my life (parts of my self) which I had—if not forgotten—at least they were no longer part of my conscious awareness. In each place there was a struggle to make contact with that person I saw in my mind's eye who used to frequent these haunts some twenty years ago—or thirty years ago—over even forty—(well, let's stop at thirty)—and it was an effort to realize that that person—and the person here now in Mount Kisco—is the same person. Who would have thought that my life would take the turns it did? And yet, what emerged from all this—is the realization that I am, in fact, one person—that what I am today is a result of and flows directly from what I was then—and what I did then. And that realization—was a wonderful—and meaningful experience.

It has to do with memory….The whole effort of this season is to remember—where we come from, where we are, and, of course, where we're going.

Those were my father's words spoken from his pulpit thirty-seven years ago, younger then than I am now, but teaching about how we put together our story of the past.

Mortality is what makes our past valuable, because it is finite. I accept that we must all say goodbye to our dearest ones at one point or another, either when they die or when we die, and I understand that it is that knowledge that makes the time together so meaningful. Because

it is finite. No one ever has all the time in the world. Kaddish is not just an acceptance of the way God made the world work. It is also an acceptance, a declaration, of our pasts, our memories that are meaningful for us, as it binds us to the generations. "I have no way of knowing about the fate of my father's soul," Wieseltier confesses, "but I know what the death of my father has done to my heart. I have been slapped by the nature of things. I have a choice between anger and acceptance; and I would like to be angry. But I would not like to be stupid. So I must begin the labors of acceptance. My kaddish is one of those labors; or so I will have it be…You took my father from me, magnified and sanctified may your great Name be..." (pp.54-55). Powerful words, both Weiseltier's and the words of the kaddish. My father understood as well that we must remember, and we must accept.

In his last days, as I would listen to him say goodbye over the phone to friends and relatives, he said, again and again, "I have no quarrel with God. I have been blessed in ways I could never have imagined. Who would have thought that this kid from the San Fernando Valley would have had the life I had." He lived in his past and his present, and I and my brothers are his future. In Judaism we are called up to the Torah, and we are remembered, as the child of our parents. That is our Jewish "last name," testifying, like the Kaddish, that their story is not over. Please join me for Yizkor.