

Musings on Mourning

Eugene B. Borowitz

A year has now gone by since my wife, Estelle, died. The *Yahrtsayt* (surely not in my family a Germanic *Jahrzeit*) came as the snapping of the last ritual bond of this period. I had said *kaddish* for twelve full months, another of my several violations of Ashkenazi *minhag*, custom. The common practice is, our dead surely not requiring the atoning power of a full year of prayer—the classic limit of Jewish purgation—that we limit our *kaddish* saying to eleven months. I also had been saying the *kaddish* alone and not as one of a *minyán*, a liturgical quorum. Yet I went beyond the law in one respect. It mandates only a month's *kaddish* for a spouse, a prescription that belied what more than half a century of living with Estelle had meant to me and had made of me. But I did not violate the rule, the wisdom, that said as the anniversary came around, "Enough now," and I stopped the daily *kaddish* for her. It hurt to no longer have the liturgical daily tie to our relationship—and in some ways it still does.

Somewhere during this past year I decided I would try to finish my active mourning by setting down some thoughts that pressed in on me as day followed day. They center on three themes: the condolence messages I received, what the *kaddish* said to me, and my reaction to the ritual consolatory phrase, *Hamakom y'nacheim etchem*... I feel the need to share these thoughts and I hope that my reaching for collegial help to attain closure will add to your preparation for what awaits us all.

The Messages that Seek to Comfort

I received several hundred condolence cards and letters, most of them handwritten. Having often sat at my desk ready to set down

EUGENE B. BOROWITZ (C48) is Distinguished University Professor, the Sigmund L. Falk Professor of Education and Jewish Religious Thought at the New York campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. The SUNY Press has just published his book, *The Talmud's Theological Language-Game, a Philosophical Discourse Analysis*.

a few words of condolence but unable to find something that would freshly speak to what the bereaved was going through, I thought I appreciated how little any of us can say in such missives. Still, I was not prepared for the consolation these messages, which echoed our culture's customary phrases, brought me. So many people, some well remembered, others requiring a real memory-search, and still others unknown to me—friends of my children? professional colleagues of my wife? people I had once taught or otherwise been in touch with?—reached across my new sense of void and sought to bring me back into life. A year later, I remain grateful to them. In one sense that is because, early on, I intuited that one way I needed to mourn was to sit hour after hour at my desk and, even briefly, respond to each one in as personal a way as I could. That meant not letting myself merely transcribe same few ritual phrases but struggling again and again to find some words faithful to what I was feeling as I wrote. I often failed to live up to this impractical ideal but mostly I came close enough to it that it brought me a measure of peace.

With all that, two things about this process came to trouble me, the one trivial, the other sufficiently disturbing that it prompted me to try to put these highly personal musings into publishable form. The slight one was occasioned by the few messages that came by email. Try as I did to think of them as this generation's way of speedily staying in touch, I found it difficult to avoid their impersonality even when I knew the sender reasonably well. And I never felt comfortable either responding in kind, as I did with some, or responding by hand, as I did with others.

The disquieting one simply forced itself upon me. Reading and responding to the scores of messages from rabbinic colleagues (and some cantors), it came as a shock to me that, perhaps to overstate the case, they were overwhelmingly secular. That is, they wrote about my wife living on in memory, or the immortal power of love, or of the lasting effect of her good deeds, or of the tribute I would render her by turning back to life. I believe in all these commonplaces of American condolence, but now, face to face with death, what I needed was at least a touch of the Sacred. We Jews are more spiritually alive today, but when it came to talking to me about Estelle's death, most of the rabbis said nothing about God. Only a few felt comfortable in speaking to me of, say, God's healing presence, or of what faith in God means in the face of death, or, harder still, what it might mean to affirm God's sovereignty when understanding fails us.

Please do not misunderstand me. I was not looking for a theological essay. A felt sentence, an evocative phrase or two, anything that pointed me to the Divine Otherness, would have fulfilled the promise of my years of Jewish practice, of the services, study, and ritual that had long filled my life with meaning. True, some colleagues, sensing this religious emptiness or expressing their rich Jewishness, let our tradition speak for them and invoked our Jewish ritual condolence message, *Hamakom y'nacheim etchem*... I shall shortly turn to what these words meant to me in this context. But first I wish to continue talking about God and our mourning by mentioning some thoughts the *kaddish* prayer evoked in me.

Learning from the *Kaddish*

The self looms so large in the American psyche that American religious life must largely devote itself to explaining and exemplifying how observance will enable us to attain our personal goals. One might well fantasize Judaism's task in this culture as continually seeking new ways to satisfy a community that faces us with a spiritual remote control at the ready. Even employing this strategy in small, responsible doses, it seems to me, will not help us much when it comes to explaining what saying *kaddish* for our dead might mean to us today.

A few generations back things were different, most people believing that saying the prayer eased the lot of their loved one in the Jewish version of purgatory. Those who had their doubt about the prayer's alleviative power had another motive for saying it: they did not want others in their relatively small communities to consider them neglectful of their proper duties to the dead. We today have pretty well lost those motives for saying *kaddish*. Even reducing the acceptable standard to coming to the weekly *shabbat* service has not resuscitated the old pattern, families often limiting themselves to the *shabbat* service after the funeral.

This being the case, I do not propose now to remedy the difficulty by offering a creative rationale for why saying *kaddish* is good for the mourner. Rather, as I learned in my mourning year, if we can move beyond self-concern and attend to the intentions of the *kaddish*, we may discover that the wisdom of our tradition ought to replace or reshape our own.

The basic *kaddish* text (the so-called half *kaddish*, the *chatzi kaddish*) consists of only three sentences plus another said by the congrega-

tion. (In its mourner's version, the *kaddish yatom*, two sentences are added on looking forward to the establishment on earth of God's all-embracing peace.)

One can easily be confused about the ending of the first sentence of the basic text, because when the worshippers hear the words "the Great Name"—a euphemism for the Tetragrammaton—they interrupt the sentence with an "Amen." The thought, however, continues for three critical, additional words. Putting it into English is frustrating, since most of its Aramaic has no good English equivalent. If some fractured English is allowed, I came to feel I could convey its meaning this way: "May the Great Name—[God's]—be 'greater-ed' and 'holy-ed'—[magnified and sanctified]—in the world that 'He'—[God]—created according to 'His'—[God's]—will." The prayer's unambiguous, repetitive theme is God's beyondness, or, more technically, God's transcendence. There is a telling ambiguity in the way the prayer's many verbs, here and particularly in its paragraph-length third sentence, resonantly convey this. They are in the *hitpael* form of the verbs and that "case" can equally be read as English's passive voice—the meaning adopted by almost all translations—or as the reflexive. That suggests that, as the third sentence makes explicit, we know (or are being taught) that for all our verbal efforts to ascribe appropriate greatness and sanctity to God, it is *Adonai* alone who might adequately do so. God's nearness inevitably reveals God's "far-ness" from us—and thus makes us aware of what a gift it is that the utterly Beyond-Us-One covenants with humankind.

What deeply jolted me during my many recitations of the prayer was the first sentence's concluding phrase, *b'olmah divra chir'uteih*, "in the world that He [God] created according to His [God's] will." Standing there dutifully, often barely containing my resentment that death, God's creation, had taken Estelle from me, I found myself required to praise God as the one who "created the world according to 'His' [God's] will." Those words hit me hard. Typical American that I am, I want the world to have been created for my sake or at least for the fulfillment of my worthy purposes. I certainly didn't want it to inevitably, irrevocably snatch away from this world the one I loved. But, the rabbinic authors of the text, so often my teachers, insisted that the world was created as an effect of God's *r'uteih*, the Aramaic of the more familiar Hebrew *r'tzono*, "His [God's] 'will'." Like *kavod* and *baruch* and other such un-English-able God-

terms, *ratzon* strains to describe an aspect of God that is both familiar to us and yet soars beyond us.

A contrast may make this usage less murky. When we speak of God's *chochmah*, God's wisdom, we have a sense of a certain congruity between God's "thinking" and our brains at their best (though God's wisdom is obviously greater than ours); this is the source of the wonder some scientists report at realizing some neural connections in their skull have reached out and comprehended a grand aspect of the universe. However, when we speak of God's "will" we seek to describe something beyond our understanding yet apparently true to God's nature or activity. Like other theological terms, the notion of God's "will" is borrowed from our experience in human relationships. We all have had a boss or friend whom we thought we understood well yet who one day did something quite unexpected. If it is far out of the other's character as we knew it, we may say the action was "willful," that is, not proceeding from the orderly, comprehensible part of the person but from a personal depth in them that is true to their nature but utterly beyond our ken. The "you" who expresses your "you-ness" in ways we had not known you to act is the basis of our speaking of God's will. *Ratzon* is the term that speaks of that manner of God's acting that is beyond our experience of God but nonetheless expresses God's character. Sometimes, its context is positive, as when we pray it will be God's will to grant us a blessing we cannot claim to deserve; but sometimes, the effect is negative, as when in the face of death we speak of it as "God's will." And in the *kaddish* prayer the creation of the world seems to be spoken of in this latter sense. If so, that mood is immediately balanced by the second sentence, which calls upon God to establish God's dominion on earth—including the end of death—"speedily and in a near time." Here God's transcendence validates eschatology.

Those whose relationship with God is as robust as their concern for self may well find this teaching highly significant. I did. It reminded me to stop expecting the world to be designed for my satisfaction and stop being resentful when it turns out not to be. And it spurred me to be grateful for God's gifts of breath and taste and excretion and thought and energy and a hundred other things for which Jews daily say blessings. Surely one of the greatest of these is that human beings were created to have a unique intimacy with God and cooperate with God's purposes, a relationship we fulfill when

we recite the *kaddish* or otherwise turn this nearness to the not-only-Transcendent One into a sacred act.

Saying *kaddish* meaningfully instructs us to let God be God and brings on the slow healing of God's covenanting nearness.

**The Traditional Words of Condolence,
*Hamakom Y'nacheim Etchem...***

A good number of colleagues who sent me condolence notes, perhaps sensing that the comfort they extended was essentially secular or, perhaps out of loyalty to the wisdom of prior generations, closed their messages with the ritual Ashkenazi formula *Hamakom y'nacheim etchem b'toch sh'ar aveilei Tziyon viY'rushalayim*, "May God comfort you among all the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." I confess that often the mere sight of the Hebrew words warmed my soul, but I soon became unhappy with the meaning they conveyed.

When I checked the origin and likely initial intent of the sentence, I discovered a recent, impressive book on Jewish consolation practices: Shmuel Glick's *Light and Consolation* (Schocken Institute for Jewish Research of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America: Jerusalem, 2004. The analysis there on pp. 43–46, particularly its lengthy note 10, is the basis of my few historical comments that follow.). There is general scholarly agreement that the *aveilei Tziyon* were post-talmudic ascetics dedicated to mourning the destruction of the Temple. When they originated is debated, but the surest historical evidence seems to indicate that ninth-century Karaites who came to Jerusalem originated the name and the practice or adopted them. In later centuries the Karaite influence faded and invoking this formula became a widespread Ashkenazi custom.

In recent years, however, the statement, taken literally, makes little sense. Most modernized Jews do not mourn the present physical state of Jerusalem and, should they think of it, are unlikely to be bereft at the destruction of the Temple (as the widespread non-observance of Tisha b'Av indicates). In the face of this change of belief the creative power of *minhag* has once again made itself felt by understanding the old formula in a new way. The *aveilei Tziyon viY'rushalayim* are now understood to be not a sect but "all Jews who are mourning." Thus, the old statement is now taken to mean, "May God console you among all the other Jews who are mourning."

My initial response to this refurbishing was somewhat positive. Mourning is substantially an act of psychic self-defense, even of a certain healthy narcissism, so this formula now comes to remind us we are not alone. Other Jews are facing their losses amid a community that has long known how to face death and yet affirm life. But I quickly rejected the value of the transformed meaning. Intolerably, it diminished the particularity of my sorrow by seeking to diffuse it in the sea of all other Jewish deaths, as it were, by advising me to think of it as one of the other deaths Jews everywhere were mourning. But, loyal Jew that I hope I am, I was saying *kaddish* for just this particular woman, Estelle Borowitz, and it was precisely the end of my wife's individuality, of her incomparable singularity that had brought me to be standing there. That being so, it was only in limited ways—as in saying *kaddish* at services—that I could tolerate some sense of *b'toch sh'ar*, “amid the rest of,” that is, to mourning-in-general.

Was it some such understanding that prompted a few colleagues to limit their consolatory conclusion to *Hamakom y'nacheim etchem...*, “God will comfort you”? I found that a helpful elision of the formula, not the least because it spoke directly of what Jewish religiosity could say to me and did so by speaking of God with a classic term—*Hamakom*, The Place—that did not clash with our sensitivity to gendering Divinity. Alas, that very insight quickly pointed me to a new problem: What sense could it make to speak of “The Place” as a comforter? The very impersonality of this term for God, which made it so attractive, now entangled us in the problem of calling on the impersonal One to do the intimately personal act of consoling the mourner. But should I be so logical about ritual? Surely this is not the only case in liturgy in which our people has preferred usage to logical consistency. Besides, I doubt that we can get very many people to adopt and make our own the far less troublesome old Sephardi formula, *Mishamayim tinacheim*, “May you be comforted from Heaven [by God].” So, with an occasional wince, I now can live with the abbreviated version of the Ashkenazi one. Is that a sufficient *nechemta*, consolation, for all this thinking about what mostly has been simple doing? I do not know, but, to paraphrase a famous rabbinic student's declaration, “It was Torah and I needed to learn it.”