Kaddish Gave Me Words After the Bibas Family's Deaths

Over the last 500-plus days, my wife and I held our children the way we imagined Shiri Bibas would have held Ariel and Kfir if they were not held captive by Hamas. Sleepless nights rocking our one-year-old, calming crying children, and changing *another* dirty diaper were all exercises of love we tirelessly practiced—what Yarden Bibas would do if he could have seen his children.

A few weeks ago, the Bibas family's story ended. Shiri, Ariel, and Kfir were killed in Gaza; after 508 days apart, Yarden, released on February 1, met his family in caskets instead of with hugs.

My wife and I were dreading the news for weeks. Like so many around us, we were holding onto hope, perhaps pushing back against a rational voice trying to tell us what was most likely the real, worst-case scenario. Reading that worst-case coming true, I left the school where I teach early to pick up my daughter from daycare and continued home to my son and wife. We didn't do so much speaking—we cried, and the kids, oblivious, played.

My family's story became bound up with the Bibas' since October 7. I was celebrating Simchat Torah in Israel with my wife (then-eight-months pregnant with our son) and our toddler daughter when our joy morphed into fear.

> No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.
> — C.S. Lewis

The rabbi of our Long Island shul interrupted davening to announce that “something bad” happened in Israel. Information was sparse – we heard “bomb,” “hostages,” “war.” Faced with the full picture that emerged after reciting *havdala*, concluding the holiday, we dragged mattresses across the small apartment hallway into our daughter’s bedroom, some kind of pillow fort from hell. We lay next to her crib—my wife clutching her pregnant belly with both hands, me gripping a baseball bat. (The odds of it being useful were about the same as my odds of making the majors, but there’s something deeply human about wanting to hold a stick when you’re scared.) We’d both lay there, realizing we had fallen asleep only when my wife’s nightmares jolted her upright, screaming. I thought of CS Lewis’ words: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”

When we learned about the Bibas family’s abduction, we instantly felt connected, a sense of synchronous emotional awareness of their fate. Everything about their story terrified us; everything about their story—up until their abduction—seemed to mirror our feelings: the innocence of children; he promise of parenthood; he fear of it all unraveling. The similarities made their terror seem tangible—it could happen to us, too.

This all reminds me of a cartoon I saw in March 2011, after the Fogel family was murdered in their home in Itamar. The artist depicted himself sitting in a chair with his head in his hands, papers and pens strewn about. The text read something along the lines of: There is no cartoon this week; not when babies are killed in bed between their parents.

When the news doesn’t make sense, when it numbs your senses, words feel both overwhelming and inadequate, yet they persist in every conversation, every whispered exchange, filling the spaces where silence might otherwise take hold. Both after October 7 and much later after the Bibas’ fate was confirmed, many people tried to say so many things: at shul, the supermarket, the school I teach in. I couldn’t stand it. I just wanted to shut it all up. What was there to say?

The Words of Kaddish

There is nothing we can do to bring back those who are gone, no way to undo even the most senseless murder of sweet red-headed children, whose last glimpse of the world was through the lens of a cell phone camera, pacifying themselves by clutching the safety of their mother. And yet, in the face of that most immeasurable loss—of life, innocent and pure and only beginning—our tradition offers up a response.

Kaddish is Judaism's most immediate and most concrete response to death.

Somewhere between the third and sixth centuries, a prayer was composed in Aramaic, the common spoken language of Babylonian Jews during the Talmudic era. The core of this prayer—called "Kaddish"—is the sanctification of God's name; hundreds of years later, the practice became a response to loss, and is now known as "Mourner's Kaddish." The rabbinic source for this practice can be found in a minor tractate of Talmud, but a mystical teaching emphasizes that when a child—a word which here means, "whoever is left behind after the departed", or, after October 7, "us"—says Kaddish, they bring merit to the soul of the departed in the Next World.

Put differently, Kaddish is Judaism's most immediate and most concrete response to death.

In this way, it is a puzzling prayer. It sanctifies God and His Name but offers little overt comfort for loss. It is a doxology—a praise of God—that offers little by way of overt comfort for loss. On the surface, Kaddish as a prayer seems to do much more for God than for the mourner. Instead of crying or demanding answers from the cosmos, we recite a prayer that studiously avoids mentioning anything about our emotional state. This absence is intentional.

Like my desire for everything to shut up, for silence, after the Bibas family was torn apart, the Kaddish responds to loss by carrying on; we continue with the Sanctification of God's name. Instead of shutting up with silence, it fills that space with the noise of continuing; the kaddish tells us that sometimes the best way forward from grief is pushing forward.

No Israeli has reflected on this as much as the famous novelist and writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon. In 1947, he penned an introduction of sorts to the Mourner's Kaddish, styling it after the medieval *peticha*, or "opening" expansion of liturgical themes. It was dedicated to Israel's fallen defenders (written on the heels of seven executions of Jewish prisoners by the British in April of that year) and came during the ongoing count of Holocaust victims coinciding with new casualties mounting in the nascent Jewish state.

Agnon's Opening for Kaddish, "After the Deaths of the Martyrs of the Land of Israel," contrasts God with a king of flesh and blood. The king sends his soldiers to die without regard for the humans within the uniforms. Another will take the dead's place, the king reasons. None of them are unique.

But for Commander God:

> Each one of us is as important in His eyes as a whole regiment.
> For He does not have many to set in our place.

Agnon's basic argument is that God isn't like other "commanders" who view their soldiers as interchangeable cogs in a machine. Instead, he suggests that individual Jewish life is so cosmically significant that losing even one triggers a metaphysical power outage in the divine realm.

Opening for Kaddish paints the prayer as benefiting the living who areleft behind by the dead. It is our prayer to recite, reminding ourselves of what — or Who—lies behind that heaviest price we pay to keep living this life. The Kaddish is a response to death recited by those surviving.

We—those who hoped—are left here; we're left to continue with the rest of it, wherever the story goes.

From start to finish—over 72 weeks—I realized many things throughout this dark, surreal saga (and in following the Bibas tragedy in particular): The innocence of a child; the fierce thing that is Jewish motherhood; that all the profound beauty in this world is matched only by its at times cruel and relentless ugliness.

On February 20th, the day after my 10/7 story ended, the one I felt like I shared with the Bibas and what we all collectively hoped would be their safe return, I realized another thing: We—those who hoped—are left here; we're left to continue with the rest of it, wherever the story goes.

The dead leave behind the living. It is we, the living, who must make sense of it all. We who read the headlines, we who watch the news, we who have to navigate that murky path and unbearable weight of memory.

The departed matter.

‘Nothing Left to Say’

Kfir Bibas matters—like his brother Ariel and his mom Shiri matters, and nine-month-old Mila Cohen, and two-year-old Omer Siman, and the other dozen children targeted by people who are perfectly okay with targeting children.

They are gone, and we remain—we are left to say Kaddish, a prayer of sanctification, because, like that cartoonist 14 years ago who had nothing left to draw, we have nothing left to say.

Kaddish is about those who were taken, but it is recited by those who remain.

I am not reciting Kaddish now. But I respond to it in shul, and I think of it constantly. What could possibly be the answer to the maddening, senseless, heart-twisting suspension of any shred of morality and mercy, of such soul-crushing, devastating loss? The response is to continue, to heave our heavy hearts to move onward with all this sanctification of God. The motivation to do so comes from understanding what loss of life means to Him and, how much He needs us.

Kaddish is about those who were taken, but it is recited by those who remain.

And so we pray: *may His Great Name be magnified and sanctified*—may the cosmic void be filled, may the greatness of God and His sanctity caused by the loss of His foot soldiers, even from one of them, be restored.

The departed matter, but the living matter, too. Kaddish reminds us of how God looks upon us—different, sometimes, than how humans look at one another.

> We matter.
>
> *Therefore, oh our brethren, the whole house of*
>
> *Israel,*
>
> *Who mourn in this mourning,*
>
> *We turn our hearts to our Father in Heaven,*
>
> *The King of Israel and its Redeemer,*
>
> *And we pray*

For ourselves

And for Him:

Yitgadal, ve-yitkadash, shemah raba

Be-alma di vara khiruteh ve-yamlikh malkhuteh,

Ve-yazmah ve-karev meshihei…

That we may be worthy to live and see

With our very eyes,

Oseh shalom bimromav,

That He, who, in His mercies, makes peace in the heavens

Will make peace for us

And for all Israel.

And let us say:

Amen.

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