

The Kaddish and the Grateful Dead
Parashat Vayikra;
March 15, 2002

My friends, this night as we gather together in joy and spirit, to sing and to dance, to celebrate, and to welcome Shabbat, a cloud hangs in our hearts. This night the beat goes on, the count goes up, enraged mobs "cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war." How many more deaths will we read about tomorrow? How many young lives snuffed out in the relentless pounding of hatred and stupidity, a never-ending cycle of bloodlust and revenge?

Where are we headed? And when will it end? Why is this happening? And what can we do, to make it stop? With Israel in flames, these are the "four questions" first on my mind, in this season of suffering.

Pesach approaches. It is the story of wandering, and wondering. We are encouraged, indeed, we are told, to ask questions. A tale which opens in woe. But it is, ultimately, a story of redemption. A time of answers. An experience of liberation, beyond the limits and the shackles of the lives we had known. The vision of a dream we cannot quite remember, the fulfillment of a promise we had long forgotten.

And so, on this night, even with the pain of this world heavy in our heart, I want to look at a question beyond the horizon of our usual sight. I want to talk about something we rarely discuss. I want to teach about something some of you may not even know is there, as part of our heritage and tradition.

"*Vayikra el Moshe, vayidabber Adonai eilav me'ohel mo'eid, lamor.* And the Eternal God called to Moses, speaking to him from the tent of meeting..." We encounter the mystery of the words, the startling directness, the unexplained puzzle of the *aleph* writ small upon the scroll.

Pages of speculation. Perhaps the *aleph* of *vayikra* is so small, to teach us what a tiny difference there is between this word, and another. The Sifra, the midrashic collection focusing on the book of Leviticus, notes the similarity between "vayikra," which means, "and he called," and "vayikar,"—identical save the aleph at the end—which means, "and it happened." The words are so close. Almost the same. But a breath between them.

But there is all the difference in the world, between being called to a purpose, part of a plan...and the accident of occurrence, the happenstance of events.

Have you felt this, in your own lives? Have you ever felt filled with purpose? Or have you ever felt... aimless, and buffeted by events? Can you feel the gulf, the galactic gap? Do you remember the difference between the two?

The clearest memory I have of that first feeling, that almost-drunken sense of purposefulness, was during both years that I lived in Israel, my junior year of college, and the first year of rabbinical school, in Jerusalem. It was a breathtaking awareness of destiny. For me, to be in Israel was to feel more keenly than ever before the intensity of

life, the hand of history. To believe that dreams can come true, that human beings can act, to squeeze the patterns of the past into a future no one ever expected. Every stone a story, every stranger a relative, every postman and taxi driver a place of pride in the unfolding story of our people.

I was so imbued with that sense of purpose, so fulfilled, that one day, I sang familiar words at the end of *Adon Olam*, and, for the very first time, I realized that I understood them. For one fleeting moment, I sang "*vi im ruchi giviyati, Adonai li, v 'lo ira*; if my soul should depart, God will be with me; I will not be afraid"—I sang those words, and I actually meant them.

That feeling, that sense that I had long ago, of being so complete in life that I was not afraid of death, leads at last to the subject I want to explore tonight. A simple question, about the meaning of life, our purpose on this planet. About why we are here, and where we are going. It leads to the topic of life after death. To the Kaddish. And the Grateful Dead.

Someday I am going to make a long list of rabbinic faux pas. You know, the kind of misstatements that live on in infamy, such as the "Father, Son and Holy Spigot" line in the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. For me, the list would include nearly cracking up the first time I read the words "from defeat to defeat to defeat" (all I could think of was some guy in a Bronx accent looking at his feet). Or almost saying, at a girl's baby naming, "bless this child, who has entered the convent" (instead of "covenant").

But the worst misstatement of my rabbinic career was not so amusing. It happened in Florida. I had been a rabbi for three weeks. The Erev Shabbat service began at 8 p.m. At 7:59 p.m. someone handed me a note: Jane Schwartz would like you to read Barb Cohen's name with the Kaddish list tonight. And, of course, at the end of the service, I read Jane's name, not Barbara's.

The phone call came to the president of the congregation at midnight. "How could the rabbi do that? He has put a curse on me! This means I am going to die! I'm quitting the congregation and making a major motion picture out of my trauma!"

The congregant wound up doing neither one. We actually ended up quite close—a good reminder that sometimes conflict can lead to friendship. But I could not foresee a positive outcome that night. What I learned at the time, instead, was lesson number one...in the power of the Kaddish.

This night, on purpose, I have worn a particular tie. It is a tie designed by Jerry Garcia. Gone five years now, mourned upon his passing, this night I share with you that saying Kaddish for Jerry Garcia, as so many fans did in the days following his death, may have been...eerily...more appropriate than they realized. For the Kaddish may have had its origins in the Ancient Near Eastern legend...of the Grateful Dead. (And yes, that is where the group got its name.)

Now, the words themselves, of course, in only slightly different form, appear many times throughout the service. They are in Aramaic, not Hebrew, and represent a doxology, a praise of God. The Jewish "prayer for the dead," really, is "*Eil Malei Rachamim*," since the Kaddish does not once mention death, or mourning.

Its function in the service is as punctuation; the short (reader's, or "half") kaddish is like a comma, in between two sections of the service. The fuller version is like a semi-colon. This is why it appears so many times in a traditional service. (One of the criteria of the liturgical changes of the early Reform movement was the elimination of redundancy; one of the criteria of the liturgical changes of the early Reform movement was the elimination of redundancy—so the Chatzi Kaddish is chanted only once in a Reform service.)

But the Mourner's Kaddish is not a division between parts of the service. It is a part of the service all by itself.

This theory as to the origin of the Kaddish has to do with the much misunderstood concept of life after death in Judaism. We speak about it much less than in Christianity, for our focus truly is on this life. We do not often speak about it at all at funerals, for what are vague theories and misty ideas in the face of real people's pain? An assurance in the midst of mourning would ring false, feel hollow, would redound to the opposite of its intended affect.

But classical Judaism does have a view of the afterlife. It is a world to come, in which the righteous people of all monotheistic faiths will find themselves—hence the lack of proselytizing in Judaism; we don't need to save anyone's souls if they are good people. For all of us, there is a sort of waiting room in the sky called limbo. Although not defined in detail anywhere in our tradition, this stage is apparently a place to wait before final judgement, a place in which the sins of our life are purged. The ultimate evil doers (murderers, rapists, and idolaters) will not be admitted to the World to Come, the *Olam Ha-Ba*. Nor, however, will they be punished forever. They will simply...cease to be. But those guilty of serious but not quite as heinous crimes (smoking in no-smoking zones) may be kept for up to a year in limbo. Hence the custom of saying kaddish for eleven months: our loved ones, well, they may have had hidden flaws we knew nothing about. Better cover most of the year, just in case. But still, they couldn't possibly need an entire year. Not our loved ones.

Why the Kaddish? Our tradition teaches that the performance of mitzvot, our religious obligations, attracts God's attention. And if we do a mitzvah in someone else's name, well, then, we can call God's attention to that person. And, it is certainly a mitzvah (and one that is specifically designed to get God's attention) to praise God. Thus the Mourner's Kaddish: a praise of God, in the name of a loved one, in the hope of moving them along from limbo to their permanent heavenly abode all the more quickly. For which, of course, our dear departed will be, well, eternally thankful. They will be...the Grateful Dead.

That is also why the obligation is on a loved one, who knew the person, to show up at services, to say the name. It is an obligation we take on for our family, or those to whom we are close. It is why paying someone else to do it is vaguely distasteful. That is why the mourner is the one to rise in traditional services, to call further attention to the one for whom we are saying kaddish.

But the emotional power of the kaddish is in more than what the words seem to mean. It is because, like so much of the Hebrew of our liturgy, only more so here, the cognitive meaning is not the point. Or only a small part of the point. With these words, it is the sound of the Aramaic that connects, that emotes. YITgadal veYITkadash veYITromam; DUH dud duh, veDUH duh duh, veDUH duh duh. The words are a mantra; they transport us to another plane, and another place. It is said that these words have the power to bind generation to generation. To reach beyond our daily work, the weekly grind, and connect us with another world.

One of the most consistently amusing questions I hear comes from college students. Away from home for a semester, or a year, living with people who have rarely met Jews, or are curious about Judaism, their roommates and friends ask them something they cannot answer. Something they never learned in Religious School. So they bring it home to me. "Rabbi," I have heard countless time, "so, like, what do we believe about life after death?"

I don't know what we believe. I don't know what you believe. And on this topic, I am not even sure what I believe. We have only touched on one aspect of the subject so far tonight: the immortality of the soul. There are many other Jewish views: the resurrection of the body. Reincarnation as part of the journey of life. Or the more rational, more commonly heard idea of living on through the goodness we have sown in the lives of loved ones, and in the world around us.

But in a variety of ways, couched in its own language, our tradition offers us a sense of something, beyond the blue event horizon. To connect with another world. To invoke with words a power beyond words. All we know is a hint, a hunch, a hope. A taste of eternity, in the guise of mortal life.

As for me, I feel closely connected...with the Second Law of Thermodynamics. You remember your physics? Since the beginning of the universe, energy is neither created, nor destroyed. It merely...changes form.

Perhaps there is a spark of the soul, a twinkle of an eye, an essence, an energy of life that is just beyond the measure of matter. That is just beyond the composition of the atoms. There is something that animates us in life. And perhaps it is something we can tap in to, in some unknown and unknowable way, through the power of our love. If the noise of life stills to beat as one with our heart. If only we are receptive to it.

In this week's portion, we read the following words. "*Adam ki yakriv mikem korban*...When one amongst you draws near to offer a sacrifice." But the words can also

be read: "When one draws near, from among you." Or: "When one sacrifices the self, to be among you..."

Perhaps we will find a merger of the self, a yielding of the want and the will into a larger whole. What is seen as separate is discovered to be one. A unity beyond division. Even a kind...of coming home.

My friends, we live on the border, between vayikra and vayikar. Between purpose, and accident. Between calling, and stumbling.

We don't know which it is, through the course of our life. If it all is part of a plan, or all a cosmic coincidence.

But we have a choice.

We can live, as if our life matters.

We can live, filled with purpose.

We can live, with a direction, and a destination. And a kind of confidence at the core of our being.

V'im ruchi giviyati, Adonai li, ve'lo ira. And if my soul, my breath should expire...God is with me. I will not be afraid.

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