

# The Healing Power of Saying Kaddish for a Suicide

*Chaya Gusfield*

*Dear Rabbi Gusfield:*

*My father has just killed himself after a long battle with schizophrenia. He left us a note asking us to not be angry with him, but saying that life was too painful to continue living. I was just told by a local rabbi that I am required to say Kaddish for him for twelve months because he took his life. I thought it was an insult to say Kaddish for someone for more than eleven months because it implied that they were bad in some way. I don't want to insult the memory of my father, or hinder the healing of his soul. Although I don't support suicide, our family was torn up by his illness and in some ways it was a relief when he died. We hope he is out of his misery. Please help me mourn my father with honor. I want to do the right thing. What should I do?*

The question is hypothetical, but it conveys some of the complexities involved in mourning a parent who dies by suicide. Reciting Kaddish can help heal the survivors and, according to our rabbinic and mystical traditions, may also help heal the soul of the person who died. Jewish practices involved in mourning a suicide can be distinctly different than mourning other deaths. This article will provide an overview of Jewish law on mourning a suicide while exploring in more depth the issues involved with saying Kaddish for someone who has taken his or her own life.

I GREW UP IN A MOSTLY SECULAR AND VERY Jewishly identified household in the Midwest. One of the most formative experiences of my life was becoming a survivor of the suicide of my 21 year-old sister a week before my fourteenth birthday. The year was 1970 and my sister had suffered a schizophrenic break. She went in and out of the mental hospital for months before she intentionally overdosed on Valium, alone in a hotel room. At the time of her death she had been “getting better” and was living in a halfway house for people struggling with mental illness. Even though my family was not very religiously involved or educated, we were associated with a Reform synagogue and she had a Jewish burial. I was never quoted the various Jewish laws that restrict and define the mourning process of a suicide or the treatment of their burial, but I knew somehow that not only was suicide a shameful thing to do, it was a profoundly unJewish act.

When I was in the ALEPH rabbinical program, I met another student who had survived the suicide of a loved one, and with the power and wisdom of *hevruta*/study partnership, the two of us entered into a journey of studying halakhic approaches to Jewish mourning in general, and then how profoundly different it was for a suicide, whether a parent, sibling, spouse, or child. Many tears and much research later, we decided to honor the memory of those who took their own lives through engaging in a halakhic discourse on mourning a suicide which would not involve shame or disrespect of the dead or their survivors. For our Senior Rabbinic Halakhic Project we each chose one aspect of Jewish law as it relates to mourning a suicide. I chose the length of time one recites Kaddish for a parent, while my *hevruta* partner chose the issue of whether to eulogize someone who had suicided. The fictional question posed at the outset of this article combined our two real life experiences as well as other experiences with which we were very familiar.

There is a silence surrounding the issue of suicide. People often use hushed tones to speak of someone who died of suicide, or even more often, don't mention the cause of death at all. By discussing these issues openly we were engaging in efforts to reduce the stigma that Jewish law has historically given to suicide since the time of the Talmud.

We live in a time where many Jews do not consider halakhah authoritative but they do look to Jewish tradition for guidance and healing during times of crisis. The rituals regarding the recitation of Kaddish deeply

touch even the most non-religious Jew. Reciting Kaddish is an important ritual act that helps the mourners as well as the soul of the departed. Jewish law and tradition invites us to say Kaddish for a parent for only eleven months, but in the case of a suicide we are instructed to recite Kaddish for twelve months. I decided to focus my research on understanding this eleven/twelve month distinction, and to develop my own recommendation regarding this practice.

## Mourning Rituals for a Suicide

Rabbinic authorities regarded destroying oneself with intention (and not for the honor of God) as a grievous sin because the suicide destroys the body given and owned by God, and denies the Jewish doctrine of reward and punishment. In an effort to discourage suicide, halakhists enumerated severe restrictions on mourning practices for a person who kills him or herself. Thus, for example, in the *Shulchan Arukh*, the primary code of Jewish law from the 15th century:

One who commits suicide willfully is not attended to at all; and one does not mourn for him and no lamentation is made for him, nor does one rend [garments] or bare [the shoulder in mourning for him], but one stands for him in the line [of comforters], and one recites over him the mourners' blessing, and whatever brings honor [only] to the living [may be done]. [*Yoreh Deah*, Hilchot Avelut 345:5]

Thus, from antiquity, the general rule in Jewish law has been:

...all things that are done to respect the living (i.e., the survivors) may be done, but that all mourning customs done in respect for the deceased are not to be performed. [Rabbi Barry D. Cytron and Prof. Earl Schwartz, *When Life is in the Balance*, p. 116]

In recent centuries, *poskim*/halakhic decisors have gone further, stating that we should use every conceivable means to practice mourning in order to give respect to the family.

For example, in the 19th century *Arukh Ha-Shulchan*, Rabbi Yechiel Epstein recommended that in regard to suicide, we should find whatever circumstances we can to prevent the denial of mourning rites to an apparent suicide. One should thus ascribe the suicide to fear or suffering or insanity, or to the deceased's thought that by committing suicide he or she was avoiding

the possibility of transgressing some of the commandments of the Torah. Epstein believed that it was improbable that a person would commit such an act as willful suicide with a clear mind.

This leniency makes it difficult to find any suicide that involves a conscious intention. This would be true in the hypothetical case before us where, although the father wrote a note clearly indicating the intention to kill himself, there was also much evidence that the act was a result of a mental illness. Even without clear evidence of mental illness, Epstein would hold that suicide itself is a sign of mental illness, and thus the capacity needed to determine that suicide was intentional cannot easily be found. Therefore, full mourning rites could be followed in the case before us as well as in most other cases.

Most poskim concur with this approach; they determine that most suicides could not qualify as intentional, and thereby avoid the issue of having to withhold or adapt mourning practices for the surviving family. Most of the community's usual burial and mourning practices are therefore usually followed.

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In light of this seemingly lenient interpretation of halakhah, why am I so concerned about this issue? Because although this leniency in most cases allows for an almost full mourning process, all too often the family survivors are still left with a legacy of shame and silence, and do not feel entitled to fully access support from their community. The legacy of shame is still painfully apparent today when someone dies of suicide. We often find the announcement of their death omits the cause, thereby surrounding their death with mystery and shame. We still find rabbis who will bury a suicide at the corners of a cemetery, or will insist on not eulogizing them because it might be interpreted as supporting the act of suicide, or in any event gives too much *kavod*/respect to the dead. Whenever we are involved with a suicide, there is a valid concern to respect the dead and the mourners, while not approving of the act. This balancing act is important especially when there are surviving children involved. However, shame and silence are not the appropriate response.

A residue of shame still clings to the question of how long to recite Kaddish for a parent who committed suicide. The purpose of saying Kaddish for a parent for only eleven months originates from the concept that “the sentence of evildoers in *Gehinnom* endures for no more than twelve months.” [MISHNAH EDUYOT 2:10] (*Gehinnom* or purgatory is the traditional notion of a place that souls go for purification before entering *Gan Eden*, or paradise.) By limiting Kaddish to eleven months, we respect our parents by not putting them in the category of a wicked evildoer — a *rasha*. This was famously formulated by Rabbi Moshe Isserles, writing a gloss on the Shulchan Arukh, who stated that we should only say Kaddish for a parent for eleven months unless we know our parent is a *rasha*. Traditional Jewish legal opinions held that children of a suicide should say Kaddish for the full twelve months. The implication is that a parent who suicides is a *rasha*. Many communities still follow this custom. Some argue that saying Kaddish for twelve months is actually a *compassionate* act because the soul of someone who suicided needs the Kaddish more than others. (Technically, one is not obligated to say Kaddish for a spouse, child, or sibling for more than thirty days. In practice, many people do. I am unaware of any sources that discuss the length of time for reciting Kaddish for a non-parent who suicides.)

## Kaddish as a Soul Healing Ritual

The use of some form of Kaddish as a *mourner's prayer* is not attested to before the first half of the twelfth century. One theory about the origin of Kaddish is that it developed from the original Ashkenazi requirement that a mourner be chosen to conduct the Saturday night prayers, which included the Barchu and a Kaddish. Because some boys — not having reached the age of maturity — were unable to lead the Barchu, they were given the task of reciting Kaddish at the end of the service. The end of the service soon became a special time for bereaved worshippers. Also, there was a deeply rooted belief that on Shabbat, a person in *Gehinnom* had a day of rest; when Shabbat ended, departed souls were condemned to further punishment or purification. By conducting or actively participating in the services at the termination of Shabbat, mourners were able to help alleviate a parent's suffering in *Gehinnom*.

It has long been believed that by reciting Kaddish, a child (traditionally only a son) could rescue his father's soul from the torment of the afterlife.

This belief is seen in aggadic folk legends usually attributed to Rabbi Akiva, where a father who was known as a wicked sinner was redeemed through the merit of his son saying Kaddish (or most likely some form of blessing that required a congregational response, since at the time of Rabbi Akiva, Kaddish was not yet recited for the death of a parent).

Besides its power for personal redemption, some rabbis attributed cosmic, and even theurgic, power to Kaddish. The Talmud states that since the destruction of the Temple, the refrain for Kaddish is the only prayer which sustains the world [BT SOTAH 49a]. Elsewhere, the Talmud notes that, when uttered with all one's strength, the response to Kaddish (*Amen, Y'hei shmei rabbah m'varakh...*) can tear up an evil decree or achieve divine pardon even for one who has been tainted by idolatry [BT SHABBAT 119b]. Even though the Gemara holds otherwise, Rabbi Yochanan's students argued that Kaddish was so important that one must interrupt one's own prayer to respond to it, even if one was engaged in the mystical contemplation of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* or heavenly chariots [BT BRAKHOT 21b]. Moreover, in discussing dream symbolism in the Talmud, the only dream signifying a guarantee of life in the World to Come is one in which the dreamer utters the Kaddish refrain [BT BRAKHOT 57a].

Over time, the Kaddish became seen as a sacred tool to help elevate the soul of the deceased, especially among kabbalists such as the Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria) and the "Pele Yoetz," Rabbi Eliezer Papo, who lived in Bulgaria from 1785 to 1826. The Ari encourages the recitation of Kaddish for any parent for twelve months, and the Pele Yoetz for even longer; both commentaries are made without reference to whether a parent is a *rasha*. In his *Sha'ar HaKavanot*, the Ari says that Kaddish should be recited for a parent for twelve months, even on Shabbat and Yom Tom, because its recital raises the level of the deceased soul to Gan Eden. He specifically states that the benefit of Kaddish is not just to save the soul from the torment of Gehinnom, but also to bring the soul of the dead to Gan Eden and to raise him or her from level to level. In *Shiyurei Brakhah*, Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai quotes the Ari but mentions that many people's custom is to stop one week short of twelve months.

The Pele Yoetz takes the concept of raising the soul of the dead even further. In a remarkable passage, the Pele Yoetz suggests that we say Kaddish *every day of our lives* in order to elevate the soul of the deceased parent:

He should not say Kaddish for twelve months and the yahrtzeit only, because whoever is living in this orphaned generation is to be

exonerated of judgment of his sins for twelve months and then afterwards his fate stands. To demonstrate the question, he also says Kaddish, not only in order to rescue him from punishment [from Gehinnom], but also to cause him to raise the level of the soul of the dead person. Therefore, it is fitting for the son that all the days of his life he should have an image of his father engraved before him... And even if he thinks that his father is a real tzaddik and enjoys in the abundance of his soul, it is as if his son gave him a delicacy that he loves, and he blesses him.<sup>1</sup> The son does not lessen even one day all the days of his life without saying Kaddish and gives tzedakah for his parent's soul. And it is good that the son be fluent [in saying Kaddish] every day. [Pele Yoetz Shalem, *Kibbud Av va-Em*, p. 298]

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In the Pele Yoetz's opinion, we all live in an "orphaned generation" where no one is free from sin. Thus we *all* need to be exonerated from judgment for more than twelve months. Although not addressing the issue of the *rasha* directly, the Pele Yoetz implies that no one can be determined more wicked than another because all of us need the help that the recitation of Kaddish can offer, and we need it forever! The focus of both the Ari and the Pele Yoetz is the elevation of the soul, not merely the release from the purification of Gehinnom.

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<sup>1</sup> This reference comes from Genesis 27:4, where Isaac asks Esau to hunt some game and make him a delicacy that he loves so that he will have the strength to bless him before he dies. The implication is that the Kaddish that the son says is a delicacy for the father, to give him the strength to bless the son from wherever he is now. One could also interpret this passage to mean that the son's Kaddish is the delicacy that his father loves and that the *son* blesses the *father* by saying Kaddish.

## Kaddish as a Healing Ritual for Survivors of a Suicide

Our wise Jewish mourning practices help the bereaved by allowing a full grieving journey. *Aninut*/laws immediately following a death, shivah, *shloshim*/thirty-day period, one year, *yahrtzeit*, and *Yizkor* are crucial Jewish markers of time that offer us important spiritual tools for a mourner's healing. The grieving journey for a suicide survivor can be very complex. For some, suicide is the worst thing that someone can do "to them," whether it be a parent, spouse, child, sibling, or friend who died. Some survivors express anger at the deceased because they feel that the person who suicided left them their dirty work. Stephen Levine, a prominent writer on grief and dying and Vipassana meditation teacher, has said that when a person suicides, they leave their skeleton in *your* closet.

Thus, in addition to how Kaddish may assist the deceased and the congregation, Kaddish must also be understood as a powerful expression of grief and mourning for the *survivors* and thus another important spiritual tool to assist in their healing.

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The experience of saying Kaddish every day for an extended period of time could arouse compassion in the survivor, which could then become a key component in a survivor's healing. When someone dies, especially suddenly and tragically, the "conversation" between the survivors and the departed often stops. In many ways, the recitation of Kaddish helps survivors continue the conversation with the deceased. It can open a door to their loved one. In the case of suicide, this door may have felt not only closed, but slammed shut. Being able to continue this conversation is crucial to the healing of the mourner.

I find the whole process of determining whether someone is a *rasha* to be counterproductive to a healing process, either for the mourner or for the deceased. Who are we to judge another, especially our parent? I follow the reasoning of the Ari and Pele Yoetz in determining that one should say Kaddish for *everyone* with the intention to assist in the elevation of their



souls in Gan Eden. Whether a person suicided or desecrated the Sabbath, or acted in any other manner that the community finds anti-social, one should be encouraged to recite Kaddish for the maximum period of time that is acceptable in one's community as long as by doing so the parent and the survivors receive full respect.

During the life of a parent, a child's duty is to honor and respect their parent and to assist the parent in any way possible. This duty does not stop when the parent dies. For a child to have to determine whether a parent was "wicked" or not is contrary to that responsibility. Publicly declaring that one's parent is wicked by altering the length of time one says Kaddish can bring shame upon the deceased. This is a violation of the mitzvah of *k'vod ha-met*/honoring the dead, as well as *kibbud av va-em*/honoring one's parents. Moreover, making the determination that a parent is wicked and saying Kaddish for the length of time set for those who are wicked clearly can shame the surviving family. This is inconsistent with the mitzvot of *nichum avelim*/comforting mourners and *k'vod ha-briyot*/respecting all creation.

Therefore, we should say Kaddish for all parents for the same amount of time. Whether the time period is eleven or twelve months should not depend on the character or actions of the parents. We can consider the custom of the community for the recital of Kaddish for any parent, as well as what brings comfort to the mourner.

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For example, if the mourner's community generally recites Kaddish for eleven months for a parent, as is done in most Conservative communities, then I encourage the mourner to say Kaddish for their parent who suicided for eleven months. To extend the recitation of Kaddish in that community to twelve months would be harmful to the deceased's reputation and the reputation of the family by implying that their parent was wicked. However, if it is the custom in the mourner's community to say Kaddish for a parent for twelve months, as it is in many Reform communities, then it might be appropriate to follow that tradition.

However, if mourners do not participate in any community on a regular basis and therefore have no custom or standard to be guided by, or are involved with a community that has no established practice, I recommend that mourners of any parent say Kaddish for eleven months; not only does that avoid any possibility that the parent may be considered a *rasha* according to Jewish law, but as Rabbi Lori Klein has pointed out, by saying Kaddish for eleven months and then taking a break before the recital of Kaddish at the year *yahrtzeit*, a mourner is able to transition out of the status of mourner in a gentler way than by ending abruptly at the twelve-month mark. Mourners who stop at eleven months know they will be saying Kaddish one month later at the *yahrtzeit*, and this can be comforting to some people.

Moreover, I recommend that after the first year (or eleven months) of saying Kaddish, mourners take a substantial break from saying Kaddish and join the community as a person who is no longer a mourner. After this period, however, mourners might want to consider the opinion of the Pele Yoetz on continuing to say Kaddish after the year of mourning is over. I follow Rabbi Victor Gross' practice of encouraging the recitation of Kaddish (after the specific period of mourning is completed and there has been a substantial break) whenever the thought of a deceased loved one comes to you when you are praying in community. Following this line of thought, in addition to *yahrtzeit* and *Yizkor*, when mourners are praying in community and are moved to say Kaddish for any loved one, it would be appropriate to do so, even when it is not the *yahrtzeit* or it is not a day that *Yizkor* is being recited.

Jewish mourning practices contain tremendous psycho-spiritual wisdom. Let us be creative in using that wisdom to assist families after a suicide. Healing from the suicide of a family member or close friend takes many years, sometimes a lifetime. By consciously embracing and adapting Jewish prayers and rituals, we can foster healing, help make meaning, and strengthen relationships strained after a suicide.

## FOR FURTHER READING:

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**NOTE:** I had many teachers in my journey with Jewish law and suicide to whom I am indebted. In particular, Rabbi Lori Klein has my deepest appreciation, love, and respect. Also, I acknowledge Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi who encouraged us to respect and learn the traditional halakhic process while bringing it through the paradigm shift in which we live today.



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