

## A Kaddish Journal

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MY MOTHER DIED ON JUNE 1, 2000, AT THE AGE OF eighty-one. At the time it was unclear whether she had, indeed, reached her eightieth year at all. My mother was born in Poland and like many of her *landsleit* she was blessed with multiple birthdays: one for the authorities and passport office, one for the school board, and one for the Kindertransport roster that saved her life.

### Kaddish and the City • July 11, 2000

Entering the process of Kaddish as a woman, a Jew, my parents' daughter, a feminist, and a mother, I find it a struggle to be real to myself, to explore the experience of grief for both my parents. When my father died in 1975 I was nine months pregnant, suffering gall bladder attacks and looking after a three year old. There was no time to grieve. Now an empty-nester, I have the space and time, at least theoretically, to deal with the loss of my father, his legacy, as well as the void created by my mother's death.

I'm not sure how to proceed exactly, whether to write a journal of my Kaddish year which is resonant with *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe's eighteenth century narrative of the 1665 plague in London, or to write a series of newspaper-old columns on the order of "Kaddish and the City?" Levity is, perhaps, inappropriate but as I wander from minyan to minyan it is hard to view the institutions dispassionately. When you are in mourning your nerve endings are extremely close to the surface. I have never been blessed with patience, so for me the rawness of *aveilut* [mourning] is exacerbated by the frustration of experiencing the loss of my mother — of both my parents — in Toronto, a city that boasts a vibrant and rich Jewish community but where, thirty years after Esther Broner's *cri de coeur* over the Kaddish she so

desperately wanted to be for her father, there is still no traditional synagogue that can sustain a daily minyan that is egalitarian. It is painful to love a tradition that doesn't love you back.

### Kaddish is for Men, Yizkor is for Women • July 19, 2000

My mother said Yizkor for her whole extended family and for Zaklikov, the little Polish town of her birth. Just weeks before she died I realized that I had added the names of those she regularly remembered to my growing Yizkor list. Was it a premonition of her death or simply a coming to terms with the disabilities that kept her from living her last years as the devoted Jew she had formerly been and still remained inside? My Yizkor litany now ranges from my friends Rose and Carl all the way back to my great grandmother. And, since my visit some years ago to Number 10 Lottunstrasse in Berlin where my father grew up, his parents and sister are no longer forgotten by me.

Men and women both participate in the recitation of the Yizkor memorial prayer and men lead the prayer in Orthodox shuls like the ones in which I grew up. Yet in my mind Yizkor is a woman's prayer. The Yizkors of my youth evoke images of old women in dumpy hats climbing the steep stairway all the way up to the balcony, their stockings creating sausages out of their swollen, veined legs. They climbed slowly, stopping frequently to catch their breath and pat their faces and necks with handkerchiefs, crumpled and soft, handkerchiefs that would later be drenched with their tears. They found their place in the *siddur* or *mahzor* [High Holiday prayerbook] with difficulty and I was called upon frequently to help them. They shared my parents' pride in a girl who could read Hebrew fluently, a girl who was blessed with a Jewish and secular education they could only dream of. And they craned their necks over the railing to nod at their husbands, just as their mothers and grandmothers had done years ago in their shuls in Europe or even in America, on the Lower East Side or on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. They were chatty women, and I loved the warmth they showed me as the rabbi's daughter. But I was banished to the margins as Yizkor approached and the sobbing began in earnest in anticipation of the recollection of mothers, fathers, grandparents gone long ago and far away.

I can only imagine what went on in the men's section because even though as a little girl I was permitted to share the warmth of my father's tallit

and the tickle of its fringes on my nose, during Yizkor all children were banished (unless a courier was needed to carry the smelling salts upstairs to an old, frail woman overcome by the combination of fasting and emotion). But I'd be willing to bet there was more decorum and fewer tears among the men whose masculinity would have been compromised in the day of the gray flannel suit by excessive Yizkor grieving. No, Yizkor was for women and they relished it. Women colonized Yizkor just as men owned Kaddish.

It is now time for sharing. Mourning, too, constitutes Jewish "continuity." It works both ways. We look forward into the past and we should do it together, saying both Kaddish and Yizkor and being counted — whether we used to climb up to the balcony to cry or remain downstairs containing our emotion.

### It Might Lead to Dancing • August 15, 2000

I must be mellowing. This morning I imagined the pace of Kaddish to be a dance rather than a power struggle as I tried to accommodate myself to two brothers saying Kaddish for a parent's *yahrzeit*. I started slowly to catch their beat and found it a companionable exercise. In more formal synagogues the "ritual director" sets the pace in the interests of decorum. In the Belle Harbor Orthodox shul, as in many others all over the world, everyone dances to the beat of his own rather quick drummer. Some do a two-step or a waltz depending on their personalities and proclivities, sometimes even a merengue or a tango if they are of a lively bent. The "amen's" appear as needed — except for those standing on the wrong side of the *mechitzah* [partition], as I was on a Saturday evening in late June.

My women Kaddish buddies and I are sometimes silenced by the idiosyncratic pace of those in positions of authority whose high levels of testosterone apply equally to shul, business, and the sports field. One is the same person in all venues, it would seem, and one's approach emerges regardless of the synagogue framework. I vacillate between trying to follow the lead of the man with the loudest voice, which is particularly critical if he is leading the service, or pacing myself according to the person beside me who seems determined to outmaneuver the designated person on the podium. Occasionally I get fed up and say Kaddish in a loud and forceful tone and people follow me.

I often find myself more radicalized in shul than anywhere else in my daily experience, undoubtedly because it means so much to me and probably,

too, because thanks to my parents, by their *zechut* [merit], I am as learned as most of the men in any given room when it comes to Judaism and Jewish practice, and refuse to yield my rightful place. The difficulty resides in what constitutes my rightful place and that is an ongoing struggle.

Today, however, I found myself visualizing the pace of Kaddish in different metaphorical terms than my old sports or power game image. At first, I found myself thrown off balance by the cadence of the two brothers. But then I realized that saying Kaddish within a community is like finding your way as you dance with new partners. Who will lead and who will follow? Does your individual expression and movement absorb and direct you regardless of those around you, or do you enjoy the steps taken in tandem, the voices blending if not in accent then at least in timbre and rhythm? At what point is the power struggle transformed into a *hora* or a *debka*, depending on one's Ashkenazi or Mizrahi roots, with each a part of the rhythm of the whole *gestalt*?

Perhaps a metaphor from the world of dance, albeit Jewish dance, could be construed as poor taste considering the subject matter and context of Kaddish, but I prefer to enter my fourth month of mourning and Kaddish recitation with the hope that the pain and struggles are giving way to a more harmonious and less hurtful feminist experience of honoring my mother through Kaddish. Many of us have trouble colluding with the model that posits men's leadership as a given. No wonder I prefer Israeli dances to the ballroom variety. And I suppose the use of the dance image, particularly that of mixed dancing, is one that exemplifies the struggles within Orthodoxy today — between modern Orthodoxy with school dances, sweet sixteen parties, and weddings with mixed dancing, and the Orthodox right with its total separation of men and women. I love sitting with women in shul — it beats discussing the Blue Jays any day. And I prefer horas to tangos. But if I'm dancing a hora in shul, I will continue to be enraged if the men keep missing the beat and stepping on my toes.

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## The Torah Service • September 12, 2000

I was asked to serve as *gabbai* at one of the occasional egalitarian services to be held at a havurah with old friends. When my friend who phoned with the invitation lamented the effort needed to prepare an extraordinarily long Torah portion during a busy week at work, I blurted out without engaging my brain, “Maybe I could do the Torah Service,” the portion of the Shabbat liturgy when the Torah is taken from the Ark and then placed back in the Ark after reading from it. From years of shul-going I already know it virtually by heart, and my friend had ample work to do to prepare her reading. She, of course, was delighted to take me up on my offer and hung up quickly before I could change my mind.

The real reason I responded as I did, however, is connected with my mother. About two years ago, my daughter led the Torah Service, preparation for which found her singing it repeatedly as she wandered through the house. Shortly after, I flew to New Jersey to visit my mother in the nursing home where she would spend the last three years of her life. Visits were difficult and often painful as I longed to communicate with her and could never be sure how much she took in. She was always aware of my presence and her face lit up when she saw me walk into the room. I like to believe she always recognized me, but interaction was a fantasy of mine and despair often overtook my customary optimism and left us sitting side by side in silence. On the visit corresponding to my daughter’s preparation of the Torah Service, however, I tried to engage my mother in a way of communicating that worked from time to time. I began singing to her, hoping to tap into her long-term memory: old songs, the upbeat Hebrew songs of the early Zionist *aliyah* and Yishuv that we used to sing around our Shabbat table, mournful Yiddish tunes like “Raisins and Almonds” that her grandmother sang to her. Without thinking I began to hum the Torah Service that my daughter had been practicing of late. I surprised myself by singing it by heart from beginning to end and then, like my daughter, repeating it. It felt as if I were in a trance. When I lifted my eyes to look at my mother, her greyish-blue eyes were filled with tears. The wistful expression that I knew so well had found its way back to her still-striking face, and I knew she was really with me.

## Airports • September 25, 2000

Airports increasingly resemble expressways and La Guardia seems to have inherited the Long Island Expressway’s moniker of “the longest parking lot in the world,” its runways experiencing the same gridlock that characterizes city traffic. I fantasize about a floating island being constructed along the East River, skimming the surface of the polluted water with platforms serving as runways, thus adding the extra airport so desperately needed.

This past Sunday evening as I returned from a family bar mitzvah in Port Washington, I found myself having fantasies of a different kind as my husband and I cooled our heels in the airport lounge beside the gate of our flight home to Toronto and our daughter’s flight back to college in Montreal. As the airline personnel coped with the inevitable delays, my fantasies ran to the opportunity for a *minchah minyan* [late afternoon service] in which to fulfill my obligation to say Kaddish materializing before my eyes. I had visited my mother’s and father’s graves early that morning, beating the last-Sunday-before-Rosh-Hashanah rush at the Jewish cemeteries. I could feel autumn in the air as I stared at my mother’s grave, recalling the bright sunshine and raw pain of her funeral in early June, and although there was no minyan for my prayers I felt confident that the visit supplanted the synagogue service which I was unable to attend that morning. But the exigencies of travel made an evening service equally untenable.

The scene at the airport was a familiar one. On Sunday nights every two months or so I had found myself at Newark which was a ten-minute ride from the nursing home where my mother spent her last years. It is common to see Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox families returning from weddings and bar mitzvahs in New York, hatboxes in hand as they carry their dressy *sheitel* [wig] or hat while sporting a casual wig or headcovering more suitable for airport lounges than large banquet halls or synagogues. I have often envied women who wore wigs. I assumed that they never worried about damp weather rendering hours of meticulous blowdrying useless, unlike my hair which asserts its own mind and explodes in curls at the first hint of fog or rain. But I recently discovered that good wigs made out of human hair suffer the same fate as my own temporarily straight coil, so the last bastion of my envy for the ultra-Orthodox has waned.

I was rather shamelessly eavesdropping on conversations about children,

weddings, circumcisions and the like, delighting in the broad vowels of the Brooklynites out of Montreal, when I noticed several men begin to collect around us. They were even more Orthodox than the original cohort whose black hats complemented their business suits. These newcomers wore long black coats, larger, rounder, headgear, and had payes, or earlocks, curled several times around their ears. Although some of the group had youthful faces, the overall impression was of age and weight. They began nodding at one another, reaching for prayerbooks, and obviously engaging in the "I'm not counting two-step" of Jewish custom that prohibits the counting of people, even as they scanned the lounge for likely candidates for their minyan. The sun was setting and it was time for minchah. My husband winked at me; a wicked grin on his face and said, "It looks like you might have a chance to say Kaddish after all," and considered offering his services as tenth man. Just at that moment, however, two young men with pale faces and large hats appeared as if from nowhere, completing the minyan.

My daughter, clutching her Camp Kinneret clipboard to her chest, the text of the unfinished Jewish Studies paper on Josephus, due tomorrow, inside, watched the scene develop, the three-word phrase so familiar to parents on her lips silently imploring: "Don't embarrass me!"

Meanwhile, a heavy man in a long black coat and with the longest *payes* in the crowd removed a thin black belt, a *gartel*, from his pocket, and began to tie it around what must once have been his waist while moving toward a corner near the gate. The others followed, assembling quickly; their siddurim appearing as if by magic. I wished I had brought my siddur as I contemplated my options. Should I approach the men and explain that I am saying Kaddish for my mother and would like to join them? Should I offer to create a *mehitzah* out of those funny little objects into which you are asked to place your carry-on baggage to determine if it will fit in the overhead compartments? Or should I simply join in? I looked at the wives of these men, complacently enjoying their conversation, oblivious to my inner turmoil, comfortable in their own roles within the domestic sphere. Would they find me ridiculous and contemptible or might one of them harbor some of the same desires as I do?

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Although I knew full well that in their community a son would say Kaddish for his parents while a daughter would grieve privately, I felt an affinity for this airport minyan stemming from a sense of *ahavat Yisrael* [love of Israel] instilled in me by my parents. I knew in my mind that I would never be part of it but I still dream in my heart that we are all one people.

My fantasies gave way to reality as the minyan unfolded. I wish I could say that I marched right up to the *baal tefillah* [prayer leader] and made sure he waited for my Kaddish and that the community replied "amen," but I did not. I wish I could say that I built a *mehitzah* and the other women joined me in prayer, supporting my desire to find a community of Jews even in the airport lounge. I wish I could say that I stood up boldly and recited the Kaddish at the appropriate times regardless of whether anyone would respond. No, I did none of the above, to the relief of my daughter and the dismay of my husband who was hoping for a good dustup to relieve the boredom. No, I hovered on the periphery of their minyan, listening carefully to the prayers, repeating them quietly as I know them mostly by heart, and quietly reciting the Kaddish at the end. Like the biblical Hannah, my lips were moving but I never gave the Eli-designate with the *gartel* the opportunity to throw me out of the temple or accuse me of being drunk and disorderly. Instead I remained invisible and marginal even as I felt myself drawn to those men in black coats as fellow Jews who held the power over me to complete my prayer, but who never even knew I was standing there beside them.

The words of my sister-in-law at brunch that morning rang in my ear, "Now that there are women rabbis and cantors in the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements, the men have disappeared." These men praying *minchah*, however, retained their authority and control. Their wives don't make waves, just *cholent*. Their sons and daughters marry young and produce lots of beautiful grandchildren. The conundrum seems insurmountable for feminists in light of the responses of men and women on both ends of the spectrum.

I question myself regarding the compromise I chose by remaining invisible and not really fulfilling the obligation to say Kaddish as there was no community response. Only when the praise of God articulated in the prayer finds its echo in *khal Yisrael*, the community of Israel, will we be in a position to be more than *luftmenschen* and will we be grounded in our common heritage. As the final sounds of *minchah* were completed and the minyan

dispersed, our flights were announced and we entered the airplane where we sat together but remained so far apart.

### She Davens Like a Man • November 9, 2000

The ritual director has not yet returned from his trip to the States but fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, there were more than enough men with *yahrzeits* to carry the day at the morning *minyana*. They were neophytes, though, unsure of the Kaddish which they recite once a year, so my voice carried as I said Kaddish. The man seated in front of me had trouble with the words of the Kaddish d'Rabbanan, although he was soon to mount the *bimah* and lead the congregation — but not before turning to his wife and saying with a sneer, “She davens like a man.” His wife, it transpires, was the reason for their foray into *shul* this morning as she is observing *yahrzeit* for her father. She is a woman in her late sixties, I would think, wearing a turquoise jogging suit, decorated with embroidery and appliques. Her glasses hung around her neck on a chain of fake diamonds. There was something soft and sweet and a little ditzzy about her. I must admit I didn’t care for her until she said hello.

First she smiled and gave me an almost conspiratorial wink as she handed her husband his tallis halfway into his *Shmoneh Esrei*. He had forgotten to put it on and remembered it only after he had begun the prayers. He looked less sheepish than he should have as he made the blessing in mid-prayer and continued. A few minutes later she turned and asked me what page we were on, and I pointed out the pages periodically thereafter, leading her through the service while her husband was unavailable. “My husband says you daven like a man,” she confided with a smile, omitting the sneer. I guess you could say we had bonded, or was she trying to smooth out the embarrassment she felt knowing I had probably overheard the slight?

After the Torah service, the Rabbi asked those who were observing *yahrzeits* to come to the *bimah* and my new-found friend was urged to make her way with the men to stand beside the *amud* [podium] as the rabbi recited the *El Malei Rachamin*. Clearly unsettled she demurred, saying “But I don’t know what to do.” “That’s why I am here,” replied the Rabbi. She was able to tell him her father’s Hebrew name and as she returned to her seat she confided in a whisper: “I have never been up there, except once, after my mother died, and I lit the Shabbos candles.” Her face glowed as I wished her *yasher koach*

for honoring her father’s memory. We chatted a bit about the difficulty of finding the place in the Artscroll Siddur and how it does not provide the transliteration she needs. I checked to see if there was a translation on the back cover as there is in some other siddurim I have used. There was, and she was relieved to find it. “Even my husband was nervous. He can’t find his way through the new prayerbook; it is all in Hebrew.” “Well, not to worry now,” I told her; “you can always find the transliteration in the back of the siddur.” She giggled as she replied, “Oh, you think it is the back because you read Hebrew. It seems like the front to me.” That comment delighted and tickled me and I think it would have pleased my parents, too. Whenever one of us children would discuss something we had clearly learned in day school, my father would joke that luckily all that tuition hadn’t been wasted. Today that tuition provided another woman with the wherewithal to honor her own parents. Next time she comes to *shul* to observe a *yahrzeit* she won’t be beholden to her husband. She will be able to read the Kaddish for herself and I’d wager she’ll say it loud and clear. She will daven not like a man; not like a woman, but like a Jew.

