

Kaddish as Expansiveness

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Introduction

I write this essay in midst of the year of mourning for my mother and my daily recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish. Despite my many times saying Kaddish when leading a service, it is the experience of being a mourner,¹ more than anything else, that has acutely raised the question of the meaning of this prayer for me. Why do I, whether as a prayer leader or a mourner, recite these words to conclude a prayer service or a portion thereof? What is it that I, as a mourner, am meant to accomplish through the recitation of this prayer?²

The Kaddish is a prayer that appears in multiple forms. Here I will relate to the most essential of those forms: the Half Kaddish, whose core form also appears in every other form of Kaddish; and the Mourner's Kaddish, which includes two appeals for peace (one in Aramaic and another in Hebrew), which also appear in every form of the Kaddish other than the Half Kaddish. Here is the text of Mourner's Kaddish, which includes within it the full text of the Half Kaddish:

Enlarged and sanctified be His great name
in this world which He created according to His will.

May His majesty be made sovereign in your lifetime and your days
and the days of all the House of Israel, quickly and soon, and say: *Amen*.

May His great name be blessed for ever and ever and ever.

Blessed and praised and extolled and exalted and elevated and glorified and
uplifted and lauded be the Holy One's name, blessed be He,
beyond (and beyond) every blessing and song and praise and consolation that we
say in this world, and say: *Amen*.

¹ Both currently for my mother and previously for my sister as well as for my great-aunt and great-uncle.

² I ask this question from a place devoid of metaphysics, seeking an answer that does not rely on some particularly metaphysical picture of the world we live in, such as certain ways of understanding the classical explanation of the elevation of the deceased loved one's soul. Rather I hope to ask the question and hear an answer that is directly relevant to my human experience as an emotional, psychological, embodied, spiritual being.

May there be great peace from heaven and life upon us and upon all Israel,
and say: *Amen*.

May the One who makes peace in His high places make peace upon us
and upon all Israel, and say: *Amen*.

Why do those in mourning recite this exaltation of the divine name? Why, when concluding a service, do we recite this acclamation of God? What could such a recitation accomplish and how might it actually enlarge and sanctify the great name of God?

The Nature of the Language of Prayer

To answer this question we must first briefly digress and explore the very nature of the language of Jewish prayer. While we most often think of language as a means of imparting information, that is not the case with the language of prayer. In prayer, even if prayer language were, in some sense, a normal bearer of information, surely it would have lost its efficacy in communicating its content after the thousandth recitation of the same prayer.³ Intellectual information, once genuinely received and understood, does not benefit from repetition. It neither does me good nor deepens my understanding to be told endlessly that $2+2=4$ or that the earth is round.

Rather, we can think about prayer language in two other ways. First, we can think about it as communication from the pray-er to the Divine. The person praying praises, thanks, and makes requests from God and in so doing communicates his or her awe, appreciation, and needs—and, in that process, cultivates a relationship with divinity itself. That is: the language of prayer is both a vessel for the pray-er to communicate feelings to God and also a means, as in human discourse, of creating intimacy and connection between interlocutors. Second, and more important for our purposes, we can see the language of prayer as performative. Prayer language is not meant to communicate something but rather to *do* something. Most importantly, it is meant

³ Which, for one praying three times a day, would only require one year of prayer.

to cultivate certain states and dispositions in the practitioner. When we say Barukh She-amar each morning, for example, we do not impart new information about God's creative powers, but rather cultivate a palpable sense of wonder and awe by reminding ourselves about, and affirming, divine creativity. As Abraham Joshua Heschel explained:

Every evening we recite: "He creates light and makes dark." Twice a day we say: "He is One." What is the meaning of such repetition? A scientific theory, once it is announced and accepted, does not have to be repeated twice a day. The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is a need for daily worship.⁴

Similarly, the imagery of prayer and its repetition—whether the prayer is about the natural world, or praising God, or about the Divine's extraordinary power—cultivates in us various religious feelings even after many repetitions. So too, language that communicates God's love for us helps us to feel beloved and accepted, feelings that must be renewed each day. In this way the repetition is a way of fully actualizing or integrating the knowledge that is presented in the words of the repeated prayer. We do not know more, but we know it more deeply and fully.

Sometimes this performative element is expressed through modes of enactment and participation. When we recite the "Hallelujah" psalms, the recitation itself is a kind of enactment of joy, a performative exclamation that, when done truly, is itself an act of joy and wonder. When we express our thanks we enact gratitude in that moment. When we not only mention the exodus from Egypt but when we ourselves *personally* recite the words sung by the Israelites after crossing the Sea of Reeds; and when we not only recall the angelic praise of God but ourselves *personally* become the heavenly choir in the Kedushah, we enact and participate in mythic moments—and in so doing become ourselves redeemed, angelic, and filled with awe. As Shefa

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955; rpt. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p. 46.

Gold says of prayer more generally, “I’m not trying to understand the words. I’m trying to be the words.”⁵ The argument here is that this approach is part of the basic nature of Jewish prayer.

This performative element is further expressed in the linguistic structure of Jewish prayer itself. The repetition of the same words day after day, the use of strings of words (whether synonyms or complementary verbs and adjectives) and the mantra-like rhythmic nature of much of prayer language are all modes of enacting and ingraining the feeling and insights that the words offer. In all these ways, prayer is a practice of cultivation—and prayer language is a performative means of bringing into reality certain qualities, dispositions, emotions, and states of being. As Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the Piaseczner rebbe, wrote, when a Jew recites the prayers for light,

the Israelite does not tell that there is light, rather he reveals the light itself and the holiness of his God. He brings forth, expands, and reveals the holy spark that sparkles in him...One is not speaking of a deed which has light in it, but rather one is bringing forth the light itself in this speech itself. When one repeats [the word] more light, and even more light, and even more light is revealed each time.⁶

And in a similar vein, he also states: “One who simply describes God’s greatness and His praise is like a person who reports that somewhere far away, there is a great light. But to actually sing God’s praise is like bringing a candle back from the faraway light to this world.”⁷

Kaddish and Expansiveness

What, then, is Kaddish meant to perform or enact? What is it that the words of Kaddish *do*?

What is it that they bring into the world? My contention and experience, inspired by my friend

⁵Shefa Gold, as quoted in Mike Comins, *Making Prayer Real* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2010), p. 43.

⁶Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Derekh Ha-melekh* (Jerusalem: Va-ad Hasidei Piaseczno [Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim], 5755 [1994/1995]), sermon for the First Night of Rosh Hashanah 5691 (1930/1931), p. 250.

⁷Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Hovat Ha-talmidim* (ed. Warsaw, 5692 [1931/1932]), “Torah, Prayer, and Singing to God,” section 2, pp. 98–99. Non-Hebrew readers may profitably consult this text in Micha Odenheimer’s translation, published as *A Student’s Obligation* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991), p. 166.

and colleague Jordan Bendat-Appell, is that the words of Kaddish are meant to expand us, to bring us into a state of mind and being that is wider, greater, enlarged, and beyond our normal experience.⁸ Indeed this is the meaning of the opening word of the Kaddish: *yitgaddal*, may God's name be enlarged, greatened, increased, amplified, or expanded.⁹ If we look once more at the core words of the Kaddish brought here again, we see this cultivation of expansiveness—of awe, greatness, sanctity, exaltation, elevation, glory, and ascension; of going and being beyond the normal and mundane; of growing, expanding, and ascending beyond this world, beyond time, beyond human reality and language.

Enlarged and sanctified be His great name
in this world which He created according to His will.

May His majesty be made sovereign in your lifetime and your days
and the days of all the House of Israel, quickly and soon, and say: *Amen*.

May His great name be blessed for ever and ever and ever.

Blessed and praised and extolled and exalted and elevated and glorified and
uplifted and lauded be the Holy One's name, blessed be He,
beyond (and beyond) every blessing and song and praise and consolation that we
say in this world, and say: *Amen*.

May there be great peace from heaven and life upon us and upon all Israel,
and say: *Amen*.

May the One who makes peace in His high places make peace upon us
and upon all Israel, and say: *Amen*.

In the Kaddish we call for the divine Name to be expanded, to be “enlarged and sanctified...blessed and praised and extolled and exalted and elevated and glorified and uplifted and lauded.” In our very calling for this expansion, we actually enact the expansion of the Name and ourselves. We expand it, increase it, and amplify it to such an extent that we go beyond the

⁸ Jordan shared this insight with me at a retreat where we taught together in December 2013, a few months before my mother passed away. He communicated that he thought he, in turn, had heard this insight from another friend and teacher, Sheila Peltz Weinberg.

⁹ The repetition here is a purposeful echoing of the Kaddish's linguistic structure and aims to help the reader feel the performative effect of such language.

ability of language to contain it, “beyond (and beyond) every blessing and song and praise and consolation that we say in this world.” We go beyond the limitation of time and space, blessing the Name “for ever and ever and ever.” We go beyond the ability of the human mind to contain it, beyond human comprehension—and in doing so, we take ourselves beyond our mundane sense of who we are.


Why? What is the connection between this expansiveness and the task of the Kaddish for mourners, prayer leaders, and community? The connection is the transformative power of that expansiveness, which we can see in multiple ways.

Expansiveness as *Mikveh*

In my experience, it is no coincidence that mourners are given this prayer of expansiveness to recite—for it is in the expansiveness itself, in the greatness of awe and sanctity, that the healing of loss takes place, that openness and stability are rediscovered. It is no coincidence that this prayer concludes prayer services and their subsections, for it is in this expansiveness that all that has arisen in these prayers, all the varied and conflicting emotions and insights, can be held in spaciousness and equanimity, and integrated into the practitioner. That is, what the Kaddish allows us and calls on us to do is to widen around our experience. *Yitgaddal*, it tells us: get bigger. Kaddish allows us to become a vessel, to create a vessel, that is wide enough to hold the truth of loss, the truth of helplessness to save a loved one, and the feelings of despair, anger, grief, denial, fear, and bitterness that arise. It does not tell us to “get over” our loss yet, nor does it allow us to get lost in it. Rather it helps us to become wide enough, expansive enough, to hold it all without having to reject any part of our experience and without getting trapped in any one aspect of our experience. Kaddish helps us hold the truth of our bereavement, and the truth of the

majesty *and* horror of this world, with compassion and love. It lets us know—not in the sense of acquiring information, but in a felt sense of gaining the insight—that we are bigger than the bereavement, that the love is bigger than the horror. We may feel overwhelmed and helpless, having lost a loved one, being caught in the stress of life and work, or simply having poured out our heart in prayer and listed all the many unfulfilled desires and needs we have, but Kaddish allows us to hold the overwhelm and helplessness in something larger without having to deny our experience.

In this sense Kaddish is a kind of *mikveh*, a ritual purifying bath, but one with special powers and significance that can even, bit by bit, remove the impurity of death.¹⁰ The *mikveh*, the Jewish ritual bath, is used as a means of cleansing oneself from ritual impurity. One accomplishes this by immersing oneself in the waters of the *mikveh*, which symbolically—ritually cleanses the one immersing, allowing him or her to be washed clean of the impurity by being held in the container of cleansing water. Kaddish, I want to claim, can achieve the same thing for the bereaved.

Day by day, as Kaddish is recited, the bitterness and anger of death is held in something larger and it is transformed. In the laws of *kashrut*, we speak of something being *bateil b'shishim* (“void in a mixture of sixty times its volume”)—which means, practically, that if a piece of meat, for instance, falls into a pot of milk but constitutes less than one-sixtieth of the volume of milk in the pot, then it is considered as if it did not exist; but  if it was not less than one-sixtieth, it colonizes the whole pot, turning it into a non-kosher state. We sometimes feel as if the pain of our loss, the bitterness, anger, helplessness, or depression, have colonized our being, turning us into something other than what we were and truly are. Kaddish allows us to keep expanding and

¹⁰ That is, this imaginative *mikveh* of the Kaddish is able to even exceed the power of an actual *mikveh* which cannot, according to the tradition, remove the impurity of death.

expanding so that the acute pain and anger become held in something wider, until they eventually no longer define our being. They are still there. The meat doesn't actually go away. We never, in my experience, eliminate the sense of loss, nor should we wish to; but we no longer need to be dominated by it and defined by it. This is the process of mourning; this is the process of Kaddish.

Kaddish as *mikveh* allows this transformation because it allows us to see all of what is arising within us without being overwhelmed by it. In its breadth and width, it gives us the space, and so the equanimity and stability, to allow whatever is present to come to consciousness. No longer terrified of the demons that lurk beneath the surface but rather confident in our ability to be present with them despite the fear and discomfort, the demons sense the permission to arise and make themselves known. Expansive and open, we do not become trapped by the demons when they arise, but instead give them space to roam within our expansiveness of mind, heart, body, and soul, a spaciousness that defangs them. When we expand, when we cultivate the expansiveness of the Kaddish, we can see all of the things that arise—anger, fear, suspicion, jealousy, desire, fantasy, terror—as schools of fish swimming by in the immeasurable ocean, or as clouds moving through the vast sky. Sometimes the fish look like sharks, killer whales, or giant squids. Sometimes it seems to be not merely clouds but in fact lightning, storms, and gale-force winds. But when we are truly wide, when we are the sky and the ocean, then even *that* is acceptable. Even the most fearsome predator cannot hurt the ocean; the ocean *is* what holds it. Even the most terrible lightning bolt cannot damage the sky; the sky *is* its vast container and thus is untouched by the passage of the lightning bolt. If we do not become identified with any particular place, any particular emotion or moment, then we can hold them all in that

expansiveness, and then we can hold *all* the terrifying monsters that arise, in compassion and love.

We can only hold them by growing larger. The contradictions, the feelings, the thoughts—whether of loss, prayer, or life—can only be held together in a large container. Sometimes we think about holding everything together as a kind of tense, desperate grasping onto the various out-of-control strings of our life. But we all know how that feels: tense, desperate, on the edge, and driven by constant struggle. We aren't really holding it all together; we are desperately resisting getting pulled apart.

Sometimes we hope to find resolution by seeking to harmonize the various components of our lives, our minds, and our hearts, so that the various disparate elements of our experience will no longer seem to be in tension with each other. This is the comfort of a grand unified theory, something that puts everything in the right place. But, most often, such strategies fail as well. It doesn't all fit together smoothly. It isn't all resolved. There is no neat and tidy solution to the tensions of life.

But here, in the Kaddish, we hold the multiplicity contained in the many prayers we have recited, the many different feelings around mourning and loss—not grasping them or smoothing out the contradictions, but simply giving them a wider space in which to *be*. In this way, they are held together without being papered over. In this way, a deeper unity is found. Indeed, Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch, tells us that this is precisely the expansive nature of the Divine: that which, because it creates this infinitely open space, the void of *ayin*, can hold together all opposites.¹¹ The expansiveness of Kaddish is then, in this sense, also the mystic place of the relinquishing of self. It is the way in which we get so wide, so beyond, that we exceed even our own ideas of who we are and so we rest in the infinite, in our ability to hold everything that

¹¹ *Sefer Maggid D'varav L'yaakov*, ed. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1976), §60, p. 91.

arises in the limitless container of love. In this way Kaddish, in its place in the service, is like the pause of silence after a chant, the lying down at the end of a yoga session, the sitting in silence and wonder at the end of an extraordinary book or movie: it is the time to let it all in, to hold it in something larger, and to then allow it to be integrated into who we are.

Of course, this is exceptionally hard. First, because many of us harbor an unhealthy desire to identify with both the predator and the prey. Because of our natural human tendency to avoid pain and our natural reluctance to admit to our own shortcomings, we find it easy to rewrite our story, focusing on how we have fallen prey to something larger than ourselves (for example, an undeserved diagnosis or unwarranted suffering) and how nothing works out. Similarly, for those of us who fall easily into self-blame, we can become trapped in a story about what we did wrong. It makes us feel safe in some way. We want to get lost in our bitterness and anger at the loss, in our denial and blame—to a great extent, because doing so shields us from the enormity of the loss itself and the genuine sadness and grief that arise in its wake. Second, it is hard because it is simply scary to just be with the predator, to just look at those jaws filled with teeth and not run away, not flee, not do anything but compassionately be *with* that which arises. But if we do so, the lion might just put its head in our lap.

Kaddish is therefore a way for us to make friends with what arises, to expand around it. We hold it, we embrace it, we don't try to get rid of it...and in the embrace it just moves on by itself. In this way Kaddish, in its affirmation of divine expansiveness, majesty, and will in the face of loss, asks us to not fight our loss. It tells us that we change when we accept ourselves, that we are purified when we stop fighting what we need to be liberated from, that we are healed

when we stop running away. In this way, it is the Divine itself which is the purifying bath; it is God who is, in Jeremiah's words "the *mikveh* of Israel."¹²

Expansiveness and Awe

The awe-inspiring nature of the Kaddish—the awesomeness expressed in words, posture, and solemnity—is an awesomeness of expansiveness. The hasidic masters speak about two types of fear, *yirah k'tanah* ("small fear") and *yirah g'dolah* ("great fear or awe"). One of the core practices of early Hasidism, particularly with regard to the hasidic revolution in the relationship to "alien thoughts" (*mahashavot zarot*), is the transformation of this small fear into awe. For example, the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, teaches:

"And Isaac dwelt and dug anew" (Genesis 26:18)—a well, and the channel of awe (*yirah*), as is his quality...the aspect of Isaac, which is fear, has multiple aspects, external fear and dread (*yirah*)...God forbid, for external fear (*yirah*) due to punishment, is called, God forbid, idolatry...
"And he dug yet another well" (Genesis 26:22)—internal awe (*yirah*), it was called *r'hovot* (literally, "the wide place"), for "the Eternal has granted us ample space," and the internality of awe (*yirah*) is called *r'hovot*—understand!¹³

Here the Baal Shem Tov distinguishes between external fear, the fear of punishment, and internal fear, the awe of divinity. External fear, the fear of punishment, is so degraded and so inappropriate a motivation for serving God that it is labeled idolatry, a striking condemnation. It is closed, fearful, and narrow. Awe, on the other hand, is called *r'hovot* ("the wide place)."

Thus, the very nature of genuine awe, of true service of the Divine, is this nature of expansiveness. The transformation from idolatrous fear to awe of the Divine is therefore the transition from constriction to expansiveness. We make this transition, in my experience, by

¹² Jeremiah 14:8, 17:13. In its original biblical context, the meaning is that God is the "hope" of Israel. However, since the same Hebrew word has both the meanings "hope" and "ritual bath," later readings took the verse to mean that God is a kind of purificatory bath, of sorts, to Israel.

¹³ *Keter Shem Tov Ha-shalem*, ed. J. Immanuel Schochet (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2004), §93c.

making space, by expanding again and again around the place of constriction—around the fear, anger, jealousy, bitterness, loneliness, or a score of other feelings—and allowing the constriction to rest in an ocean of space. We might bring our attention to the place of constriction and then, with each breath, breathe in infinitely, filling our lungs with the breath of the world and creating limitless space for the constriction to rest in; and then breathe out infinitely, feeling our breath filling the world and connecting ourselves to an even vaster immeasurableness, in which the constriction can be held. In the Kaddish we might intend, with each word of enlargement and ascension, that we expand bit by bit, creating just a little more space for what is present to rest in infinity.

And then, on the Days of Awe, we get even wider. We are called upon to expand, to see the awesomeness of divinity and this world, again and again. To recognize the fleeting and uncertain nature of our lives and the cosmic context in which we live, the finite nature of our existence and the measurelessness of the divine. And so in the Kaddish, we push that expansiveness one step more. We say that the divine Name is “praised and extolled and exalted and elevated and glorified and uplifted and lauded...beyond and beyond every blessing and song and praise and consolation that we say in this world.” Beyond and beyond, or above and above, or surpassingly surpassing, on the Days of Awe we expand that little bit more, we reach for a larger infinity, to recognize that however much we have expanded and seen the truth of this beyondness, we can yet expand a little bit more. We can go even farther and hold even that expansion in a wider even more measureless space.

Our Expansion and Reflexive Language

This expansion, as I have argued from the beginning of this essay, is an enlargement not only of the divine Name but of ourselves as well. Through our call to expand the divine Name beyond all limitations of language and thought, we ourselves are expanded. In part, this happens because the wishing, calling forth, or blessing of expansiveness naturally touches the sender as well as the recipient, just as our genuine well-wishing for others brings to our selves a sense of ease and well-being. Yet in another way, the language of the Kaddish itself points at this dual effect.

The verbs in the Kaddish are in the *hitpa-eil* form, which is generally taken to be reflexive.¹⁴ We could then read the Kaddish as saying: “May His great name enlarge and sanctify itself.” That is, Kaddish would be read as God’s self-sanctification and self-expansion. Yet recited, as it is, in our mouths, who is performing this expansion and sanctification but us? We can make sense of this seeming tension by following the hasidic masters in their declaration that “there is no other,” that everything is divine, including ourselves. In saying Kaddish, then, we—as the Great Name ourselves, as the Divine ourselves—are calling upon ourselves to expand and ascend. We are declaring our intention, hope, and task of magnifying the Name-which-is-us. We are exhorting ourselves to become real, sanctified, praised, and spacious enough to contain all that is present, to give it a place to rest in infinity.

At the end of the Aleinu prayer, we recite the verse from Zechariah that declares that “on that day, the Eternal will be one and His name one.”¹⁵ This is our task, the task of redemption, of *tikkun*. The Kaddish, in the sense we have been discussing, is the way in which we make the Name one by making ourselves one. We unify not by destroying any difference, but by creating a wider space in which all that is disparate can exist in a greater whole. This is perhaps why we

¹⁴ Most verbs that are conjugated in the *hitpa-eil* correspond to reflexive verbs in other languages. However, this is not invariably the case and there are many verbs that are used in that grammatical pattern that do not appear to have any specific reflexive meaning at all.

¹⁵ Zechariah 14:9.

conclude prayer services with the Kaddish. It is the seal, the unity, the unification, the holding all that is separated together, which allows the multiplicity of life and prayer to be held in one overarching space. It is perhaps why we say it as mourners—for the act of expanding we-who-are-the-Name allows us to truly mourn, to hold all the many feelings, memories, thoughts, and reactions to our loss in a loving container that allows everything that must emerge to arise and be held in love.

Self-Conscious Transcendence

We have discussed how the Kaddish expresses its expansive nature by using words to call for praise beyond all words: “Blessed and praised and extolled and exalted and elevated and glorified and uplifted and lauded be the Holy One’s name, blessed be He, beyond (and beyond) every blessing and song and praise and consolation that we say in this world.”¹⁶ The expansiveness of Kaddish is thus emphasized even more when we recognize the prayer’s own self-consciousness of its exceeding of the limitations of language. The Kaddish both exceeds language and likewise calls on us to exceed language. Elliot Rabin, in his discussion of the nature of Jewish prayer, argues:

The strategy of Jewish prayer-poetry is to explode the mind with an overabundance of words to the point where the person senses what is beyond language. The davener is not meant to understand, visualize, internalize every word of *t’fillah*; that scenario is rendered impossible by the sheer verbosity in a Jewish service. (Davening Shaharit means reading a hundred-page anthology of Hebrew poems every morning!)¹⁷

In the Kaddish, the nature of the overabundance of words bears witness to this claim; in addition, the Kaddish itself names its own desire to go beyond language. Indeed, at times of greater awe

¹⁶ The extra “beyond” (*l’eila*) is added on the High Holy Days and throughout the Ten Days of Repentance.

¹⁷ Elliot Rabin, “Tefillah: Poetry of the Sublime,” in *HaYidion* 5 (Spring 2013), pp. 28–31, available online at <https://ravsak.org/tefillah-poetry-sublime>.

and heightened expansiveness, that self-conscious expansion beyond language is even more prominent. Rabin's perceptive claim then becomes even stronger in relationship to the Kaddish. It is further bolstered by the fact that Kaddish is the only prayer of antiquity that is recited with relative regularity that self-consciously refers to itself in such a way.¹⁸ The self-consciousness of the Kaddish in this respect strengthens our previous claims about the Kaddish's performative task as a prayer of expansion and transcendence, taking the practitioner beyond human boundedness.

Kaddish, understood against the notion of expansiveness presented here, thus presents a model that is both at odds with, yet also deeply congruent with, the apophatic theology of Maimonides and his successors.¹⁹ Both stress the inadequacy of language to capture the essence of the Divine. But whereas in Maimonidean thought this results in an approach of silence and negation, the response in Kaddish is instead an affirmation that consciously attempts to exceed the mind's limitations through the excessiveness of language itself.²⁰



¹⁸ As far as I can discern. The other prayers that come to mind in this regard are Nishmat Kol הא perhaps similarly ancient prayer that tells us that "even were our mouths as filled with song as the sea...we could not sufficiently praise You...and bless Your name," and also the medieval hymn Anim Zemirot. Both of these, however, are only recited on the Sabbath and holidays.

¹⁹ Apophatic theology is negative theology, a theology that seeks to describe the Divine only by negation, by what the divine is not. For example, one can not say that God is mighty, but rather that God is not weak.

²⁰ See Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* I 57–59. There he explains that because language is inadequate to describe the Divine we must, as much as possible, be silent and, where that is not possible, speak of the Divine only negatively, through the negation of qualities (which are all qualities) that are not appropriate to ascribe to God.

provide other examples of the use of language to self-consciously transcend its limitations.²¹ In any case, like apophatic mysticism and theology, the Kaddish in this sense leads the practitioner to a state of aporia through its radical expansiveness, an insight into the unknowability and unbounded nature of divinity and ourselves. We thus conclude our prayers that are grounded in language with a prayer that takes us beyond language. We approach our loss and suffering not with words of comfort, but with words that take us beyond comfort—to a ministry of presence, an opening to the limitless transcendence of divinity.

The Truth of Things as They Are

Yet we do not only speak of expansiveness in the Kaddish. In addition, we say:

Enlarged and sanctified be His great name
In this world which He created according to His will.

We ask for the name to be enlarged “in this world which He created according to His will”—that is, we are asked to expand and open into this very world, a world created according to the divine work of the Kaddish and its radical expansiveness. Its own words are not meant to be a

boundary within which the prayer operates, but rather to point beyond themselves to an

What does it mean for us to say that the world was created according to divine will? expansiveness that exceeds all borders and that in fact exceeds the very possibilities of language. What does it mean for us to expand into that world? It means that we are asked to expand into Later forms of Jewish spiritual practice—such as the saying and unsaying of the Zohar (the things, to hold things, to accept things just as they are...to see that this is simply how things are, Zohar continually uses a technique of saying and unsaying, such as claiming that the Divine is and it is larger than us. It doesn't mean “all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.”²² “known and not known”) and even the stream of consciousness of Bratslaver *hitbod' dut*—may That is nonsense. We don't accept things “as they are” in the sense that we believe it is always

good or right or justified that such and such happened. Rather, it means that we simply

²¹ Bratslaver *hitbod' dut* is a stream-of-consciousness speaking-to-God meditation practice where the practitioner speaks non-stop to God. Michelle Kwitkin has suggested to me in a correspondence that this may also be true of the language of Ezekiel's vision, *ma-aseh merkavah*, where the word *k' ein* is used over and over to suggest that language is simply inadequate to convey the essence of the Divine. Yet the prophet does not respond to that thought by declining to speak about God, but rather uses this locution to indicate how language exceeds its limitations.

²² As Voltaire's Pangloss repeats in *Candide*, mocking Leibniz's originally serious use of the term “the best of all possible worlds.”

acknowledge deeply, without the internal resistance of denial, rejection, or aversion, that this is how things actually are in this moment.

This, I believe, is the meaning of the blessing we say when we learn that someone has died: “Blessed is the true Judge.” We hear the news and then, instead of denying it, ignoring it, drowning it out, or using one of our many strategies for running away from discomfort, we stop and say, “I acknowledge this, I bless this truth, I accept that which is true, I bless the true Judge.” This is how it is. It is not justification, but a rather a profound seeing of the nature of things, the nature of life and death. This also is how we can understand God’s response to Job’s queries. God responds from the tempest, “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Speak, if you have understanding!” (Job 38:4)—and then goes on to list, in an almost overwhelming manner, for four chapters, a series of questions and challenges that ask Job how he can presume to seek justification in the midst of the massiveness and majesty of this universe and God’s power. God’s response seems to be simply saying: This is bigger than you. It isn’t right or wrong, it’s *just* bigger than you. Can you recognize the hugeness?

And in this bigness, in this hugeness, there is a certain all-right-ness. In naming the truth and holding it in something larger, we are okay. Like the ocean is okay despite the storms, and the sky is alright despite the lightning. No matter how terrible the tempest, the ocean itself is fine. And when we are big enough, we are all right: we can recognize and accept things, even tragedy, just the way they are. This is the truth, the true Judge. It isn’t a justification of the judgment, for there can be no justification of tragedy. It is just saying, with great clarity and presence, this is what life is like. It is opening to the enormity of what is actually there without hiding.

At my mother's funeral, her rabbi, Rabbi Rachel Shere, said that she loved how honest my mother was. And she was. She didn't care that much about what was socially acceptable. She had her own ideas about what was right and she followed them. As her child, that wasn't always so comfortable. But, of course, the truth isn't. So when we say "this world which He created according to His will" and when we say "blessed is the true Judge," we are saying: "This is how it is." This is the truth, and I will bless it rather than run away from it. As our prayer tradition teaches us, "The Eternal, your God, is truth."²³ Or, as Rabbi Ḥanina taught: "Truth is the seal of the Holy One."²⁴ And, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "The Eternal is truth" (10:10).²⁵ If we want to be with God, we can't run away from the truth.

The Kaddish demands that we be with that truth. Expanding is not a means of running away; it is a means of being with. One of my teachers, Sylvia Boorstein, summarized mindfulness practice as: "Pay attention. Tell the truth. Don't duck."²⁵ If we want to wake up and be present, if we want to hold everything that arises, we have to acknowledge it and we can't duck. We have to meet it face-on and hold it in something larger. We have to meet it with a commitment to truth and clarity, and the strength to see that commitment through. The Kaddish, in this sense, is quite demanding. It makes us pull away all of the veils, all of the places we are hiding—or, at least, it has the potential to do so.

Yet the expansion, which precedes the "world according to His will," is also what makes the truth-telling possible. Only when we are wide enough is the painful truth not so overwhelming that we cannot tell it, cannot bear to be with it. For telling the truth is actually

²³ The tradition is that the prayer leader combines the closing words of the last paragraph of the Shema with the opening words of the blessing following the Shema to render the sentence "The Eternal, your God, is truth" (*Adonai eloheikhem emet*).

²⁴ Rabbi Ḥanina was a first-century tannaitic sage; this teaching is found at B. Shabbat 55a.

²⁵ As cited in Jonathan Slater's *Mindful Jewish Living: Compassionate Practice* (New York: Aviv Press, 2007), p. 140.

much harder than we realize. The hasidic master Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz taught: “I have found nothing more difficult to overcome than lying. It took me fourteen years....I served twenty-one years. Seven years to find out what truth is, seven years to drive out falsehood, and seven to absorb truth.”²⁶ How often do we prevaricate, lie, or mislead, in small or large ways? How easy is it for us to not tell the truth because it will be smoother, easier, less ruffling in some way? How does this turn into an inability to face the genuine pain, loss, difficulty, and confusion we have inside? Watch yourself. See if you can go one day without shading anything at all—a day of total honesty.

It isn't easy. But it helps if we recognize the pain of deception, the ways in which we hurt ourselves and others by not telling truth and not being willing to see the truth. Each time it happens, each time we hide something from ourselves or others, there is a small loss, a small pain, a small contraction, a small death. Kaddish demands from us that we face the truth. It reminds the mourner again and again: you are still mourning. It reminds the community again and again: your friend is still mourning, still in pain, still in loss. This is how we become wise. Indeed, these are two of the seven character traits of a sage: “Regarding something not previously heart, [a true sage] will [always] say ‘I have not heard [anything in that regard],’ and such [a scholar will always] acknowledge the truth” (Pirkei Avot 5:9).

The Truth of God

This truth of divine will, this commitment to seeing the truth, takes on an extra level in the thought of the hasidic masters. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, tells a parable of a king who built a castle of many walls, partitions, and gates. At each gate, the king commanded

²⁶ As told in Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (1947; rpt. New York: Schocken, 1991), pp. 131–132.

money and treasures to be distributed, increasing in amount as the gates became more inward and closer to the king. Many who came to see the king took the money given to them at one of the gates and went on their way. A few, however, burning with desire to see the king, ignored the proffered treasure and, after many travails, came to the king himself. Upon reaching the king, each one realized that in fact the walls and partitions had presented only an illusion of separation, for the walls themselves were the very substance and essence of the king, like a snail whose garment is part of its very self.²⁷

For the Baal Shem Tov, the fundamental insight we strive to achieve and integrate is the divinity of all we encounter, the reality that there is ultimately nothing but God. Every day in the Aleinu prayer, we recite the verse from Deuteronomy (4:39): “The Eternal is God in the heavens above and on the earth below; there is no other.” “There is no other” does not simply imply that there is no other *god*, but that there is no *other of any sort*.²⁸ We discover that everything we experience, everything we are, every being we encounter, every speck of sand, is in fact the Divine that is before us. This is what it means to see the truth. This is what it means for the world to be according to the divine will. It simply is divine will, for it is divinity.

Yet at the same time, this affirmation of presence, in its very nature as an affirmation and definition, limits the unlimited and bounds the boundless. Ultimately, therefore, this claim that there is no other is the claim of non-duality. In a combination of Maimonidean negative theology and hasidic panentheism, we realize that the fundamental insight is not the positive assertion of unity, which itself can be a kind of grasping, but rather the negative release of all concepts in

²⁷ Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonne, *Sefer Ben Porat Yoseif* (ed. Lemberg, n. d.), p. 94a.

²⁸ See Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Sefer Ha-tanya* (ed. Brooklyn, 5716 [1955/1956]), *Sha-ar Ha-yihud V'ha-emunah*, chap. 1, pp. 152–153.

non-duality.²⁹ This is Kaddish’s claim that the divinity we recognize—the divine will we see in the world—is yet beyond all language and comprehension. The ultimate theological insight is to see the illusory nature of the walls we imagine separate ourselves from God, the world, and other people, to see the emptiness (*ayin*) of our sense of a separate self.³⁰

This is the culmination of the expansiveness of Kaddish. This is where expansiveness leads us: to see that as we grow wider we see that in that infinite expansiveness, all is contained. That that expansiveness, the name of God, is the divinity that holds, within it and as part of it, the whole world. We feel there is something greater, something holding all this disparity together, the coincidence of opposites which is the Divine.³¹ As we get wider and hold this moment in more and more spaciousness, we feel the divine nature of everything we encounter—that nothing is excluded from the divine presence. We see the truth of things, just as they are, and that part of that truth is their divine nature.

Minyan: Opening with Others



Yet, as we not yet noted, Kaddish is only said in a *minyan*, in a prayer quorum of ten. We only say these words and expand in this way in the presence of others. For if we do not acknowledge the truth and expand around it before others, if we do not expose to others our mind and heart, then in some way we remain hidden and closed. The solitary work is crucial, but opening before others is the next level of the challenge, the challenge embodied in Kaddish. It is allowing ourselves to be seen in our pain, confusion, and loss—a being seen that is profoundly healing.

²⁹ Panentheism is the claim that, like pantheism, the world is God, but that, unlike pantheism, there is also a God beyond the world.

³⁰ For a fuller discussion of this claim, from which these paragraphs are excerpted, see my article, “Non-Dual Judaism,” in *Jewish Theology in Our Time: A New Generation Explores the Foundations and Future of Jewish Belief*, ed. Elliot J. Cosgrove (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), pp. 31–40.

³¹ *Maggid D’varav L’Yaakov*, §60, p. 91.

Rabbi Abraham Kalisker (1741–1810), a third-generation hasidic master, saw this clearly in his teachings concerning *dibbuk haveirim*, the attachment of spiritual fellowship. In his instructions to his followers for a co-counseling practice in which people discuss their personal failings with a like-minded friend, he explains that, “when one has accustomed oneself to doing this, it will be found that when a person sees something wrong or objectionable in a friend and offers words of reproof, the latter will not feel ashamed before the former and will confess to the truth. Thus falsehood will fall and truth will begin to shine.”³² That is: part of what is crucial about this practice of sharing and reproof is that through the sharing and mutual acceptance, one can share one’s failing precisely without feeling ashamed; and, moreover, it is the not feeling ashamed that allows the genuine confession of the truth. The healing, transformation, genuine self-critique, truth-telling, and genuine self-acceptance are made possible and powerful by the loving gaze of another who accepts you without condoning all of your actions. It is being held in the gaze of another and speaking the truth to them that creates the healing power of this practice.

Here we return to the deep importance of truth, but what is added is the power of telling that truth, of revealing, and embodying that truth, before others. Only when we are willing to name our truths, of every sort, before others can we be said to have fully embraced them. Only then “will falsehood fall and truth will begin to shine.” It can be a powerful practice to name things as they are in the presence of a loving community, expanding enough around the shame and embarrassment to admit to the fullness of one’s feeling, struggles, and failures in the presence of others. Such a practice points to that truth not only in the expansiveness of the

³² Rabbi Abraham Kalisker, *P’ri Ha-aretz*, Letters, Letter 6, as translated in Joseph Weiss, “R. Abraham Kalisker’s Concept of Communion with God and Men,” in *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, ed. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press [The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization], 1985), p. 165. I have made minor adaptations in the translation in order to conform to the style of this volume.

practitioner, and in that person’s ability to touch the divine presence, but in the expansiveness of the community and the particularity of the loving faces all around.

Of course, to do this requires a certain kind of practice of the *minyan*. It requires spiritual fellows who are willing to hold that which each person expresses. It requires a community that is willing to be what the Torah (at Genesis 2:18) calls an *eizer k’negdo*, a helper-opposer—that is: a witness, challenger, and loving opponent who helps each person hold up a mirror to themselves in love. It requires people who will not run from displays of emotion, confusion, failure, and loss and who will not use shame or embarrassment to tamp down “unseemly” emotional outbursts, but who will rather see their task as allowing each individual fully to hold, express, and expand around their suffering and confusion. In this way, the love of the *minyan*, the love of spiritual companions, becomes the *mikveh* of expansiveness, the next layer of expansion and honesty that Kaddish leads us into.

Peace

Every form of the Kaddish other than the Half Kaddish (which is always followed, later in the service, by another Kaddish³³) concludes, in Aramaic and Hebrew, with a prayer for peace. This, it seems to me, both a hope, an affirmation, and a consequence of what has gone before. That is: when we are truly open, when we are expansive, when we are willing to see things as they are, when we feel held and seen in community—then we find peace and equanimity, a fundamental all-right-ness in the world. The concluding benediction of peace is the capstone, in a way, of the expansiveness and acceptance of Kaddish. If we can expand around the loss and hold it in love, if we can have the courage and breadth to see things as they truly are, if we can be held in the love and acceptance of our fellows, then we can heal and move through the pain of loss. If

³³ In other words: the Half Kaddish never itself functions as a conclusion.

we can expand around the chaotic diversity of the prayer service, the many places in us that have been touched and exposed (if we engage with our prayer practice seriously), then we can conclude with a sense of wholeness and completion, a bringing together that is not an erasure of difference but rather a holding of all this diversity in something wider.

Conclusion

Kaddish, as a practice, is the continuous expanding of our boundaries, the becoming wider around our places of tension, loss, confusion, despair, and pain, and our holding all that arises in the infinite expansiveness, beyond the ability of mind or language to grasp, that is divinity. It is the continual acknowledging of the truth of this moment, this loss, this uncertainty, and this pain. It is the being held in container of loving community and the peace that comes as a result of this practice. Each time we say the words, if we choose to practice in this way, we open a little bit more so that more can be held in the divine vastness. Whatever arises, whatever pain or fear, wherever we find ourselves hiding or running away, Kaddish asks us to turn toward the suffering and to hold it in something greater. It asks us to do so again and again until we become as wide as the universe, holding everything in divine love and discovering the peace, openness, and liberation that is the gift of such expansiveness.