

*Words of Praise - Yom Kippur Yizkor
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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יִתְגַּדֵּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא.

The opening of the mourner's kaddish. Words that haunt us. Words that comfort us. Words that connect us to the living memories of those who have died.

בְּעֵלְמָא דִּי בְּרָא כְרַעוּתֵיהּ, וַיִּמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתֵיהּ

We find the inherent meaning of these words burned into our soul. They speak of those we've lost. Each phrase brings to our mind a face, a touch, a scent, a voice. The sense of the prayer in its unmistakable rhythm.

בְּחַיֵּיכוֹן וּבְיוֹמֵיכוֹן וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל,

The feeling we know. But the words themselves, what do they mean? What do we find if we translate this ancient statement? The rabbis of old wrote the Kaddish not in Hebrew but in their lingua franca Aramaic. What did these sages say?

בְּעֵגְלָא וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב, וְאַמְרוּ אַמֵּן.

Almost unbelievably, Kaddish is a prayer of praise. It does not mention the dead. It does not speak of the mourner. The prayer extolls God.

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעֵלְמָא וּלְעֵלְמֵי עָלְמֵיָא.

MAY HIS GREAT NAME BE BLESSED FOREVER AND EVER
AND EVER.

וְיִתְבַּרֵּךְ

But that's not how we feel when we say the Kaddish. We do not feel exuberant. We do not feel full of praise for the Holy One Blessed Be He. We feel sad.

וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח וְיִתְפָּאֵר וְיִתְרוֹמַם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא

In the book of Proverbs we read "... a sad heart makes a despondent mood."¹ Our sadness transforms the words of Kaddish. Praise becomes pity, smiles become sadness. With these words we know so well, our melancholy reinforces itself, allowing us to experience the very real grief that comes with death.

וְיִתְהַדָּר וְיִתְעַלֶּה וְיִתְהַלָּל שְׁמֵהּ דְּקֻדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא,

Once the passage of time has dulled our grief, the Kaddish brings the longing of memory. With words of praise for God we remember their hands. We remember the sounds of their voices. We long for their touch. The good times, the bad times, all the memories we hold in our hearts. The Kaddish frees them all to dance once more about our minds bringing us close to the ones we loved.

לְעֵלְא מִן כָּל בְּרַכְתָּא וְשִׁירְתָּא וְנִשְׁבַּחְתָּא וְנִחַמְתָּא,

And regret. Our tradition overflows with regret. Even God regretted creating people because of their evil so God flood the world saving only Noah. And us, what do we regret? What word was left unsaid? What gesture did we fail to make? Was there something more we could have done? Should we have been kinder? Did we speak often enough? Did we share how we really felt? Did we say "I love you"?

דְּאִמְרוּן בְּעֵלְמָא, וְאִמְרוּ אָמֵן.

1. Proverbs 15:13

Sadness, grief, longing, memory, regret... these could crush a person. These could destroy ones soul. But they don't. We wake up each morning though our loved ones live no more. We continue to walk the path of life. Over time we learn to smile again, we learn to laugh. We learn to hope.

יְהִי שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמַיָּא וְחַיִּים

The Psalmist explains how we keep living. “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me.”² Even at our darkest times, especially at our darkest times, God walks with us. As we grieve, the love of family, the support of friends, brings close the Divine spirit which flows through all corners of the universe.

עֲלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

We do not need the *words* of our mourners' prayer to lament our dead. We do not need those words to echo our feelings nor describe our pain. Instead, the words of praise serve as containers. The memory of our loved one brings the feelings and fills the prayer with lamentation that no words ever could.

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם

Our words praise God because the lamentation fades. Through praise we affirm all the good in the world, all those people for whom we live, all those hopes we seek to fulfill, all those opportunities not yet discovered. In our Mourners' Prayer we must praise God for when all else seems lost the praise of God reminds us of the world in which we live. The praise of God stops the sadness, grief, longing, memory and regret from destroying our soul.

2. Psalm 23

עֲלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

Amen.

As we remember through our words of praise, may we each be inspired to say “Amen”. Yes, “Amen” for the words of the prayer, those words of praise. But even more, “Amen” for the lives of those we remember; for their values, their contributions to our world, their love. “Amen” to honor their memories.