

sion for the blessing I think to myself: This is exactly the predicament of the mourner. He must bless what is wonderful even though he cannot see it.

The knowledge of a thing is more decisive than the sight of it.

A friend points me toward the modern career of the mourner's kaddish. In 1947, S. Y. Agnon composed a prayer to be said at military funerals, "as one follows the coffins of the fallen of the land of Israel." It is a preface to the mourner's kaddish. "When a king of flesh and blood goes to war against his enemies, he sends his soldiers to kill and to be killed. He may love his soldiers or he may not love them. He may have regard for them or he may not have regard for them. Even if he has regard for them, however, he regards them as dead, for the angel of death is close upon the heels of a man who goes to war, and accompanies him to kill him. When he is cut down and slain by an arrow or a sword or any of the other instruments of destruction, another man is put in his place. The king does not feel that someone is missing. After all, the nations are many and their troops are many. If one of them is killed, the king has many replacements. But our King, the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, wants life and loves peace and pursues peace and loves His people Israel. He chose us, and not because we are a large nation, for we are one of the smallest of nations. We are few, and owing to the love with which He loves us, each one of us is, for Him, an entire legion. He does not have many replacements for us. If one of us is missing, heaven forbid, then the king's forces are diminished, with the consequence that His kingdom is weakened, as it were. One of His legions is gone and His greatness is lessened. For this reason, it is our custom to recite the kaddish when a Jew dies." Agnon then proceeds to give a short commentary on the text of the

mourner's kaddish, according to which God's Name will be "magnified in its power, so that there will be no loss of strength before Him . . . and sanctified so that we need not fear for ourselves, but only for the splendor and the pride of His holiness." But Agnon was not composing a general meditation on the mourner's kaddish. He was writing in Jerusalem when the city was under fire, and so he turns to address the harsh historical circumstances. "If this is what we pray and what we say for every individual who dies, how much more shall we pray it and say it for our brothers and our sisters, the lovely and pleasant and dear children of Zion who were slain for the land of Israel, whose blood was spilled for the honor of His blessed Name, for His people and His land and His heritage! Indeed, everyone who dwells in the land of Israel is one of the legions of the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, whom the King has appointed a watchman over His palace. When one of them is killed, He is bereft of others to put in his place. And so my brothers in the house of Israel, all of you who mourn in this mourning, let us direct our hearts to our Father in Heaven, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, and pray for ourselves and for Him, as it were: 'Magnified and sanctified may His great Name be . . .'"

It is a beautiful composition. It is also a little repugnant. The army of God: the metaphor has brought so much misery to the world! Surely military life is the antithesis of spiritual life. Surely the service of the Lord is not a war. As for the survival of the Jews in the land of Israel, I am inclined to extol the Jews in the land of Israel for it; to admire the legions, not the king.

In Brooklyn. A night with no sleep. I take a volume off the shelf in my old room and stumble upon the source of Agnon's interpretation of the mourner's kaddish. It is

dying. The man at the pulpit made a little joke to restore order, and to blunt the imputation of significance to the fatal flight of the starling, but he defeated himself when he completed Rabbi Tarphon's pronouncement—"and the boss is pressing."

Driving to shul this evening, I was complaining in my mind. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth: sometimes I feel not like the tradition's heir but like the tradition's puppet. By the time the prayers started, I was in no state for praying. But my consternation dissolved at the sight of a little boy in the corner of the room, with earlocks and fringes and thick glasses, and his twin brother right next to him. Their bearded and caftaned father had sat them down before a kabbalistic edition of the prayerbook and opened it to one of its typographically preposterous pages, in which the ordinary meaning of words is sacrificed to a mysterious arrangement of the letters. The little boys puzzled over all the loose letters, large and small. The one began to yawn, the other began to giggle. Early signs of critical intelligence.

I walked from shul to Dumbarton Oaks, to the old stone bench near the bottom of the hill at the far edge of the gardens. For years I have been coming to this bench for a little loneliness. The forsythia were blazing, as they blaze at this time every year. This year I beheld the slope of yellow fire and thought: a hill in hell.

Flames in bloom.



What next, in my search for the mourner's kaddish? Three or four hundred years after *The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiva* attached the rabbis' kaddish to the redemption of the dead, a story about Rabbi Akiva introduces the mourner's kaddish

and announces that its function is the redemption of the dead. The story is robustly told in *Maḥzor Vitry*, a liturgical, legal, and exegetical compendium whose primary author was Simhah ben Samuel of Vitry, or Vitry-le-Brûle, a small town in Champagne, in northeastern France. It records the practices and the opinions of the Jewish community in the age of Rashi, in the eleventh century; and it was considerably enlarged by material from subsequent centuries. In this rich book, I read: "A tale of Rabbi Akiva. He was walking in a cemetery by the side of the road and encountered there a naked man, black as coal, carrying a large burden of wood on his head. He seemed to be alive and was running under the load like a horse. Rabbi Akiva ordered him to stop. 'How comes it that a man does such hard work?' he asked. 'If you are a servant and your master is doing this to you, then I will redeem you from him. If you are poor and people are avoiding you, then I will give you money.' 'Please, sir,' the man replied. 'Do not detain me, because my superiors will be angry.' 'Who are you,' Rabbi Akiva asked, 'and what have you done?' The man said, 'The man whom you are addressing is a dead man. Every day they send me out to chop wood.' 'My son, what was your work in the world from which you came?' 'I was a tax collector, and I would favor the rich and kill the poor.' 'Have your superiors told you nothing about how you might relieve your condition?' 'Please, sir, do not detain me, for you will irritate my tormentors. For such a man [as I], there can be no relief. Though I did hear them say something—but no, it is impossible. They said that if this poor man had a son, and his son were to stand before the congregation and recite [the prayer] 'Bless the Lord who is blessed!' and the congregation were to answer amen, and the son were also to say 'May the Great Name be blessed!' [a sentence from the kaddish], they would release him from his punishment. But this man never had a son. He left his wife pregnant and he did not know whether the child was a boy,

And if she gave birth to a boy, who would teach the boy Torah? For this man does not have a friend in the world.' Immediately Rabbi Akiva took upon himself the task of discovering whether this man had fathered a son, so that he might teach the son Torah and install him at the head of the congregation to lead the prayers. 'What is your name?' he asked. 'Akiva,' the man answered. 'And the name of your wife?' 'Shoshnia.' 'And the name of your town?' 'Lodkiya.' Rabbi Akiva was deeply troubled by all this and went to make his inquiries. When he came to that town, he asked about the man he had met, and the townspeople replied: 'May his bones be ground to dust!' He asked about the man's wife, and he was told: 'May her memory be erased from the world!' He asked about the man's son, and he was told: 'He is a heathen—we did not even bother to circumcise him!' Rabbi Akiva promptly circumcised him and sat him down before a book. But the boy refused to receive Torah. Rabbi Akiva fasted for forty days. A heavenly voice was heard to say: 'For this you mortify yourself?' 'But Lord of the Universe,' Rabbi Akiva replied, 'it is for You that I am preparing him.' Suddenly the Holy One, Blessed Be He, opened the boy's heart. Rabbi Akiva taught him Torah and 'Hear, O Israel' and the benediction after meals. He presented the boy to the congregation and the boy recited [the prayer] 'Bless the Lord who is blessed!' and they answered, 'May the Great Name be blessed!' At that very moment the man was released from his punishment. The man immediately came to Rabbi Akiva in a dream, and said: 'May it be the will of the Lord that your soul find delight in the Garden of Eden, for you have saved me from the sentence of Gehenna.' Rabbi Akiva declared: 'Your Name, O Lord, endures forever, and the memory of You through all the generations!' For this reason, it became customary that the evening prayers on the night after the Sabbath are led by a man who does not have a

father or a mother, so that he can say kaddish and 'Bless the Lord who is blessed!'"

Here is a very early record of the mourner's kaddish. I note that this kaddish is established only for Saturday nights. The text explains why. "On the Sabbath the sinners of Israel are released from Gehenna, and they find rest on the Sabbath until the Jews conclude their evening prayers [on Saturday night]. That is why the prayers are prolonged, so that those souls will not hurry back to hell."

"'What is your name?' he asked. 'Akiva,' the man answered." This is striking. The savior finds his namesake in the saved: a tale of two Akivas. What do the two Akivas have in common? Well, it was said of Rabbi Akiva that "every day he would carry a bundle of wood—half of it he would sell for his living, the other half he would use for his own purposes. His neighbors protested, saying, 'Akiva, we are choking from the smoke [of your burning wood]! Sell us the wood, and buy some oil, and study by the light of a lamp.' He replied: 'The wood fills many of my needs. I study by its light, I warm myself by its heat, and I sleep on it.'" But there is a deeper affinity between the two Akivas. Before he became one of the masters of his age, our hero was a humble shepherd and completely unlettered. He began his education at the age of forty, and he once confessed that in the years when he was "an ignorant boor" he had wanted to "break the bones" of scholars. And here he is, remedying the ignorance of the son of this other Akiva, saving this other Akiva from the consequences of having raised a child who is not competent in his tradition.

Lodkiya: this must be Laodicea, the port city on the coast of northern Syria. Akiva was known for his travels. He made quite a trek to establish the kaddish.

והשיב לו מהרר"ל שם: וכן שמעתי מרבתי דהכי נפסק עובדא בגזירה
בפראג שיש רצון לומר שלא להתאבל על קדושים ובסוף הסכימו להתאבל.
הוא גופא נראה לו שאף על גב שהם קדושי עליון במדרגה עליונה שאין
בריה יכולה לעמוד במחיצתם מכל מקום יש להתאבל עליהם עיי"ש.

ויעי' בלקס יושר ח"א דף 115 מש"כ בשם הגאון תרומת הדשן שהיה מתענה
ביום ט' בניסן על אמו שנתרגה בגזירת אוסטרייך בווינא באותו יום.
וכל הגדולים של הימים ההם הסכימו שיש להתאבל על הקדושים ולומר קדיש.

מכר זאת הדיתי לשואל שיש להתאבל על קדושי המבצר התשיעי ולומר
אחריהם קדיש. האכן נורא ואיום היה המראה שעה שכל הצבור
הנשאר בחיים בגיטו אמר כולו בקול אחד קדיש על יקירי לבו מחמלי נפשו.
ויהי רצון שהרופא לשבורי לב יחבש את עצבותינו יחיש פדות לעמו וישלח
לו ישע ותשועת עולמים.

סימן ו'

אם קרובי הקדושים חייבים להתאבל עליהם ולומר קדיש.

שאלה: ביום י"א טרחשון, היום השלישי לאחר שרכי המבחים
הנאצים ימ"ש הוציאו מגיטו קובנו למעלה מעשרת אלפים
איש, אנשים נשים וטף והובילום להכריעם לסבב במבצר התשיעי
במקום שהומתו מתוך ענויים קשים ומרים בכל מיני מיתות משונות,
באכזריות איומה שקשה לתארה, בא הפליט מגיא התרינה והטבח,
בהור אחד שחצליח להמלט וסיפר את כל פרטי הסאורע המחריד
איך שהנרמנים הארורים ציוו את האומללים הללו לחפשים מעליהם
את כל בנדיהם ולקפוץ לתוך הכורות שהוכנו מקודם לכך ואחר כך ירו
בהם במכונות יריה, וכשכילו לעשות את מעשה הרצח הזה כיסו
את הכורות בעפר וקברו את כולם החיים והמתים גם יחד, כי
הרבה מהקדושים הללו היה עוד בהם רוח חיים בהיות שרק נפצעו
מכדורי הרשעים.

לא היה בית בתוך הגיטו שלא היה בו סת, וה בכח מרח על אחיו
ווח קונן על אשתו, זה זעק על יוצאי יריבו וזו יללה על בעל
נעוריה, זה צעק הוי אבי וזו שפכה תמרוריה בנהי איכה בני, כלואי
הגיטו שנשארו בחיים עטפו אבל ויגון וירב בהם תאניה ואניה.

והנה בא אלי „בערצייק דער גלעזער" גבאי חברת עין יעקב חלוית
המת קלויז, ושאל אותי אם צריכין להתאבל על הקדושים
ולומר אחריהם קדיש.

תשובה: בשו"ת מהרר"ל סימן צ"ט נשאל אם יש לומר קדיש אחרי הנרמנים
על קידוש השם, והשואל רצת לחדש שאין להתאבל אחרי הקדושים.