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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Beha'alotekha: As Long as the Candle is Burning

In his book on the Musar (morality) movement, Rabbi Dov Katz relates the following story:

Late one night, Rabbi Israel Salanter walked past the home of an old shoemaker. The rabbi noticed that, despite the late hour, the man was still working by the light of a dying candle.

“Why are you still working?” asked the rabbi. “It is very late and soon that candle will go out.”

The shoemaker replied: “As long as the candle is still burning, it is still possible to work and to make repairs.”

Rabbi Salanter spent that entire night excitedly pacing his room and repeating to himself: “As long as the candle is still burning, it is still possible to work and to make repairs.”

The human soul is compared to a candle (see Proverbs 20:27 and compare Proverbs 6:23). Rabbi Salanter, it seems, discerned a profound message in the shoemaker’s reply: as long as there is life, there is still time to make repairs – physical and spiritual.

This week’s Torah portion of *Beha'alotekha* begins with a passage (Numbers 8:1-4) describing the lighting of the menorah (candelabrum) in the Tabernacle.

Lighting candles is on my mind. This past Shabbat (Sivan 14), I lit a memorial candle at home in commemoration of my mother’s first *yahrzeit*. In keeping with conventional Jewish practice, I had recited *kaddish* at each of the three daily services throughout the year of mourning.

In deference to Genesis 41:9, I must confess my deviation from conventional practice in at least one respect. I recited the *kaddish* for a full twelve months without interruption. The popular custom is to recite the *kaddish* for a parent for less than twelve months. Why is that?

In “A Note on the Mourner’s *Kaddish*,” our teacher Rabbi David Novak cites a Talmudic passage (*Kiddushin* 31b) that “the commandment to honor one’s parents applies even after death...one should refer to his father (or mother) as “my father (mother) my teacher: I am the atonement for his (her) repose.” This is the law for the first twelve months after death, but afterwards he should say: “May their memory be blessed for the world-to-come.”

Rabbi Novak also quotes the Talmudic view (*Sanhedrin* 104a) that “the child’s behavior during this year affects the otherworldly status of the parent.” It is appropriate, therefore, for the surviving children to perform special *mitzvot* during the year of mourning.

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The significance of reciting the Kaddish evolved to meet this need. Originally said after public study of Torah (in praise of the Giver of the Torah), those who are mourning parents may have engaged in public study and teaching of the Torah in honor of their departed mothers and fathers.

Not everyone is a scholar, however. Thus, the custom evolved that the mourners themselves said Kaddish and nothing more.

Medieval commentators stressed that Kaddish is a “means to an end” of honoring parents and not an end in and of itself.

According to strict logic, it would seem that Kaddish – as with all other mourning practices for a parent – should be recited for the full twelve months of mourning. However, Rabbi Moses Isserles (note to Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 376 at end) mentions the custom to say Kaddish for only eleven months. He apparently bases himself on Rashi’s comment (*Kiddushin* 31b, s.v. “*mikan*”), which implies that a full twelve-month recitation of Kaddish might be misconstrued by others to imply that the deceased lacked the spiritual merit to escape the judgment of hell, which supposedly lasts for twelve months.

The Zohar, a famous mystical text, notes a view that twelve months are needed for a righteous individual to ascend the highest levels of heaven. Seen in this light, twelve months of saying Kaddish reflect the **virtue** of the departed. This later opinion may have influenced Rabbi Isaac Luria (16th century) to advocate saying Kaddish for a full twelve months – minus one week in deference to the popular custom. Later authorities follow his lead.

In concluding his brief survey, Rabbi Novak states the following: “the only basis for restricting the recitation of Kaddish is a popular custom loosely based on one interpretation of an aggadic statement in the Talmud. Although popular custom is important and one ought not offend popular beliefs, it is clear that the mitzvah of saying Kaddish for twelve months, especially where it will aid a minyan, takes precedence.”

I agree with Rabbi Novak. Reciting Kaddish during the year of mourning is technically *minhag* – a custom. Insofar as it is seen as an obligation, it should be treated consistently with other mandatory mourning rites and be continued for a full twelve months.

In his comments to the opening verses of our Torah reading, Rashi notes that the Torah does not use the conventional term for lighting the menorah (*le-hadlik*) but the less common term *le-ha'alot* (to cause to rise). This is understood to mean that the light must be kindled in such a way that the flame burns independently, rising of its own accord without additional intervention. Alternatively, says Rashi, the reference is to a step (*ma'alah*) in front of the Menorah upon which the priest stood while putting the lights in order.

In that light – no pun intended – I can only hope that my decision to recite the Kaddish for a full twelve months will be perceived as only a tribute to the many virtues of my mother, Nechama Devora bat Moshe Leib. May her memory be blessed for the world-to-come.

Shabbat Shalom!

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