

The divine embrace — fusing word and movement in Kaddish

Jesse Hefter - January 24, 2021

When each one of us is a newborn, our parents often hold us up to them by cupping their palm in one hand under our heads and wrapping their other hand and arm around our little body. They support our head and our heart. They provide us with safety and security; they surround us with their love.

Perhaps Solomon intimates about these feelings in the verse: “His left hand is under my head, His right embraces me” (Shir HaShirim, 2:6). The people of Israel are lovesick for God and are desperate for a Hug.

During the year of Kaddish for a loved one, we continually merge thoughts of distance and nearness. What is Kaddish if not its theme statement: “May the great Name (of God) be forever blessed!” or perhaps “May it be that the great God continues to always bless us!”. The first reading speaks to God as the true Judge as we mourn our loss; the second reading emphasizes our recognition of God’s closeness.

There exists an interested minhag/custom associated with the recitation of Kaddish. Based on practices recorded by Rav Amram Gaon, the 9th century codifier of our early liturgy and head of the Sura Yeshiva in Iraq, one would bow slightly at certain key passages of the Kaddish prayer. Four bowings were considered required while a fifth was optional.

While the specific locations within the Kaddish prayer for these physical movements are the subject of Rabbinic discussion over the ensuing centuries, the four movements find their foundation in a biblical text containing four instances of God’s name. The prophet Malachi (1,11) describes God’s reach on Earth: “For from the sun in the east to its setting place, my Name is great among the nations and in every place incense and pure offerings are given in my Name, for my Name is great amongst the nations, says God of Hosts.”

The Midrash offers a fascinating deep dive into the power of the bow. “Rabbi Yitzchak taught: all is due to the merit of bowing.” (Bereishit Rabba: 56). The following examples are offered to prove his point:

- 1) Avraham returns in peace from Mount Moriah – the verse states “and we will bow and return” (Genesis 22:5)
- 2) Israel is redeemed from Egypt – the verse states “and the people had faith and bowed” (Exodus 4:31)
- 3) The Torah was given to the Jewish people – the verse states “and you will bow from afar” (Exodus 24:1)
- 4) Chana was remembered – the verse states “and they bowed there to God” (1 Samuel 1:28)
- 5) We, as exiles from the Land of Israel, will be ingathered – the verse states “and on that day there will be a great shofar blast...and they will bow to God on the holy mountain” (Isaiah 27:13)
- 6) The Beit HaMikdash will be rebuilt – the verse states “Exalt God our Lord and bow to his Holy Mountain” (Psalms 99:9)
- 7) The dead will return to life – the verse states “Come, we will bow down and kneel before God, our maker” (Psalms 95:6)

Suddenly now, the power of the words and the movement when reciting key words in Kaddish is unleashed. In a methodical yet mesmerizing, perhaps mystical, cadence, the reciter of the Kaddish is seeing two simultaneous images before him/her during this prayer. At one moment, the image of their loved one, the loss of whom sears the soul and the next moment, the image of God, the closeness of whom provides comfort and blessing.

We are familiar with the bowings integrated within the recitation of the Amidah that we play three times daily. These bowing are performed “straight” ahead – meaning we bend our knees and pivot our bodies forward (much as a subject might before a human king or queen).

However, the bowings during the recital of Kaddish are often performed with an additional layer of symbolism. One bows slightly to the left and then to the right at the outset of Kaddish, corresponding with the first two words “*Yitgadal*” and “*Yitkadash*”. This leads directly to the first instance of God’s name – “*Shmay*” (his Name). Three more times we follow the same process, of foreshadowing our mentioning of God’s name with a left-right bow movement.

The word we often use for the Name of God is composed of just four letters – Yud – Heh – Vav – Heh. It is likely that the four bowings we perform parallel each of the four letters so, in addition to our making a movement to signify our respect for the divine, we slowly build a unique name of God letter-by-letter as we pronounce and proceed through the words of Kaddish.

As the Kaddish reaches its crescendo, we conclude with the prayer that “the One-who-maintains-peace (another name for God) in his realm will bring peace to us...” we have now fully realized God’s name.

Meanwhile, the left and right bowings at the four junctures in Kaddish where God’s name is mentioned echo Solomon’s yearning. “His left hand is under my head; His right embraces me.” We simultaneously remember our loved one who, from our earliest moments of life cradled and embraced us and God who we know continues to cradle and embrace us.

Interestingly, many pray-ers, when reaching the end of all Amidah recitations, take three steps backward, bow gently to the left and right, and then return three steps to where they started. These small movements to the left and right afford every one of us, not only mourners, the opportunity to gently express our yearnings for sanctity, safety, and security, i.e., the embrace of the Divine.

May my father, hk”m, continue to influence me through his lessons, luminosity, and love.