

Yizkor Pesach 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Kupnick (April 11, 2015)

Chag Samayach! I hope you are enjoying these final days of Passover... Jewish tradition teaches us that there are two different categories of Pesach that help us to understand the true meaning of the festival. The first is Pesach L'She'Avar, the Passover of the Past. We remember what our ancestors went through to get us the freedom we enjoy today. Had it not been for their courage we would not be able to sit back and tell our history proudly around our seder tables. But there is also Pesach L'Atid, the Passover of the Future. This is a time when all people, Jew and Gentile, will be free. It's the reason we fill that Fifth Cup at the seder, not for Moses, but for Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. We pray for a better time when Passover, and its message of freedom, will be embraced by all.

This concept of Pesach L'Atid, the future, almost messianic concept of Passover, pervades much of Jewish thought, and it was what motivated the Rabbis of old to choose this morning's haftarah. It's a vision of Passover in the future where the Jewish People, and the freedom we represent, will be a source of inspiration to the world around us, Jew and non-Jew alike. In verse 10 of the 11th chapter of Isaiah (which we read just a short while ago) we read of the Pesach L'Atid:

"At that time there will be someone special from Jesse's family. He will be like a flag that all the nations gather around. The nations will come to him and ask him what they should do. And the place where he is will be filled with glory." In other words, people will look at the Jewish People and want to do what we do; to feel what we feel, to follow our lead.

And I thought about this passage, this concept of non-Jews not only seeking the counsel of Jews, but doing what we actually do, very recently. And the inspiration to reconsider this message came from an unlikely source - a Catholic man finishing up a month of saying Kaddish daily. His name is Bob Magee, and even though I only met him once, his story and the life lessons he shared with me have touched me deeply and I think they'll do the same for you.

As many of you know, the president of Beth El, Eric Clayman, lost his younger brother quite suddenly last month. It was a profound, stunning and painful loss not only for Eric and his family, and Scott's wife and children, but also for Scott's many friends. The funeral took place in Mahwah, so many of Eric and Amy's Cherry Hill friends could not make it to the funeral home. Hazzan and I went, and the place was packed. Not only was it standing room only, many more waited outside. So many of them there were Scott's friends, one of whom, Bob Magee, got up to speak on behalf of the others. Bob talked about what a great guy Scott was, what a wonderful family man and friend. And Bob was very emotional - he was pouring his heart out. But at the end of his eulogy, he turned to Eric and his mom, Natalie, and the rest of the family and said, "I know Jewish tradition was very important to Scott, so I am going to say Kaddish for him."

At the time I did not know what he meant, or how he'd be able to do it. There is nothing that says a non-Jew can't say the Mourner's Kaddish, but did he know you need to have a minyan, which means (most of the time) that you need to be in a synagogue to say Kaddish? ...Well, truth be told, I forgot about that part of his eulogy until just a few days ago. Then, much to my surprise, I got an e-mail from Bob Magee. I had been mentioned by name at the funeral and I guess he remembered my name, but he contacted me and here's what he wrote in his e-mail: "I wanted to

reach out to you to tell you how much comfort saying the Kaddish has been. More than just the Kaddish, I realized after the fact that the Kaddish sits within the daily services; I have generally been attending the weekday Ma'ariv service, although I have also been attending the Shabbat service on Shabbat. It was initially daunting - I had to use two web apps - one from Chabad (which had no English but did have transliterated Hebrew) and another which provided a Sephardic Siddur with intralinear English along with the Hebrew but no transliterated Hebrew. However, I found a great resource in a publication called the Eit Ratzon Siddur published by a guy out of Rutgers... It has allowed me to say the Hebrew and experience the poetry and cadence of the language while simultaneously understanding the meaning. I'm writing to tell you this because I believe that this would be a great resource for kids, for adults who's knowledge of Hebrew might be somewhat shaky and so their participation in services may not be as fulfilling as it might otherwise be, and perhaps most importantly for interfaith households. It has given me a tremendous and inclusive tool to accomplish honoring my friend - I can only think that it could be of substantial help to many others... Sometimes it's easier for an outsider looking in to see the value. Saying the Hebrew you feel the poetry that is lost in English. I'm a fan of the King James translation and I think it does capture the majesty of the language in English but it isn't the original."

Wow-Wow- and WOW! What a powerful teaching on so many levels! And of course it reminded me of that section of this morning's Haftarah because when it came to a way to respond, this non-Jew found meaning in the Jewish way of mourning. And in fact, it was SO meaningful for him that he wanted me to make sure other JEWISH people could get out of it what he had. And I love the challenge he has laid at our feet: Use the apps; get a hold of the resources that will allow people who don't know how to read Hebrew to say the words in Hebrew anyway. Let them feel the power and the majesty, the poetry and artistry of the liturgy in the original the way that he did. Give non-Jews who are married to Jews access to that, too. What a powerful and compelling challenge for all of us who want to perpetuate our sacred traditions!

But the most powerful teaching, the most compelling challenge that Bob Magee brings is to us as Jews is: Learn the rhythm of Jewish life and the peace that comes, even in the most troubling of times from saying Kaddish on a daily basis. Like he said, sometimes it might take a non-Jew, someone who is looking at this from a distance, to see the beauty and meaning in it. And it's true. The vast, vast majority of mourners here in our own synagogue do not take the responsibility of Kaddish as seriously as Bob Magee. Very few of our members come to shul for four days after the funeral, let alone 30 days after a funeral of a family member, and even more rarely for the 11 months following the loss of a parent. That makes me sad... I long to hear the words for our members that Bob Magee shared with me: "I wanted to reach out to you to tell you how much comfort saying the Kaddish has been." You know, I would say less than 20% of our members take Kaddish seriously for the month at minyan after their loss. I look every one of our members in the eye when we meet before the funeral and say to them, "You now have the obligation to say Kaddish in a minyan for 30 days," (or 11 months for a parent), but very few take this seriously. And relatively few honor the memory of their parents by coming to shul on the day of the Yahrzeit - one day out of the whole year - even though they get a letter from the shul reminding them to do so. I know because I read the names out loud every night at evening minyan; those how come realize how small a group they are.

And yet, I also think of the fellow from our shul who lost his mom a year and a half ago. He managed to rearrange his work schedule so that he left for work at 8:15 AM after morning minyan, instead of at 7:30 AM from home. And I know it was tough, but he made a commitment. And then, a year ago, this same man was given the gift of a beautiful granddaughter; his daughter had a girl. The gift of new life. The couple named their daughter after the man's mother for whom he had said Kaddish. But when it was time for the baby-naming, he chose to have it not in the Sanctuary on Shabbat, and not in his home, but on a Sunday morning at our daily minyan so he could be surrounded by the new friends he had made in the minyan during his year of Kaddish. They had become a new family to him, and he wanted to share his home family with his shul family.

We have been given a precious gift, not just of our lives, but of the ability to make sacred the memory of those who have passed. We have the opportunity to recall both Pesachs: The Pesach of the Past, as well as the Pesach of the Future. Maybe we have come to the time that the Bob Magees of the world will look at us and say, "You Jews do know how to do it right."

We know when it's right. We know when we feel connected. We know that when we are committed to a sacred tradition our loved ones are that much closer, even in their passing. That's why we say Yizkor, and Kaddish; to connect us with our ancestors, to bring their memories alive today, and to gain a clearer vision of the Jewish people we ourselves strive to be.