

Memory is a Blessing
Hospice Memorial Service - Nov. 6, 2011
Rabbi Hannah Orden

When I began thinking about what I wanted to share for my “Reflections on Caring,” I took a book off my shelf – a collection of essays called *Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning*. My attention was drawn to an essay called “On Being the Kaddish.” The Kaddish is a prayer that is recited at every Jewish service to honor the memory of those who died. So, I was curious about what it would mean to “Be the Kaddish.” I wondered: How does a person become a prayer?

I didn't pay attention to the author of the essay until I read the first line. I felt a shock when I read the words: *Gregory, our firstborn son, was killed in Lebanon on June 9, 1982* and I realized with a start that I knew this family. Greg was a friend of my sister's who also became my friend when I went to live in Israel in the summer of 1981. After Greg's death, I became very close to his mother and accompanied her through that first year of intense mourning.

In the essay, Greg's mother describes the moment when her family rabbi informed her that her son had been killed and told her that now she was the Kaddish. She asked him what he meant because she also thought of the Kaddish as a prayer not a person. The rabbi told her that it was the responsibility of the Kaddish – the mourner – to keep alive the memory of the person who has died, to not forget and not to let others forget.

This concept of honoring our loved ones who have died by keeping their memory alive is very strong in Jewish tradition. When I was growing up, the prayer book we used at our synagogue spoke about the dead living on in the memories of those who live after

them. *Thus, even when they are gone, the departed are with us... We remember them now; they live in our hearts; they are an abiding blessing.* In the essay “On Being the Kaddish” Greg's mother also acknowledges that *to remember – to really remember, remember in detail – brings with it nearly intolerable anguish. We suffer through the remembering, and wonder how long it will last, wonder, as time goes on, whether it may be without end. We look to be free again, the grieving behind us.*

She also writes about the healing power of tears – the tears of loss for the life that has ended, the tears of longing to see the person again, the tears of regret over unfinished business, and the tears of simple remembering, the tears that flow when a song or glance, a certain place or smell reminds us of the loved one who has died.

She describes how, after the initial shock and terrible grief had abated a little, she began to ask friends and relatives what they remembered about her son. She says: *usually it was very little, unless I persisted, and then, as they shed their own tears, they began to tell me wonderful things – anecdotes, trivia, the bits and pieces that linger – and they triggered my own memories, permitting me to recover more and more about Greg's life.*

And this, she says, is what it means to "be the Kaddish" for one who has died – to recite the prayer for him – yes – but also to remember – even if it hurts, even if it brings tears. To "be the Kaddish" is to be willing to talk about the person who has died, to tell stories and share memories even when it makes others uncomfortable. That is the job of those who are left behind – to keep memory alive. That is how a person becomes a prayer. At the end of the Kaddish prayer, we say the Hebrew words *zichronam livracha*, which mean “May their memory be a blessing.” So, for everyone who is here today to mourn the loss of a loved one, I offer the words from our prayer book: *By love they are*

remembered, and in memory they live... Even when they are gone, the departed are with us... We remember them now; they live in our hearts; they are an abiding blessing.

Rabbi Hannah Orden's website: <http://www.rabbihannahorden.com/>