



When God Feels Distant: The Response of the Kaddish

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Sometimes, we experience God's presence intensely in our lives. But sometimes God feels distant—even hidden—from our experience. A *midrash* acknowledges this tension explicitly:

Midrash Tanhuma Ha'azinu 4

The Holy Blessed One... sometimes is found, and sometimes isn't found; sometimes is close, and sometimes isn't close.

מדרש תנחומא האזינו סימן ד

הקב"ה... פעמים מצוי ופעמים אינו מצוי, פעמים קרוב ופעמים אינו קרוב

In Parashat Aharei Mot-Kedoshim, God's presence is palpable. The *parashah* describes the ritual of Yom Kippur when Israel is cleansed of its sins. In Rabbinic understanding, this day of purification was also a day of intimate reconnection with God, epitomized by the moment in which the High Priest would pronounce God's personal name. Calling God by name indicated a closeness and intimacy, perhaps only experienced after forgiveness from sin.



How did this take place? According to the Mishnah,¹ the priest would confess the sins of Israel, and then quote the following verse:

Leviticus 16:30

ויקרא טז:

For on this day it will be atoned for you, to cleanse you of
all your offenses, before YHVH you shall be cleansed.

כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכָּפֹר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהֳרָתְכֶם מִכָּל
חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְקֹנֶק תִּטְהָרוּ:

When the priest recited the end of the verse, he would pronounce God's name as it was written, something forbidden in other circumstances. This was **the** dramatic moment of Yom Kippur. Another *mishnah* describes how, when the priest pronounced God's actual name in Jerusalem, his voice was so loud that people heard it all the way in Jericho.²

How would the people react to hearing God's name? They would prostrate on the ground and recite:

Mishnah Yoma 3:8

משנה יומא ג:ח

Blessed be the name of His glorious kingship forever and ever.³

ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד

The people reacted to hearing God's name with physical action—they bowed low to the ground—but also with a verbal response: blessing the name of God.⁴

¹ Mishnah Yoma 3:8, 4:1-2, 6:2. See also Tosefta Kippurim 2:1, ed. Lieberman, p. 229. For the question of whether these texts were original to the Mishnah or drawn into the text from the Yom Kippur liturgy, see Shmuel and Ze'ev Safrai, *Mishnat Eretz Yisrael: Moed* (Jerusalem: Lifschitz, 2010), vol. 6, pp. 114-122.

² Mishnah Tamid 3:8. See Safrai and Safrai, p. 116.

³ For this translation, and a discussion of the history of this phrase, see Reuven Kimelman, "Blessing Formulae and Divine Sovereignty in Rabbinic Liturgy," in *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue*, eds. Ruth Langer and Steven Fine (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), pp. 1-39.

⁴ We are familiar with this line as a response to God's name as recited in the Shema, as well. The Shema was likely originally recited in a call and response format, and "*barukh shem*" was a response to the uttering of God's name in Deuteronomy 6:4. See Tosefta Sotah 6:3, ed. Lieberman, p. 183; Bavli Pesahim 56a. It is so urgent to respond to the mention of God's name that it interrupts the flow of the extended quote from Deuteronomy 6:4-9.



Indeed, in addition to this phrase, there are a number of similar liturgical phrases that respond to hearing the name of God, even when it is not pronounced in its full original form (something only the High Priest could do on Yom Kippur). These phrases vary somewhat, but all contain similar elements: blessed; name of God; and forever.⁵ And they all respond to hearing God's name, in one form or another.

There is one exception to this pattern, that of the response line in the Kaddish, beginning *yehei shemeih*:⁶

May His great name be blessed forever and ever and ever. יהא שמה רבא מברך לעלם ולעלמי עלמיא

This response has all the elements of the response recited above (ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד)—the word “name,” blessed, and forever.⁷ But one crucial element is missing: the response comes without a previous mention of God's name to trigger its recital! Indeed, God's name is missing entirely from the Kaddish, and yet we respond **as if** we have heard God's name and reacted to it.⁸ In other words, the absence of God's name in the Kaddish is highlighted by this line, which seems so out of place without God's name immediately preceding it.

⁵ For instance: “May the name of God be blessed forever and ever: (Psalm 113:2, recited in the opening of the blessing after eating a meal), or: “Bless YHVH your God forever and ever (Nehemiah 9:5; Tosefta Berakhot 6:22). See David De Sola Pool, *The Kaddish* (Leipzig: Drugulin, 1909), p. 46. See also Sifrei Devarim #306 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 342).

⁶ In the Talmud, this prayer is not called “Kaddish,” but rather by this line: “*yehei shemeih*.” See, for instance, Bavli Sotah 49a.

⁷ Indeed, they are so similar that some *midrashim* interchange the two sentences. Compare Bavli Pesahim 56a (which has *barukh shem*) with the Targumim (Neophyti and Yerushalmi) to Deuteronomy 6:4 (which has *yehei shemeih*).

⁸ See De Sola Pool, p. 47: “There is every reason to think that the response was often used in one form or another as an ejaculated praise at the mention of God's name.” He goes on to note (p. 50): “There is no mention of God's Name in the Kaddish to occasion this response...”



God's missing name in the Kaddish is further accentuated when we note the biblical source of the response in Kaddish:

Daniel 2:20

דניאל ב:כ

Daniel answered and said: "Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever."

עֲנֵה דָנְיָאֵל וְאָמַר לְהוָא שְׁמֵהּ דִּי אֱ-לֹהָא מְבָרַךְ מִן עַלְמָא

וְעַד עַלְמָא...

The overlap between these phrases is significant, with one exception: Daniel mentions God, whereas the phrase in the Kaddish does not. Instead of a word for God (א-להא), in the Kaddish we see simply the word "great" (רבא), as shown in this table:

יהא	להוא
שמה	שמה
רבא	די א-להא
מברך	מברך
לעלם ולעלמי עלמיא	מן עלמא ועד עלמא

This serves to highlight the function of this phrase in the Kaddish: to indicate that where we might expect God to be mentioned, God's name is conspicuously absent.⁹

Noting God's missing name in the prayer, how are we meant to experience the Kaddish? This is a prayer that highlights our sense of the reality in which we dwell, where God's presence is often experienced as distant. In a world with so much suffering and destruction, God can feel far away (in the words of our opening *midrash*: אינו קרוב). This prayer, built on a response to the name of God that is never uttered, gives voice to that feeling of distance.

⁹ Compare also Psalm 113:2, which also has all the elements of this phrase, but also includes God's name. See Perushei Siddur He-Tefillah La-Rokei'ah, ed. Herschler, p. 244.



Indeed, this understanding of the role of Kaddish goes back to one of the earliest sources for the prayer, a story of R. Yose:

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 3a

It is taught: Rabbi Yose said: One time I was walking on the path, and I entered a ruin from one of the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray. Eliyahu of blessed memory came and watched the doorway until I finished my prayer... He said to me...

“Whenever the Israelites go into the synagogues and schoolhouses and respond: **‘May His great¹⁰ name be blessed,’** God shakes [God’s] head and says: “Happy is the king who is thus praised in His house! Woe¹¹ to the father who had to banish his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father!”

תלמוד בבלי ברכות ג.

תניא, אמר רבי יוסי: פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך, ונכנסתי לחורבה אחת מחורבות ירושלים להתפלל. בא אליהו זכור לטוב ושמר לי על הפתח עד שסיימתי תפילתי. ... ואמר לי: ... בשעה שישראל נכנסין לבתי כנסיות ולבתי מדרשות ועונין יהא שמיא הגדול מבורך הקדוש ברוך הוא מנענע ראשו ואומר: אשרי המלך שמקלסין אותו בביתו כך, מה לו לאב שהגלה את בניו, ואוי להם לבנים שגלו מעל שולחן אביהם.

On the one hand, when the phrase is recited by Israel in the synagogues and study houses, God is filled with happiness. It is similar to the days of the Temple, when God was called by name. And yet, it is not entirely parallel because God’s name is not recited; God’s joy is tinged with grief. Recognizing that we live in a post-destruction world, God goes on to say: “Woe is Me and woe is Israel.”

¹⁰ Many manuscripts have the Aramaic word רבא in place of the Hebrew word הגדול (which appears in the printed version of the Talmud).

¹¹ Note that while printed editions of the Talmud have the word “מה - mah,” most manuscripts use the word “אוי - oy.” Mah seems to be a euphemism for oy, a substitution made by those uncomfortable with God experiencing woe. See Raphael Rabinovitch, *Dikdukei Soferim* (Munich, 1867), vol. 1, p. 2b-3a; Moshe Benovitz, *Talmud Ha-Igud: Perek Rishon Mi-Masekhet Berakhot* (Jerusalem: Ha-Igud Le-Parshanut Ha-Talmud, 2006), p. 98 and cf. p. 95, and n. 41.

This story reflects the complex emotions that are embedded in the recitation of the line *yehei shemeih*. This is a line that, in a similar form (*barukh shem*) was associated with the presence of God; reciting it meant that God's name—the embodiment of God's immanence¹²—was at hand. Yet now this line is recited in a world in which God's city with the Temple is in ruins. It cannot be a response to God's name, because God's name is no longer pronounced. In other words, the line has morphed from a reaction to God's presence to a painful reminder of God's distance. God is no longer available in this world in the way that God once was.

This helps explain the function of the Kaddish. Originally recited as a prayer following the study of Torah, the Kaddish expresses the feeling that God is distant.¹³ It is true that we gain access to God to some extent through the study of Torah, but that is very different from the experience of hearing God's name and feeling God's palpable presence in Jerusalem. We mark this shift through a prayer that poignantly highlights the missing name of God. And as this prayer eventually morphed into a recitation performed by mourners, this aspect of the prayer was further highlighted. After all, it is a mourner who may feel the distance of God most acutely.¹⁴

We no longer live in a world in which a High Priest pronounces the name of God, as described in *Aḥarei Mot-Kedoshim*. We can't hear the name, and we can't react to God's presence as we once did. Both God and we mourn this tragic situation. The response in the Kaddish—recited

¹² For the concept of God's name as a symbol of God's near presence, see Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 58-68.

¹³ For the original function of the Kaddish as a response to Torah study, see Midrash Mishlei 14, ed. Visotzky, p. 112 and Martin Lockshin, "An Unlikely Prayer," in *Kaddish*, eds. Martin Cohen and David Birnbaum (New York: Mesorah Matrix, 2016), pp. 337-348; Moshe Bar-Asher, *Leshoneinu Rinah* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 2016), pp. 136-137.

¹⁴ See further on this point my previous essay, "Stoicism and Grief: Aharon and the Mourner's Kaddish," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/stoicism-and-grief>. For a fuller analysis of these points, see my article, "Mourner's Kaddish: A New Framing," in *Kaddish*, pp. 9-23, available here: https://www.academia.edu/40872620/Mourners_Kaddish_A_New_Framing, and in shortened form here: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mourners-kaddish-is-misunderstood/>



even in the absence of the trigger mention of God's name—characterizes this feeling of distance from God.

And even while we may experience God as distant, we know that sometimes God can be close (פעמים קרוב). The Kaddish offers this hopeful aspect as well, envisioning—and asking—for a future time where God's presence is felt among all those on earth.¹⁵

¹⁵ For this aspect of the Kaddish, see the essays cited in previous note.

