

Q: Can women say Kaddish?

A: Following yesterday's post, I have received an email from a woman who is within the year of mourning for her mother. She and her sister are saying Kaddish, but her sister had the unpleasant experience of being chased out by the congregants, despite the rabbi's supportive attitude.

She asked me to clarify the Halakha regarding the reciting of Kaddish by women. Before I do so, however, I must quote here a Midrash that sprang to my mind upon reading her email:

מעשה באשה אחת שהביאה קומץ אחד של סולת להקריב מנחה, והיה הכהן מבזה עליה, ואומר: "ראו מה היא מקרבת! מה יש בזה להקריב? מה יש בזה להקטיר?" נראה לכהן בחלום: "אל תבזה עליה! מעלה אני עליה כאילו נפשה הקריבה!" - מדרש תהלים, מזמור כב

A woman once brought a fistful of semolina as a thanksgiving offering. The priest scorned her, saying: "look at what she brought! What is there to sacrifice? What is there to burn?" He had a dream that night where he was told: "Do not scorn her! I [God] consider it as if she had sacrificed her soul!" (Midrash Tehillim, Ps. 22)

Just like the Midrashic woman who brought forth her soul, a mourning woman comes to shul to say Kaddish for her loved ones, and to pour her soul out. She is tormented and grieving no less, and perhaps more, than a man in the same situation.

Who are we to judge her and to tell her that her sorrow does not justify a Kaddish in shul? Can we insist that saying Kaddish, expressing grief, and fulfilling one's personal and societal duties, are rights reserved only for men?

Some would argue that traditionally, women did not say Kaddish in shul. This argument is only partially true, as will be shown later, but even if women never said Kaddish in the past, there would be no reason to block them from doing so now.

Let me explain: the practices of mourning change constantly in accordance with changes in lifestyle and societal norms. There is a long list of requirements mentioned in Tannaitic and Talmudic literature, and even in Shulhan Arukh, which are unheard of today.

Some examples are sitting Shiva for grandparents, in-laws, stepchildren, nieces, and nephews; eulogies in the city plaza; a sub-period of two or three days at the beginning of Shiva; revealing one's shoulders; hiring wailing women and bagpipe players for the funeral procession and many more.

All those changes point to one general rule: the mourning practices are not determined by legal considerations only, but by necessity, social norms, and most importantly, feelings and emotions.

In other words, the Halakha never intended to regulate mourning but rather to facilitate the process. It comes to help the mourners express their grief, and to assist their circles of relatives and friends in offering the support system which is so desperately needed.

In the past, women perhaps did not see the need to say Kaddish, because they lived in small communities and were surrounded by close friends. It is very possible that the mourning women were comforted with the compassion and attentiveness their inner circle had to offer. The presumable lack of interest in saying Kaddish could also have been a result of the clear division between the roles of men and women in society.

Today those two conditions have drastically changed. On one hand, women are integrated in all areas of modern life, and they feel that they deserve to express their grief or respect with Kaddish, just like men.

On the other hand, like many men in modern society, they no longer have the luxury of personal and intimate relationship with a close circle of friends. Some people choose to turn to WhatsApp and Facebook for companionship, and some come to shul where at least God listens.

A good analogy for changes in social norms, which led women to the shul and let them interact with the regular *Minyan*, is *Birkat haGomel*. This blessing is recited by one who was saved from great danger. For many centuries, new mothers did not recite this blessing, despite the fact that their lives were in grave danger during delivery.

Recently, however, there is a growing tendency to encourage women to say the blessing in the shul, in front of a minyan. Before the woman says the blessing, the cantor or Gabay asks the men to pay attention to her blessing and to say Amen. If a woman is allowed to say *Birkat HaGomel*, where the men are required to pay special attention to her, she should definitely be allowed to say Kaddish, even if she is the only one saying it.

In practice, Rabbi Avraham Yosef, the son of Hakham Ovadia Yosef, and Rabbi Eliyahu Abargel, both ruled that a woman can say Kaddish in the synagogue.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein writes that it was a common practice for a mourning woman to enter the synagogue to say Kaddish, even without the separation of a Mehitzah (divider).

There is also the testimony of the author Yaakov Yehoshua (1905-1982), an author and historian of the old Sephardic community in Jerusalem, that it was customary to see women saying Kaddish in the Ashkenazi synagogues. He adds that Rabbi Shraga Faivel Frank of Yemin Moshe requested in his will that his daughters will say Kaddish for him.

Conclusion:

It is true that there is no obligation to say the Kaddish, but if women chose, they are allowed to do so. They can recite the Kaddish in the synagogue or at the house of Shiva where there is a minyan. If the rabbi senses that saying Kaddish would help a mourning woman, he should encourage her to do so.

It is also important for women and rabbis alike to educate the male congregants and to enlighten them to the Halakhic sources which allow women to say Kaddish. It would also help to ask them to try and understand the emotional state of the mourning women and the tremendous benefit they will have from saying Kaddish.

Sources:

יעקב יהושע, טורי ישרון, י:מא, עמ' 22: נהוג היה בכמה מבתי הכנסיות האשכנזים שיתומות נהגו להגיד קדיש אחרי פטירת הורים, שלא השאירו אחריהם בנים זכרים... מספרים על הרב שרגא פייבל פרנק, רבה של שכונת ימין משה, כי בצואתו ביקש כי בנותיו תאמרנה אחרי קדיש, ואכן מסתבר כי לפי ההלכה נוהגות בנות להגיד קדיש

הרב משה פינשטיין, אגרות משה, אורח חיים, ה:יב: והנה בכל הדורות נהגו שלפעמים היתה נכנסת אשה ענייה לבית המדרש לקבל צדקה, או אבלה לומר קדיש

ילקוט יוסף, נטילת ידים וברכות, הערות סימן ריט: וכן כתב בכנסת הגדולה שיש לתמוה על מה שנהגו הנשים שלא לברך הגומל, שזהו מנהג בטעות. ואם מפני שצריכה לברך בפני עשרה ואין זה מכבודה, וכי טעם זה יספיק לפוטרה מחיובה, והרי אפשר לה לברך בעזרת הנשים וישמעו הקהל שבבית הכנסת

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Haim Ovadia