

Kaddish for Gaza

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A few weeks ago a group of Jews gathered in front of Parliament in London to say *Kaddish* for those Gazans killed on the border in what was described as a peaceful demonstration. Was saying *Kaddish* appropriate?

It is part of our religious tradition “not to rejoice when our enemies fall” (Proverbs 24:17). We reduce our pleasure at the Passover Seder by pouring out wine to regret the loss of Egyptian lives in the Exodus. And on six days of Passover services we only say part of the joyful *hallel* prayer, because the Midrash imagines God being sad over the loss of Egyptian life. But I do not know of any basis for saying *Kaddish* or a memorial prayer over people who have sought to destroy us. Should we say *Kaddish* over Nazis who lost their lives defending the Reich?

I mourn the loss of life. I regret the needless waste and tragedy intentionally orchestrated to gratify a political agenda. But let me refer to a current term, cultural appropriation, to explain why saying *Kaddish* in this context is so offensive and objectionable.

Cultural appropriation is a concept that applies to the adoption of elements of a one culture by members of another culture. Some thing or ceremony that has deep and specific meaning and function in one culture is used out of context or inappropriately and often derisively by another.

Now I cannot speak for how Liberal or Reform Judaism use the *Kaddish*. But I can tell you historically how it functions in traditional Judaism. The *Kaddish* is not a memorial prayer as such. For that we have the prayer *El Maleh Rahamim*, “God full of mercy.” The *Kaddish* has two functions. Initially it was simply a marker between different sections of the services held in synagogues with a quorum to distinguish important sections of prayer and study from each other. Whereas most prayers are in Hebrew, the *Kaddish* is in Aramaic, which was the dominant language of the Persian and Middle Eastern countries two thousand years ago. Most Jews at the time were unfamiliar with Hebrew but comfortable with Aramaic. As a result, the *Kaddish* became the most repeated and well known part of the liturgy.

When a person died there was an obligation to try to compensate the community for the loss by reinforcing the tradition as a tribute and in memory of the deceased, either by study or attendance at communal prayers. Ideally one would conduct a service. But if one could not, at least participate in some way. Saying *Kaddish* in the daily services was a way mourners could show their devotion to keeping the tradition alive, and paying tribute to their parents for bringing them up in the tradition, this was how the *Kaddish* came to be associated with mourners. It is not a memorial prayer. It simply praises God and accepts divine authority as the guiding power of the universe and an acceptance of the Divine Decree. It is a prayer that seeks to reinforce Jewish identity and those who support its continuity. As such it has no

relevance beyond the rituals of Jewish life specifically.

But it has become a cliché—a Hollywood token for referring to Jews or Judaism in one short sound bite.

If one wishes to mourn the loss of life beyond the Jewish community or regret the sad state of world affairs or one's favorite personality or pet, there are other more appropriate ways of doing that than by taking a religious prayer out of context. The actual memorial prayer we have in Judaism is *El Maleh Rahamim*, "God full of mercy, look after their souls." That might have been more appropriate, technically. It makes no sense to take a prayer calling for God to strengthen Judaism and apply it to Gazans who certainly have no such agenda.

This incident also raises the nature of the divide between different Jewish denominations. And it reminds me uncannily of the ancient split between the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Some choose to emphasize their difference from the dominant society, and others try to minimize them, all to different degrees. Some want to reduce the distinctive nature of Jewish culture. Reform Judaism in the USA at one stage banned Hebrew, adopted Sunday as the day of worship instead of Saturday, and rejected almost all traditional rituals. The result of distancing oneself from specific Jewish rituals is all too evident; the alienation from Jewish traditional religious life in the USA and elsewhere has now become a significant feature of Jewish life. Non committed Jews in the USA seem to be returning to 19th and 20th century positions of opposing Zionism and wanting to be Americans of the Hebrew confession. Why then be Jewish if there is hardly anything that differentiates me from everyone else? That is why marrying out is hitting 70% amongst nontraditional denominations and support for Israel and Jewish communal institutions is collapsing amongst the majority of notional American Jews today.

I think it is only fair to point out that those who despise Zionism and reject Israel's right to protect itself have more in common with Haredi anti-Zionism, Neturei Karta, Satmar, and their allies, than they do with Zionist Jews. Who'd have thought! But we have always had those within trying to pull us down.

Another example of cultural appropriation is *Tikun Olam*—a phrase used in the *Aleynu* liturgy and mysticism to mean correcting the mystical imbalance of the universe by intensifying one's connection with God and traditional ritual. It is true that in the Talmud it is also used as enabling society to function according to a specific set of rules that enable society to run smoothly. But it does not mean "be nice." For that we have "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself." Nowadays it is used as a way of saying that one is being a good Jew every time one helps someone else. Indeed, for doing without Judaism altogether and clinging only to this residue. Yet it would be dangerous to think that all non-Orthodox Jews share this view. And the extreme dismissal by the ultra Orthodox of anyone not exactly the same as they are, is doing great damage to the Jewish soul too.

Being a good person does not necessarily involve any religious element. We should all aspire to being good people. Being a good Jew is when you do something that is specifically Jewish. We should want to be both—good, committed people to our own communities and religions as Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, as well as being good citizens of the world. By all means, let's mourn the losses on all sides. But leave *Kaddish* out of it.

This whole issue shows how dangerous identity politics is, because it lumps every group together, for better and for worse, as if they were homogeneous. Whereas here is proof that generalizations about Jews, Zionists, Arabs, or Muslims are. You find extremists, apologists, assimilationists, and fanatics everywhere. As Polonius says in Hamlet, "This above all, to thine own self be true."

The Sadducee/Pharisee conflict was over such issues as theology, nationalism, and rabbinic authority. We know who survived. The Christians liked to paint Pharisees as religious fanatics and nationalist extremists. Some might have been. But most were not. They were passionate about their Judaism while still caring about the world. I pray that this present split in the Jewish world does not go that way. If push comes to shove, I am confident the new Pharisees will survive. But I would deeply mourn the loss of the rest, and I would say an *El Maleh Rahamim*, "God have mercy on their souls," prayer for them.