

# Prodigal Son

*Leon Wieseltier*

**Kaddish**

*Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.*

*588 pages.*

*Reviewed by Jeff Jacoby*

When Mark Wieseltier died on March 24, 1996, his son Leon, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, a Washington celebrity as renowned for his brilliance as for his dissolute ways, resolved to do his duty and say kaddish for his father.

And so, three times a day for the next eleven months, in accordance with Jewish custom, Wieseltier went to synagogue—usually the Orthodox Keshet Israel synagogue in Washington, D.C.—and pronounced the words that Jewish mourners have pronounced for centuries: “Magnified and sanctified may his great Name be in the world that he created....” Often, again in accordance with custom, he was designated to lead the prayers.

These rituals were not utterly alien to Wieseltier, the product of a rigorous

Orthodox Jewish upbringing who more than twenty years earlier had, as he puts it with considerable understatement, “stopped living according to Jewish law.” Yet if anything, his familiarity with Jewish practice served to highlight his own ignorance about what he was doing, and why he was doing it. “I was struck almost immediately,” Wieseltier writes, “by the poverty of my knowledge about the ritual that I was performing with such unexpected fidelity.” To correct his inadequacy, and to prepare himself for the year of mourning that lay ahead, he began to seek out the history and meaning of the mourner’s kaddish. Repairing to a teahouse near the synagogue each morning after prayers, he delved into Jewish texts ancient and recent, reflected on what he found, made notes, delved some more. “The texts were like tracks in a garden,” he says. “A little vertiginously, I followed where they led.”

Where they led was to this amazing book. *Kaddish* is dense, moving, passionate, frustrating, harrowed, brilliant. Above all it is a profoundly Jewish work.

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Not a book of formal Jewish scholarship, not a book about Judaism, but a Jewish book: Wieseltier listens intently to what the sages have had to say about death and mourning over the centuries, then enters into the dialogue with them. He roams through Jewish history and law, consulting one authority after another, challenging or applauding their rulings, and matching their arguments and insights with arguments and insights of his own. As his own understanding grows, we are treated to the rare spectacle of an author's own gradual transformation as the result of his inquiry—the kind of moral awakening which Judaism has always taught to be the promise of study.

Lapsed Jew or not, Wieseltier is manifestly a gifted *lamdan*. The course of study he sets upon is breathtaking. Talmud and Midrash, of course, and Maimonides and Ibn Ezra and Joseph Karo, and Rashi and Rabbenu Tam and the Mahzor Vitry—but also “the early thirteenth-century compendium of laws by Isaac ben Moses of Vienna called *Or Zarua*”; the “*Ma’aseh Hamechiri*, a document of the very early history of the community in Ashkenaz ... produced in the last years of the eleventh century”; “the prayerbook of Solomon ben Samson, Rashi’s older colleague who was murdered in Worms in 1096”; and “*An Elegant Composition on Deliverance*, by

Nissim ben Jacob.” He consults rabbinic responsa, collections of customs, works of mysticism, books written in the aftermath of the Crusades and books written in the aftermath of the Holocaust—even a novel by Vladimir Jabotinsky. Wieseltier moves through the immense forest of Jewish learning with intimidating sure-footedness. Most readers will have to work to keep up with him.

The style of *Kaddish* takes getting used to. Wieseltier’s judgments and animadversions on the texts he examines seem presumptuous at first. When he learns, for example, of Nahmanides’ claim that the purpose of mourning is to inspire repentance and atonement, he declares that the idea “repels” him. He pronounces S.Y. Agnon’s prayer for military funerals “a little repugnant.” Yet it becomes clear before long that Wieseltier takes his books, and the multiplicity of Jewish voices that speak in them, very seriously indeed. The tradition is too important to him to accept mutely. He wants to understand this ritual he has committed himself to—not so much how it came to be (though his excavations into that question are fascinating) as why it matters so much.

He is asked, early on, why he is saying kaddish.

A good question. These were my answers. Because it is my duty to my father. Because it is my duty to my

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religion. (These are the strong reasons; the nonutilitarian, nontherapeutic reasons.) Because it would be harder for me not to say kaddish. (I would despise myself.) Because the fulfillment of my duty leaves my thoughts about my father unimpeded by regret and undistorted by guilt.

It is a solid response, yet Wieseltier's faith in the efficacy of the kaddish—of any prayer—is anything but solid. The point of the kaddish, Jewish tradition teaches, is bound up with the idea of a life after death: A son who publicly recites God's praises eases the torments his father undergoes in Gehenna, where souls are purged before they can ascend to heaven. How this works, and how a son's actions in life affect his father's fate in death, Wieseltier explores in a heady profusion of sources and details.

But there is a problem: He doesn't believe his father has to pass through Gehenna. Not because Mark Wieseltier was a saint, but because Leon Wieseltier doesn't believe in Gehenna, or heaven, or the purgation of souls, or any other afterlife. A "pornography of reward and punishment," he calls such teachings, shuddering at "the garishness of these rabbinical hallucinations." One who holds that human existence is meaningless if there is no reward and punishment in a World to Come is a "pious fool." In one of the many aphorisms with which *Kaddish*

is strewn, he calls the afterlife "an answer of the imagination to a question of the mind."

He cannot bring himself to believe. The premise of the kaddish, he acknowledges, is that "for the mourner, death is not oblivion." But "what about the mourner ... for whom death is oblivion? I am such a mourner. The kaddish often seems preposterous to me. The only effect of death of which I can be sure is nonbeing."

What can his kaddish mean, or his duty to his religion and his father, if he rejects the very convictions that imbue that kaddish and that duty with significance? Belief in the afterlife, in divine reward and punishment, in a messianic future, in a coming resurrection of the dead are not, in normative Judaism, mystical flights of fancy. They are axiomatic; they are essential. This is the anguished drama at the heart of this remarkable book: To keep faith with his father, Wieseltier devotes himself to the kaddish; yet the faith of his father is precisely what he lacks.

He does not hide from the contradiction. "Up at dawn," he notes in his journal. "With no faith, to the house of faith." When a friend asks, "How long can you say those words and not mean them?" he concedes the question's gravity. "There are lots of reasons for praying," he writes, "but one of the reasons must be an interest in what it is that you are praying for."

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Sooner or later, the utterance that is purely mechanical or purely metaphorical demeans these words, and the utterer of them.”

Wieseltier wrestles with his agnosticism. Stung by the objection of another friend—“But I believe in God and you don’t!”—he says, “If she means that I do not believe in the way that she believes, then she is right. Still, I’m not praying and studying entirely for filial reasons. I am not *only* a son.” Perhaps he means: I am, after all, my father’s son, born of an enduring heritage. Twenty-plus years of alienation from Jewish tradition notwithstanding, that tradition still commands his intellectual respect. Even, at times, his love. “The theology and the cosmology and the eschatology that are implied by the kaddish: Is all this truth? I do not believe that it is. Still, I have no patience with people who treat it as nonsense. And I do not regret for a moment that I was taught to believe it. When they taught me what they believed to be the truth, they taught me to believe that there is truth. They spared me the dizziness of my contemporaries.”

**T**he Jewish way is to perform the commandments even in the absence of understanding. Let the hands tend to the deeds; the heart and mind will follow. That is how the rabbis interpret the Israelites’ response at Sinai:

*Na’aseh v’nishma*—we will do, and we will hear: Action first, study and comprehension later. Wieseltier begins each day in shul, fulfilling his obligation to his father. Only then does he head for the teahouse to grapple with the scholars and dreamers of the Jewish ages.

Action first—why? Because behavior governs attitude. Wieseltier’s daily prayers at an Orthodox synagogue do not transform him back into an Orthodox shul-goer, but the experience does not leave him unchanged. A year of mourning, it turns out, is a year of introspection, of a sharpened awareness and continued reevaluation of his own spiritual and moral state. Throughout the book, he monitors the quality of his praying and notices the interplay of his prayers and his state of mind.

I have begun to notice that my prayers are refreshing my life with language. Three times a day, Hebrew music.

In the morning I told a terrible lie, and when I rose to say kaddish in the evening I was ashamed. This is more than I bargained for.

I was leading the worship this morning, and as usual my head was crowded with thoughts that came between me and the prayers. But then the clatter suddenly stopped, my head emptied out, until all that remained were the words, and I saw them, and I heard them, and I joined them, and to my surprise I provided the congregation

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with a few minutes of real prayer. I don't know how this happened. But I will attribute it to the spiritual utility of emptiness.

Praying this morning was not like praying last night. This morning I was alive to every word. When I left the shul, I felt like a lit match.

It is very fine, this spiritual self-awareness. It is the way Jews *should* pray. It is also, Wieseltier discovers, the kind of inner grappling which mourning is supposed to engender. Wieseltier undertook his onerous task—getting to shul three times a day—for the elevation of his father's soul. That souls rise and fall in the afterlife is something he doubts, but there is no doubting that his own soul has been lifted. His year of mourning, he realizes as the end draws close, has had “the aspect of a homecoming. An inevitable reunion with an unexpiring essence.” He fled the tradition, and the tradition waited. “It exists to endure,” he writes. “We are born into a being that loathes non-being, and this is our comfort.”

**T**he kaddish is colloquially thought of as a prayer for the dead, but it is not really a prayer at all, and it makes no mention of the dead. When a son recites the kaddish, he is not pleading for his father to be granted favorable treatment; he is demonstrating why his father *deserves* favorable treatment. I am the proof that

my father is meritorious, the son's kaddish says; judge him by the fact that his heir stands up in public and proclaims the magnificence of God.

For all his doubts and skepticism and libertine past, Leon Wieseltier stood up in public thrice daily for eleven months and proclaimed the magnificence of God. Now his book, a testament to the moral effect of Jewish tradition, does, in its way, the same thing. Near the very end, Wieseltier quotes a work by Menahem ben Zerah, a fourteenth-century scholar who survived murderous pogroms in Spain and the southwest of France. “There is nothing for an intelligent man to mourn over and to grieve over,” wrote Menahem, who had known much mourning and grief, “except his sins.” Comments Wieseltier: “It has taken me a year to feel the force of this idea. Sorrow as a form of remorse. Remorse as the essence of sorrow.” That was where he began, twelve months earlier, when he opened his research with Nahmanides. Then the idea repelled him. Now he accepts it. “Mourning is a process of remoralization,” he writes. “In sorrow is the seed of change.”

*Kaddish* is a work of erudition, grief and love—the love of a son for his dead father, the love of a wayward Jew for the tradition of his people.

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