A good moed everybody.

I would like to share the following thought that crossed my mind over Pesach:

This current Pesach was a very unusual Pesach. Many of us made a seder for the first time. Some of us had Pesach alone, some with a small family gathering. Some of us were supposed to be guests and didn’t prepare anything, some were supposed to be hosts and were stuck with four briskets. Yet we all pulled together, and made the seder as amazing as we possibly could. Some of us zoomed with our kids, grandkids and other relatives the afternoon before, some learnt new songs and praise to sing and harmonize with our spouses, while some of us bought or downloaded a classic or new hagaddah in order to understand and experience the redemption from Egypt in a new light. Some of us spent the seder in quiet introspection, while some of us sang the night away. Yet while we all threw all of our energies into this Pesach, I think that we can all agree that it just wasn’t the same. Virtual meetings and virtual singings, as delightful as they may be, cannot make up the face to face closeness and intimacy that we were unable to have this year. You cannot make up a child’s presence at the table, with their chair empty, even if they are sending you their wishes and desire for closeness while they are far away.

This Pesach our children were not by their parent’s table, and our fathers and mothers did not have their children by their table.

There is another table where a father is sitting alone, bereft from his children. The Talmud relates to us that Elijah told Rabbi Yossi ben Chalafta, that every time that a synagogue calls out “Amain Yehay Shemay Rabbah Mivorach”, the Holy One Blessed Be He nods with His head and says to Himself, “How fortunate is a king that they praise Him in His house, and in the same measure is the pain to a father who banished His children, and woe to the children who are banished from their father’s table.” Not only this year where all of the shuls and study halls are closed, where there is no Amen resounding out, but every year, for the past two millennia, our Heavenly Father’s table been empty. Every year Pesach rolls around, the anniversary when He redeemed us with Him, the time that He carried us as if on the wings of eagles, where he made us chosen and special, a treasure of a people. His anniversary, our anniversary. And His table is empty. No children, no song, no closeness. And while we may “zoom” with him with praise and prayer in our shuls and study halls, and we do our best to connect and be intimate with our mouths and hearts, it still is not the same as being on our father’s table, in our father’s house. An empty table on Pesach, an empty table during our holiday of freedom.

The Gerrer Rosh Hayeshiva, Rabbi Saul, said (paraphrased) that we feel how last year the Pesach seder was perfect; we were surrounded by family and traditions, by meaning, affection and purpose. This year, we all understand, the Pesach seder was empty and lacking. However, we are not fully correct, as the previous years were lacking as well. We did not have a Temple in Jerusalem to go to, nor a Pascal lamb or kid to offer as thanks. While we gathered together to sing and rejoice over our closeness to Hashem and His freedom, we were still missing the heart of the Pesach, the fifth cup, being in the place where we belonged, with the close intimate presence with our Father. We could not bring any offerings, nor could we sing our praise in His house, by His table. He continued that hopefully as we sit around our lacking table, we can understand how even in the previous years our seder was lacking. We may have eaten the Matzah of freedom and the Marror of slavery, but the lamb of Hashem’s love and mercy was missing from the table. It was not complete in the previous years, nor will it be until the Temple is rebuilt.

May we take a moment this Pesach, as we are secluded in our houses, to reflect on our loss. On the loss of the Temple, and all of the closeness and opportunities that we currently are bereft and missing. May we yearn to once more be on our Father’s table on Pesach, and cry in our Father’s place on the millions of empty seats at His seder. May we envision what it would be like, one people, together, all celebrating in unison in Jerusalem together with Hashem. And may we all merit to once more be there, where we belong, by our Father’s Pesach table.

In Nissan we were redeemed, and Nissan is the month guarded for our redemption once more.

Next year in Jerusalem,

Rabbi Krasner

Yizkor

Yizkor is that time of the year, where we remember our loved ones. When we celebrate the holidays, together with their traditions, joy and awe, we take some time to reminisce the memories of those who helped bring us here. For our fathers and grandfathers who toiled to ensure that we would have a proper Jewish education, and for our mothers and grandmothers who imbued within us that love and awe for the Almighty. For our departed brothers and sisters whom we rejoiced with in Pesachs and holidays gone by, and for all who we shared our lives and holidays with. They are integrated in our celebration of the holidays, and the holidays will never be the same without them. So we take a few moments out of our celebration to reflect on their lives, and we pray to our Father in Heaven, to take their souls and elevate them. Every year to a higher and higher sphere, to a closer and closer connection and joy with the Almighty. For Him to draw their souls close to Him on the wings of His Divine Presence. For our loved ones to be given more happiness and bliss in the Garden of Eden, where they are rewarded for all of the good that they have performed during their travels on Earth.

What about this year?

Well, we definitely can still light a memorial candle, and the Yizkor prayers and donations of kindness and charity can still be prayed and pledged in our houses. (<https://www.sefaria.org/Yizkor.1?lang=bi> (please print before Yom Tov starts)) What about Kaddish? We cannot say the kaddish for our loved ones without a minyan. And while we know that they would not have any grumblings on us when we did the best that we could do, still it does feel to some extent that we have let them down, and we have not given to them what they deserve.

I would like to respond as I did to those who have asked me in the previous few weeks about what they should do if they cannot say kaddish during their relative’s yahrtzeit:

Contrary to what has been written in countless websites and books, the Kaddish is an ancient and antique praise and prayer (Talmud Brachos 3, Shabbas 119). Over time, because of the power and importance of this prayer, it has been reserved and sought after by those who have lost a loved one, and are trying to find ways to elevate their soul closer to Hashem. By saying Kaddish for a relative, teacher or friend, one can increase the heavenly reward for their beloved, and one can elevate their soul to a loftier and higher status and prominence. How does this work? The Kabbalists explain (see the Rashba’s responsa vol 5 res 49) that while one is on this Earth, we can constantly do good deeds, prayer, charity, kindness, mitzvot, refraining from evil, repentance, studying Torah, etc, bringing ourselves closer to the Creator of all souls, and in return Hashem will reward them immensely in the World to Come. As the Talmud quips, “This world is like a banquet, grab and eat, grab and drink.” However, the World to Come is a world of payment, not a world of action. There are no mitzvot that require a physical struggle, no evil desires from which to overcome. So how can a soul reach a higher elevation at this point? Since they no longer can directly do good or increase their reward, this is only possible in three ways. The first is if one who is still on Earth, still in the world of action, were to perform kindness, charity or good in their merit, Hashem in His mercy considers it as if the soul has performed that good. Similarly, if one prays for the elevation of the soul, Hashem who listens to all prayer will consider it and increase the prominence and joy and pleasure for that soul. The third way is if the deceased triggered mitzvot or good deeds that are performed, even years or generations afterwards, they are all added to his ledger. This includes any good deeds, Torah or mitzvot performed by a child, student or follower, whom were raised, taught or inspired by the deceased.

So how does Kaddish work? When a child, student, relative or friend sings the praise of kaddish in the deceased merit, a prayer that emanates from the heart and has the power to shake the Heavenly Throne, The Creator of the World smiles, and considers this prayer to have been said by the deceased as well.

However, as powerful and important this prayer may be, it is not the only way to elevate a friend or relative, nor the original approach that friends or relatives would take. The Medrash (Kallah Rabbati 2) relates the following well known narrative: Rabbi Akiva happened upon a spirit of a man who was receiving a harsh judgement for destroying other people’s finances and lives. Rabbi Akiva went out of his way to find that man’s child, who was shunned from schools because of his father’s wrongdoings, and taught him how to lead the blessings in davening for the shul. Rabbi Akiva later found out that Hashem in his mercy had negated this man’s judgement. Originally, it was leading the prayers and saying borchu which was the pathway that was utilized to elevate parents, teachers and mentors, and only at a later time did this morph into the saying of kaddish. However, if you look at the narrative in detail, you will notice a much greater understanding and meaning. It is not just the prayers which elevate the deceased, rather the fact that a child, student or mentee is the one that is praying them. And in reality, it is not the prayers themselves, as much as the actions of the child, the actions which the child takes to become close to Hashem that elevate them. The greatest gift that a child, student, relative or mentee can do for their beloved, even more than a kaddish or borchu, is to walk in the ways of Hashem, to yearn to love Him, to come close to Him. And when a child decides to follow in the ways of Hashem, to love Him and to become close to Him, to perform acts of kindness, charity, mitzvot, prayer, torah, etc in the merit of a parent or loved one, Hashem, in His mercy will consider those actions as if they were inspired by the soul of the deceased, and consider them for him. And even more than that, when that child lives a Torah life, of love, awe and yearning to come close to Hashem in memory of someone they love, all of the good deeds, and closeness to Hashem that he performs his entire life is merited to the one that they lived properly in memory of that person.

There is a well-known story, of when Rabbi Ruderman was a young student in the Slabodka Yeshiva, the Dean received a telegram that his parents had passed away. The dean waited until Rabbi Ruderman finished his studies, and then notified him. “Your staying in yeshiva and learning was a greater merit for your parents, then the saying of kaddish would have been.” Rabbi Ruderman later continued by opening up the famed Ner Yisroel Yeshiva of Baltimore, raising and inspiring thousands of students in the ways of Hashem. And all of those students and their mitzvot have not only become a merit for Rabbi Ruderman, but for his parents as well.

So what can one do if they cannot say kaddish? What I feel would be a greater elevation, merit and memory than saying kaddish is to teach the ways of Hashem to a relative who does not know them. Find a nephew or a niece, a grandnephew or grandniece, a younger friend, mentee or anyone who would want to be inspired by you. And inspire them. Teach them the ways of Hashem, the ways of the Torah, the ways of a proper life. Call them on the phone or through zoom, and explain to them the ways of Avraham, of loving kindness and the pursuit of justice. Many of the youth are looking for meaning and truth, or at the very least are bored out of their mind with the current lockdowns. And many would enjoy the companionship and the fact that you, yes you, want to spend time with them. Tell them that you want to study Torah with them in memory of a mutual relative or friend, or teach them the prayers or Hebrew. Discuss with them the parshah, or look over a pertinent essay on the parsha which could be found online. Go through the haggadah, relive the freedom of the Exodus, as Hashem carried us as if on the wings of eagles. Inspire them to want to build a relationship with Hashem, and Hashem will not only consider it a merit for yourself, but He will consider it a merit for your beloved as well.

So zoom a nephew or niece, someone who looks up to you, who you have had, and can have a positive influence. Tell them that you want to study with them in memory of your loved one, and it will not only be a merit for that loved one, but an everlasting bond connecting your rich past with the budding future.

Have a memorable and joyous Pesach,

Rabbi Krasner