



Kaddish During COVID: Mourning Rituals During a Pandemic

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Abstract

Traditional Jewish mourning practices include the recitation of Kaddish during the grieving period and on the recurring anniversary of death. Kaddish recital requires the presence of a *minyán*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine and lockdown limited possibilities to gather as a quorum. This article offers a prosopographic sketch of the array of solutions to this Corona Kaddish conundrum. Three classes of solutions are discussed: (1) ad hoc *quorums*, including *pirate*, *balcony*, *outdoor*, *virtual*, and *drive-in quorums*; (2) *substitutes*, including *shades* of Kaddish or *replacement* practices; and (3) *workarounds*, including *quorumless*, *proxy*, and *catch-up* Kaddish. Common characteristics emerge from the cluster of solutions, and the collage tells a story about Jewish tradition and ritual. First, no previous pandemic saw such a gamut of Kaddish possibilities. This change can be linked to digital information sharing and to mourners' desire for a means to recite Kaddish. Second, solutions were rooted in sources; no suggestion was entirely novel, indicating that there is a trove of sources hibernating until called upon by the community. Third, Jewish ritual may not be as frozen as many think and experience, since during the pandemic different ways of performing the ritual were entertained. Fourth, offered a plethora of options, practitioners of Judaism anonymously and unconsciously declared that Kaddish must be preserved. Moreover, ad hoc solutions and

This article is dedicated to my grandmother, Chaya Kimelman. After a full life in Melbourne, Big Grandma (as we called her) moved to Jerusalem to be with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and to continue her learning at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies. At the age of 89, with 89 great-grandchildren, she contracted the coronavirus and passed away on 20 Tevet 5781, 4 January 2021.

This research began as a series of virtual lectures in Zur Hadassa, Israel on Kaddish during the coronavirus pandemic. I had the opportunity to present my research at the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies Annual Conference held virtually in May 2021. A preliminary version appeared on the CoronAsur research blog: Levi Cooper, "Jewish Mourning Practices Under Lockdown and Quarantine: The COVID Kaddish Conundrum," *CoronAsur: Religion & COVID-19*, 17 June 2021, <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/20331-93>. I also shared the progress of my research in a series of podcasts hosted by Pardes, <https://elmad.pardes.org/topic/the-maggid-of-melbourne-speaks>. I am grateful for the valuable feedback, advice, and encouragement that I received at each of these stages.

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workarounds have been preferred over shadow images and replacement rituals. This indicates that mourners want to recite Kaddish, and they want to perform the ritual in a communal setting.

Keywords Kaddish · Ritual · Prayer · Mourning · Community · Corona/COVID-19 · Jewish law

Kaddish Conundrum

According to Jewish law and tradition, various rituals require the presence of a *minyán*—a quorum of at least ten Jewish adults¹—for the performance of the rite. Quarantines, lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and other crowd-limiting measures aimed at preventing disease transmission hamper the possibility of gathering as such a quorum. When congregating is forbidden, rituals dependent on the physical presence of a congregation become difficult, if not impossible. The experience of living in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic since March 2020 has brought such challenges into sharp relief.² One particularly stark flashpoint has been the recital of Mourner’s Kaddish—in Hebrew *kaddish yatom*, also known as *kaddish yehei shelama*.

To succinctly state the necessary background for the ensuing discussion: Kaddish is a responsive prayer that is recited by mourners in the presence of a quorum during the prescribed grieving period and on the recurring anniversary of death. While the text of the prayer makes no mention of death, its recital is experienced as a memorial for the deceased or a salve for the soul of the departed. The emotional valence of Mourner’s Kaddish gives the ritual additional layers of meaning and import.

Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine (1884–1953)—an authority on Jewish customs and practice who was born in Jerusalem to an illustrious Sephardi family and served in the rabbinate in England—remarked that everything needs a measure of luck, “so too the lot of Kaddish merited more than all the other prayers” (Gaguine 1934: 111n150). Indeed, Kaddish is perceived, experienced, and portrayed as a quintessential Jewish ritual.

Contemporary vignettes and personal chronicles of the Kaddish recital experience highlight the visceral commitment to the ritual (Wiesel 1990: 132; Diamant 1998: xv–xvii; Wieseltier 1998; Charney and Mayzlish 2008; Gerson 2021: 147–157). This dedication transcends denominational affiliation and personal belief and practice. It is not uncommon for people who do not regularly attend synagogue

¹ Traditionally such a quorum comprises at least ten Jewish males over the age of thirteen. Liberal streams of Judaism have chosen to include all genders, redefining a quorum as at least ten Jewish adults.

² See, for example, the letter by the Rabbinical Council of Bergen County which declared: “Shuls will be closed for all minyanim and shiurim effective Friday morning, March 13 [2020]. There should be no house minyanim. All of the rabbis will be davening alone in their own homes. Please daven at home, individually” (Rabbinical Council of Bergen County 2020).

services to make an appearance in order to recite Kaddish in a quorum for a deceased relative.

COVID-19 limitations on gatherings for prayer services hindered the possibility to recite Kaddish in the accustomed manner. Given the prominence of Kaddish in Jewish consciousness and practice, the restrictions created a particularly painful situation.

Methodology

The goal of this article is to provide a real-time, prosopographic account of the solutions employed for this Kaddish conundrum.³ Beyond documenting an aspect of Jewish life in a time of crisis, each solution is then examined from a socio-legal angle for its roots and for possible long-term implications and challenges. Which Kaddish-related innovations instituted during the pandemic might outlast coronavirus? This angle ensures that the focus is not only on the present, but provides a perspective on the likelihood of pandemic-induced change in the performance of the ritual. In the conclusion, I consider what the array of efforts to find solutions tells us about contemporary Jewry and about Jewish tradition, practice, and ritual.

We can presume that distressing circumstances facing mourners who wanted to recite Kaddish would have been relevant during previous pandemics. Indeed, an 1831 document from the second cholera pandemic provides evidence of difficulty encountered by mourners who wanted to recite Kaddish during an outbreak of disease (Cooper 2021a; Cooper forthcoming). Thus pandemic-related Kaddish challenges are not a new phenomenon.

As I will demonstrate, the solutions proffered during the current pandemic drew on existing texts, or at least can be linked to Jewish sources. In many cases these texts were cited explicitly as precedents. My discussion of precedents is not intended to argue for the authenticity of a particular solution. Rather, noting these sources suggests how the past assists in grappling with the present, and highlights the role that texts play in identifying solutions for new realities. Without exception, the sources cited were originally written in contexts unrelated to stay-at-home orders, quarantine requirements, social distancing, or crowd-limiting measures. The solutions to the conundrum, therefore, cannot be considered new, yet their application to pandemic conditions was novel and innovative.

Not only was the application of existing sources inventive; the array of solutions discussed during the coronavirus outbreak is unprecedented. No previous outbreak of disease produced such a plethora of solutions to the Kaddish conundrum. Moreover, digital circulation of the solutions provided unparalleled real-time access to the possibilities, which generated awareness and further discussion.

The inventory of solutions is drawn from the pandemic-related Hebrew and English literature produced at dizzying speeds and disseminated in electronic form

³ For perspectives on the opportunities and challenges of real-time research, see Back et al. (2013).

by different denominations, religious organizations, and rabbinic leaders.⁴ These sources are supplemented by two types of non-rabbinic accounts in the Hebrew and English press: journalistic reports of Jewish life during the pandemic and personal narratives that recount how individuals responded to the Kaddish conundrum. Most of the solutions come from rabbinic authorities or from official organs of various movements, though lay writers also contributed to the discourse. The materials come from Australia, Canada, England, Israel, South Africa, and the United States of America.

The research focuses on a data-rich period, beginning with the onset of the pandemic in early March 2020 through June 2021. It is difficult to put an end date on a pandemic, as the incidence of illness and fatality declines rather than disappears, and the public's cautious approach fades rather than vanishes.⁵ In addition, events play out at their own pace in different locations. On June 15, 2021, the Israeli Health Ministry officially repealed the requirement to wear masks indoors, and removed almost all local coronavirus-related restrictions (Kovets ha-takkanot 2021a). The following Shabbat, June 19, was the first time in fifteen months that praying in synagogues was permitted in Israel without any COVID-19 restrictions. For synagogue attendees this created a sense that the pandemic had ended in Israel. Some organizations suggested offering prayers of thanksgiving on that Shabbat (Nachshoni 2021a). Yet on June 25—a mere ten days after the Israeli mask regulation was canceled—the Health Ministry reinstated the indoor mask requirement (Kovets ha-takkanot 2021b). Despite the shortcomings of setting an end date, the period from March 2020 through June 2021 spans different pandemic situations in various locations, and therefore provides sufficiently robust material to offer an account, assess the solutions, and consider the implications.

The objective of this study is to produce a prosopographic image that traces the gamut of solutions to the Kaddish conundrum and to assess the picture that emerges from the data. I will note denominational affiliation and region, though my aim is not to compare the responses of different sectors of the Jewish community.⁶

Concentrating on Kaddish is warranted because under non-pandemic circumstances, this prayer is a recognized Jewish ritual that is widely practiced irrespective of denominational affiliation. The emphasis on Kaddish during the pandemic is also justified because of the emotional significance of the experience of reciting this prayer as part of a community. By way of example: A public letter issued by the Sydney Beth Din in the first month of the pandemic specifically mentioned Kaddish; other rituals that require a quorum were not singled out:

We believe that the formation of any communal minyan for prayer, in any Synagogue, outside or inside, in a park or elsewhere is absolutely forbidden

⁴ For two snapshots of pandemic-related halakhic literature from the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, see Brodt (2020a, b). For an online repository of documents see *Corona guidance* (no date). Regarding the flourishing of research publication in general, see Liu (2021).

⁵ For a historical account of an epidemic receding, see Cooper (2020: 9–10).

⁶ For an early, general report along such lines, see Friedman and Abensour (2020).

according to Jewish Law. This applies to everyone, whether saying kaddish or for any other reason (Ulman et al. 2020).

Furthermore, contours of Kaddish may have been shaped by past events, suggesting that this ritual is susceptible to change. According to some, Kaddish is traditionally recited in Aramaic as a result of a historic episode that forced the change from Hebrew. That episode was then memorialized by the preservation of the foreign language (Anav 1886: 9; de Sola Pool 1909: 20). Closer to the long-term effects of a pandemic: Some writers charged that temporary changes to Kaddish during the 1831 cholera outbreak in Posen, Prussia altered the ritual forever more (Bamberger 1925: 5–6 §8). The ritual of Kaddish, therefore, is an appropriate candidate for focused research.

Solutions

During COVID-19, three classes of solutions have been deployed in order to respond to the Kaddish conundrum: (1) ad hoc quorums, (2) substitutes, and (3) workarounds.

Ad Hoc Quorums

At times when synagogues were shuttered, or synagogue attendance was severely restricted or people were advised against gathering, some people still gathered for makeshift prayer services. Such ad hoc quorums can be divided into five categories: pirate quorums, balcony quorums, outdoor quorums, virtual quorums, and drive-in quorums. These improvised prayer gatherings provided a forum for Kaddish recital, and mourners recounted their experiences participating in these provisional quorums.

Pirate Quorums

Pirate quorum (Hebrew: *minyán pirati*)—as termed by some news outlets (Levi 2020)⁷—refers to gathering for prayer in a manner that was prohibited by government-imposed or communal COVID-19 restrictions. In order to avoid detection, pirate quorums generally gathered away from the public eye, often inside buildings, thereby increasing the danger of spreading the virus.

At the very minimum, such rogue gatherings required ten people to collude in the illegal venture. Presumably, information about these gatherings was spread by word of mouth or via internal communication channels. In addition, reports emerged of

⁷ The term predates coronavirus (Efrati 2012). Some news outlets used less pejorative terms such as “makeshift” (Davis 2020; AJN staff 2020) or “private” (Feinberg 2020a, b). Since all ad hoc quorums were makeshift and most were in some way private, and since I want to emphasize the illegal and cavalier character of these gatherings, I have used the pirate appellation. The term “rogue *minyán*” was also used (Edelmen et al. 2020).

signs posted outside synagogues announcing the closure of the premises, together with directions in Yiddish or in Talmudic Aramaic instructing people how to enter surreptitiously (Itzikzr 2020; Magal 2020; Fig. 1).

In some instances, Jewish organizations petitioned governments to gain permission to hold services. Alternatively, they turned to the courts in an attempt to strike laws limiting prayer gatherings on the grounds that such laws were discriminatory, or that prayer gatherings were a necessary service, or that congregating did not pose a danger to public health. Political and judicial attempts to legalize pirate quorums were unsuccessful (Davis 2020; Agudath Israel of Am. v. Cuomo 2020).⁸ In Israel, religious parties were members of the government, and as such they were active in setting the restrictive guidelines and determining which prayer gatherings were outlawed (Tessler 2021).

By their nature, pirate quorums were secretive and only drew attention when they were discovered by the police and critiqued in the press (Raved 2020; Simanovsky 2020a, b, c, d). It is difficult to quantify how many people participated in unlawful prayer gatherings; however, the phenomenon existed in many locations around the world. The images produced in the press reports suggested that it was primarily Haredim who participated in pirate quorums.

While providing a solution for those who wanted to pray in a quorum—including Kaddish reciters—these gatherings were a source of tension within the Jewish community. Tensions were rooted in two concerns. First, pirate quorums clashed with state law and were therefore a blight on all Jews in the eyes of law-abiding sectors of the community. This was particularly apparent when such gatherings were raided by police and reported by journalists (Narunsky and Davis 2020; Davis 2020; AJN Staff 2020; The Yeshiva World 2020).

Second, attendees at pirate quorums were accused of further spreading the virus, or at least not sharing the burden of curbing the outbreak and “flattening the curve” (Edelmen et al. 2020; Gillman 2021). Thus, for example, South African Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein preempted the stay-at-home order with a recommendation to close synagogues. Some synagogues remained open since South Africa had yet to go into nationwide lockdown. Reporting on rogue quorums who continued to meet despite the Chief Rabbi’s decision, the local Jewish press included the following threatening postscript:

The SA Jewish Report (SAJR) knows the names of the shuls, senior rabbonim, and doctors involved, and isn’t yet naming them in the interests of unifying our community. However, after this crisis is over, this newspaper and the board of the SAJR believe that the community should hold them to account (Feinberg 2020a).

Given the illegal nature of pirate quorums, as soon as assembling was permitted or synagogues were reopened, such gatherings ceased to exist or at least ceased to be proscribed. Pirate quorums therefore provided a truly ad hoc solution, and they cannot be expected to have a long-term impact on Jewish practice.

⁸ For an overview of US legal proceedings regarding church services, see Brady (2021).



Fig. 1 Sign in Talmudic Aramaic outside synagogue in Bnei Braq, Israel: “Whoever wants to pray in the synagogue, should go around the building and up the stairs where the women enter the synagogue. And your friend has a friend!” Posted by Israeli journalist Yinon Magal on Twitter, October 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/YinonMagal/status/1313940190667436033>

It remains to be seen whether the tensions surrounding pirate quorums will leave lasting scars. It must be said that these tensions often tapped into existing fissures between different sectors of the Jewish community regarding compliance with secular state laws and regarding notions of shared burdens of responsibility. Seen in this light, pirate quorums reflect spot fires that were by-products of a larger conflagration in the Jewish community. Thus pirate quorums have not created new lasting issues.

Balcony Quorums

A second form of makeshift solution was the balcony quorum (*minyán mirpeset*). These gatherings offered participants the possibility of joining a prayer service while adhering to government guidelines. They also offered the perk of praying from the comfort of home.

Balcony quorums raised halakhic questions regarding what physical conditions tie a group of people together for the sake of creating a prayer quorum. Should the boundary be determined by line of sight, by the ability to hear the prayer leader, or perhaps by a measure of distance? Could people in entirely different domains be conjoined for the purposes of a prayer quorum? Such issues were discussed during the pandemic, particularly by Orthodox rabbis. Responsa and summaries of relevant sources were published online as the issues were unfolding.

Balcony quorums provided a good temporary solution for those determined to pray in a quorum during lockdown. Naturally, the formation of such quorums was limited to an urban landscape that included multi-story buildings constructed in close proximity to each other (Fig. 2). Balcony quorums also formed where high-rise dwellings opened up onto a shared space, with the commons serving as the service’s focal point. The separation and physical distance between the participants

meant that balcony quorums did not form new communities. Thus, they too disbanded when it became possible, or we can expect they will disband in the future.

Outdoor Quorums

While the balcony quorum was appropriate for dense, multi-story structures, other urban landscapes provided for different types of gatherings: outdoor quorums. These prayer gatherings formed in various locations: backyard or courtyard (both known in Hebrew by the term *minyán hatseir*), and street or sidewalk (both known in Hebrew by the term *minyán rehov*).

Outdoor quorums were conducted in private gardens, shared spaces, or public areas, and they all shared two salient features: they did not contravene government restrictions like private quorums, and they did not raise the same questions of Jewish law as balcony quorums. Outdoor quorums described themselves as temporary solutions with participants yearning to disband and return to communal institutions (Keene 2021).

As COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, synagogues reopened and began to resume communal gathering. Despite the possibility of returning to pre-pandemic prayer arrangements, there have been cases of outdoor quorums continuing to operate. Participants in these gatherings have not necessarily rushed to rejoin their former synagogues. Regular participants in outdoor quorums often coalesced into new communities. The shared experience of grappling with adversity created a bond between attendees. In addition, these new communities were intimate, close to home, less formal, open to experiment, and lacking rabbinic oversight and control. They were reminiscent of the *shtibl* model of prayer communities once so prevalent in cities, albeit without the actual *shtibl* (Yiddish: small room). Might this be indicative of a move away from large synagogues and a return to the *shtibl*? Or is this a specific pandemic-related development?

It remains to be seen whether participants in outdoor quorums will return to their former synagogue communities as the pandemic recedes. Much will depend on whether these nascent communities are able to find weather-appropriate spaces for gathering.⁹ Moreover, competition over the use of public spaces will also likely be a factor (Nachshoni 2021b).

Virtual Quorum

A fourth type of makeshift prayer gathering was the virtual quorum. Following the balcony quorum, this comfortable solution further challenged the notion of presence for the purposes of forming a quorum. The virtual quorum took on two primary forms: (1) all participants were connected virtually; (2) a quorum was physically present in a particular location and individuals joined virtually. Kaddish reciters who were physically present availed themselves of a standard quorum, while others

⁹ Regarding outdoor quorums in the snow, see Rahav-Meir (2020) and Kramer (2021).



Fig. 2 Yahadut bimei korona [Judaism in the Days of Corona], Makor Rishon, April 3, 2020, illustration by Shay Charka playfully depicting three Jewish rituals being conducted via balconies: circumcision, Torah reading, and marriage; a participant cheers from a distant building; silhouette of a synagogue in the center background. Reproduced with permission from the illustrator

joined electronically from their homes. Mourners participated in both forms of virtual prayer gatherings.

Virtual quorums provided clear advantages: the mourner had the personal experience of reciting Kaddish within a communal setting. The solution internalized the

shift in human interaction during the pandemic to solve the Kaddish conundrum. While the coronavirus was raging, *going* to work or *going* to school was defined by virtual presence; that is, logging on without leaving home. So too *going* to synagogue. Virtual quorums were part of a group of solutions that came into play during the pandemic: televised joyous occasions such as weddings, discharging obligations like reading the Scroll of Esther via live telecast, family gatherings for a Passover Zoom *seder*, paying a *shiva* call to mourners via the internet, and others.¹⁰

From the perspective of Jewish law, the virtual quorum (and its innovative siblings that I mentioned) entered relatively uncharted waters in that there was no battery of sources that had already reached a clear consensus on the issues. To be sure, virtual quorums existed before the pandemic, and had already been discussed by rabbis from all movements. For over a century rabbinic writers have debated discharging obligations using electronic media (Spira 1907: 66d–67a §72; Monsonigo 1992: 44–46 § 7). More recently, Conservative and Reform rabbis explored the possibility of virtual participation in prayer services (Reisner 2001; CCAR Responsa Committee 2012). Indeed, the use of the internet by religions is not new (Reader 2010). Yet no one had been forced to address the issues in the real-life context of a pandemic.

Stay-at-home orders and self-isolation triggered an exponential increase in demand for virtual quorums, reigniting the discussion (Ovadia 2020; Golinkin 2020a, b; Shapira 2020; CCAR Responsa Committee 2020). Rabbis grappled with pertinent questions: Is a quorum determined by embodied presence? To an extent, the question tapped into existing tensions regarding quorum definitions and was part of a broader issue: To what extent might tradition evolve with technology and ideas?

The stance of Jewish law is only one angle of the virtual quorum innovation. A contemporary sociological perspective is worth highlighting. The popularity of virtual quorums reflects the deep need of mourners to recite Kaddish for loved ones. The preference for a virtual gathering rather than a private recital (see below) demonstrates the need for community. Kaddish is not just about the individual's private bereavement journey, it also bespeaks communal support for the mourner during the Kaddish period. Anyone who opted for Kaddish in a virtual quorum was also broadcasting a need for a communal embrace in trying times.

Yet virtual quorums raise long-term questions: To what extent will this novelty outlast the coronavirus? Indeed, the virtual quorum may be the innovation that should be watched as we move beyond COVID-19. Its advantages during the pandemic have been patent, and in the future it could continue to provide opportunities for those who are immobile or do not live near a Jewish community. In addition, virtual quorums make joining a community a less daunting task. With the onset of the coronavirus, a further advantage of virtual quorums was noticed by Reconstructionist Rabbi Emily Cohen:

¹⁰ For an overview of the issues see Zuckier (2020).

[I]t's a chance to explore other communities. If you're someone who shies away from the Jewish community, use this to test the waters. It's a lot less scary to sign onto a livestream than to walk into a synagogue. ... Best case, you'll be excited to go to synagogue in person when services resume (Cohen 2020).

The virtual quorum may create communal possibilities that were not previously available. For example, writer and Kaddish-reciter Ivy Eisenberg described the "daily hug" she received from the virtual quorum and noted that daily prayers had not existed at her Reconstructionist synagogue prior to April 2020 (Eisenberg 2021).

Yet this path could be a double-edged sword. From the beginning of COVID-19, some writers warned of the dire consequences of moving religious interaction online (Winberg 2020). Will those who are mobile or do live near a synagogue make the effort to attend if they can recite Kaddish from the comfort of their own homes? The opportunity to provide solace without being physically present is important for those who are unable to be present, but what of those who are able to be present yet opt for a less taxing, distant encounter? If communities move online, how will they cater to vulnerable populations who do not have access to technology? Do virtual quorums erode elements of community, reducing our relationships from robust 3D to two-dimensional computer screens? Or do the boons of being able to connect with the immobile and those in distant lands outweigh the costs?

The question is not just an issue of community: Is the virtual encounter a faithful reproduction of the genuine experience? How much of the religious experience needs to be embodied in order to be authentic? As one academic from the International Christian University in Tokyo soberly wrote:

Online religion is much like online sex: it can be done, but it is rather, well... lame. At least this seems to be the case for those who try to take practices meant for actual human bodies to experience and replicate them using digital media platforms (Brown 2020).

Drive-In Quorums

There was an ad hoc solution that bears mentioning for its comparative value, even though it appears not to have been widely used to solve the Kaddish conundrum: mobile prayer services. Christian communities conducted drive-in (Shive 2020; Chow 2020), drive-thru (Vanselow 2020; Harris 2020), and drive-by (Aljibe et al. 2020) services.¹¹ Mobile Christian prayer gatherings existed prior to coronavirus (Kiley 2014). As with many of the solutions to the Kaddish conundrum, the pandemic increased the use of existing forms.

There were Jewish parallels to these mobile prayer service. Drive-in prayer services were entertained by some congregations, though on Shabbat they could only

¹¹ Drive-in: congregants drove to a parking lot and participated in the service from within their vehicles. Drive-thru: congregants drove past stationary clergy. Drive-by: clergy drove past home-bound congregants.

have been considered by denominations that permitted driving on Shabbat. Thus, for example, Temple Beth Am, a Reform congregation in Pinecrest, Florida, conducted a drive-in Shabbat service and the prayer book prepared for the event included the Mourner's Kaddish (Temple Beth Am 2020a; Drive-in Shabbat 2020: 19).¹²

While the drive-thru and drive-by mechanisms could not be construed as a quorum for Kaddish recital, iterations of these ideas were employed for the performance of other rituals (Heilbrunn 2020; Kipnes et al. 2020). For example, in April 2020, the city council of Beitar Illit, Israel paraded trees through the streets so that people could recite *Birkat ha-'ilannot*—the annual Spring blessing over the blossoming of fruit trees (Levi 2020; Hayim 2020).

In addition to the ad hoc quorums—pirate, balcony, various outdoor, virtual, and drive-in—there were hybrid forms, such as joining a street quorum from a balcony (Hashkes no date).

Ad hoc quorums had the broad objective of conducting regular prayer services, rather than the more specific goal of providing Kaddish opportunities. But in conducting services, these makeshift solutions provided a forum for Kaddish recital. It is possible that some of these gatherings may continue beyond the crisis. Ad hoc quorums did not institute changes to Kaddish itself. Therefore, no modifications to the prayer will result from these quorums, even if changes to communal gatherings remain in place.

Substitutes

A second set of solutions was more focused on the particular challenge of reciting Kaddish. When gathering as a quorum was not possible, this group of solutions advocated substitutes for Kaddish recital. Given that substitutes by definition were not Kaddish, they did not require a quorum. Such suggestions may have been accompanied by a recalibration of the ritual—de-emphasizing the importance of Kaddish and offering alternatives for honoring and commemorating the deceased. In this way, mourners were to have an experience of doing something for the deceased, even if it was not the traditional ritual. Kaddish substitutes can be divided into two categories that might be termed shades and replacements.

Shades

Shades refer to prayers that looked like Kaddish, drawing on the themes or even the words of the traditional prayer.¹³ During the pandemic, sources in Jewish tradition for such texts were publicized and adapted.

¹² Temple Beth Am also conducted a drive-in Havdalah service (Temple Beth Am 2020b). For further examples of drive-in services, see Congregation Beth El of Montgomery County (2020), Rubin (2020), and Carmona (2020).

¹³ Rabbi David Golinkin referred to such solutions as “pseudo-kaddish” (2020c). I have avoided the term “pseudo” since it can be used in a derogatory sense.

Thus, for example, Rabbi Dov Baer Edelstein (d. 2018)—a Conservative rabbi who served congregations in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Georgia, before moving to Israel—composed a prayer for those unable to attend a quorum in order to recite Kaddish (Keinan 2009: 287).¹⁴ The final two sentences of the composition collapsed the Kaddish into its two most famous lines—the familiar opening and the concluding prayer for peace. During COVID-19, this text was recalled and disseminated online by Conservative rabbis in America and in Israel (The Rabbinical Assembly 2020; Mallek 2020).¹⁵ Rabbi Dr. Pamela Barmash, of Washington University in St. Louis and a member of the Conservative Movement’s Committee on Laws and Standards, produced a loose translation of Rabbi Edelstein’s text (The Rabbinical Assembly 2020):

God of all creatures, in whose care is all, turn today in loving-kindness and mercy to my prayer on behalf of the memory of my dear one. Remember all the kindness and good deeds that s/he did in the land of the living. Grant him/her eternal shelter in your presence, and may they be bound up in the bond of life. May God’s name be exalted and hallowed. May the One who makes peace on high bring peace upon us, all Israel, and all the inhabitants of Earth. Amen.¹⁶

Conservative Rabbi Rob Scheinberg of the United Synagogue of Hoboken offered a suggestion that drew on an older text. Traditional Sephardi and Ashkenazi prayer books included substitutes for parts of the services that require a quorum, though not for Mourner’s Kaddish (Ashkenazi 1843: 2a–3b; Baer 1868: 120–121).¹⁷ Rabbi Scheinberg adapted and simplified these texts as a Kaddish substitute. His effort addressed “[o]ne who would like to say the mourner’s kaddish in the absence of a minyan, but to stick with words and themes that are very close to the words and themes in the Kaddish” (The Rabbinical Assembly 2020).

While most of the suggested substitutes came from rabbinic figures or organizations, laypeople also contributed to the discourse. Thus, for example, Sheryl Pockrose wrote a review of the new release of Anita Diamant’s 1998 book on Jewish mourning practices. Ms. Pockrose noted the contemporary relevance of the book’s contents:

While this book was published before the current need for social distancing, the descriptions of alternative ways of reciting Kaddish, as well as poems or meditations that could be used at other times, can be helpful in creating meaningful remembrances in a smaller setting (Pockrose 2020).

¹⁴ The shade text was not included in the forerunner of this prayer book (Va-’ani tefillati 1998).

¹⁵ Rabbi Golinkin also cited Rabbi Edelstein’s Kaddish composition, but he took exception to the inclusion of the first line of the classic Kaddish (Golinkin 2020c, d).

¹⁶ For an alternative translation by Rabbi Geoffrey Goldberg, see Golinkin (2020c).

¹⁷ Substitutes are offered for *hatsi kaddish*, *barkhu*, and *kedusha* of *shaharit*, *kaddish shalem* (presumably for all the services), *hatsi kaddish* and *kedusha* of *minha*, and *barkhu* of *’arvit*. In the context of the present discussion, Mourner’s Kaddish is conspicuously absent.

Fig. 3 Rabbi Jan Uhrbach and Rabbi Ed Feld, Prayer in Place of Mourner's Kaddish, 13 March 2020, available for download from the website of the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly, <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/prayer-when-there-no-minyan-say-kaddish>

Conservative rabbis were proponents of Kaddish shades, though there were Orthodox rabbis in America who also advocated this route (Winberg 2020).¹⁸

New shades of Kaddish that had not previously been discussed were also suggested. For example, Rabbi Aaron Alexander and Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt—both serving at the Conservative Adas Israel Congregation in Washington DC—recommended “Recite the kaddish in a virtual gathering without central *y’hei sh’mei rabbah line*, but rather taking a mindful pause for a moment” (The Rabbinical Assembly 2020).

Drawing on their previous experience in producing prayer books, Rabbi Jan Uhrbach and Rabbi Ed Feld fashioned an English prayer that included a few Hebrew lines, titled “Prayer in Place of Mourner’s Kaddish” (Fig. 3).¹⁹ Unlike Kaddish, the prayer included a directed memorial for the deceased who was to be mentioned by name. This is reminiscent of the *Yizkor* memorial prayer.²⁰ Thus some of the themes of this substitute—such as the mention of death—diverted from the classic Kaddish. Moreover, the opening of the prayer was not drawn from the classic prayers for the deceased.²¹ Nonetheless, the supplicant openly referenced Kaddish and the forum in which it is traditionally recited. When the supplicant says “May Your name, Adonai, be elevated and sanctified everywhere on earth and may peace reign everywhere,” there are echoes of the first and last lines of Kaddish.²² The concluding line in Hebrew uses the same line as the Kaddish conclusion, tying the new prayer with its additional foci to the Kaddish of old.

The prayer was posted on the website of the Conservative Movement’s rabbinic organization (The Rabbinical Assembly 2020). The bracketed subtitle—“to be used in exigent circumstances only”—may indicate the authors’ concern, lest this substitute becomes the norm and forestalls the need to gather as a community. In this vein, the authors included an explicit prayer for a return to communal settings: “[M]ay we soon be able to once again safely gather in holiness and joy.” This accords with a note in the authors’ pre-pandemic prayer book:

¹⁸ Rabbi Seth Winberg credited Orthodox Rabbi Benjamin J. Samuels of Congregation Shaarei Tefillah in Newton, Massachusetts.

¹⁹ For their previous experience see Feld et al. (2010, 2016).

²⁰ *Yizkor* is recited in the Ashkenazi rite once on each of the three festivals and on the Day of Atonement. It is recited in the synagogue by those who have lost dear ones. While *Yizkor* is commonly recited as part of the synagogue service, according to Jewish law it does not require a quorum.

²¹ The opening line uses the Biblical phrase *Elohei ha-ruhot le-khol basar* (Numbers 27: 16), that is rendered as “God of the spirit of all flesh.” Versions of the phrase have been used in liturgical poems for Simhat Torah and for wedding celebrations (Siddur Raschi 1911: 148 §308; Machsor vitry 1891: 600 §492), and Rabbi Edelstein’s pre-Corona Kaddish substitute.

²² Rabbi Golinkin cited this option, though he took exception to this line which is a translation of Kaddish (2020a, b, c, d).

Prayer in Place of Mourner's Kaddish

When a Minyan Cannot Gather (to be used in exigent circumstances only)

רבּונו של עולם,

אֱלֹהֵי הַרוּחוֹת לְכָל־בָּשָׂר

Ribbono shel olam,
elohei ha-ruhot l'khol basar —

Master of the world, God of the spirit of all flesh, it is revealed and known before You that it is my fervent desire to praise Your name, and to remember and honor my beloved:

father/mother/son/daughter/ husband/wife/partner/brother/sister/_____
[the name and relation of the person may be inserted]

by reciting the Mourner's Kaddish in the company of a *minyan*. Though circumstances prevent me from doing so, may my yearning and prayers find favor in Your eyes, and be accepted and received before You as if I had prayed that Kaddish.

May you grant hope and healing to all who suffer, and may we soon be able to once again safely gather in holiness and joy.

May Your name, Adonai, be elevated and sanctified everywhere on earth and may peace reign everywhere.

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרְמִי

הוּא יַעֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ

וְעַל כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל [וְעַל כָּל־

יִשְׂרָאֵל תְּבַל], וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

Oseh shalom bimromav
hu ya-aseh shalom aleinu
v'al kol yisrael [v'al kol
yosh'vei teiveil], v'imru amen.

This prayer is adapted from Siddur Lev Shalem by Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

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• JAN UHRBACH & ED FELD

The Kaddish is not a private prayer; rather, it is recited in the community with a *minyan* present. In that context, the mourner affirms that tragedy has not separated him or her from God or the Jewish people, and, in turn, the communal response then constitutes an acknowledgment of the mourner (Feld et al. 2016: 58; and with slight changes Feld et al. 2010: 26).

Ironically, it is this communal element that makes private recitations of Kaddish shades so unsatisfying.

Replacements

Another type of substitute could be termed replacements—acts other than Kaddish recital that memorialize the deceased or grant merit to the soul of the departed. These suggestions do not attempt to mimic Kaddish; rather they advocate alternative action. For example, in March 2020 the Sydney Beth Din issued a public letter that included the following guideline:

In relation to Kaddish, be assured that the mitzvah of protecting one's fellow Jew certainly gives nachas to the soul as much as Kaddish if not more. There are also many other mitzvos that can be performed in honour of the departed. Please contact your own Rabbi for further advice (Ulman et al. 2020).

Other replacements were also suggested during the pandemic. Reconstructionist Rabbi Emily Cohen reported that her community in New York City was hosting a “Virtual Kaddish, where people call in from all over to speak about loved ones and connect with others in mourning” (Cohen 2020). One writer mentioned the possibility of studying *Mishnah*—an anagram for the word *Neshama* (soul)—though he acknowledged that this was “a less-than-perfect stand-in for Kaddish” (Subar 2020). In Israel, Orthodox Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon advocated giving charity, performing acts of kindness, or sponsoring Torah classes (Rimon 2020).²³

Those who advocated replacements did so without reference to precedent. Notwithstanding, sources lend support to the notion that Kaddish can be replaced. Two such texts demonstrate possible roots of replacements.

In Frankfurt-am-Maine Rabbi Yuzpa Han Noirlingen (1570–1637) wrote that it was more important to study than to recite Kaddish:

Indeed, this rectification [*tikkun*; referring to Kaddish] is only for the unlearned, but Torah study is seven-fold more effective than all the prayers.

Rabbi Noirlingen continued with an action deemed even more worthwhile:

And if the son innovates Torah novellae, there is no measure to the honor that his father merits through this in the Heavenly assembly.

²³ Because Rabbi Rimon was discussing the possibility of catch-up Kaddish (see below), he also advocated taking advantage of opportunities to recite different types of Kaddish; namely, leading prayer services which include *hatsi kaddish* and *kaddish shalem*, or reciting *kaddish de-rabbanan* after Torah study.

Thus Rabbi Noirlingen presented a hierarchy where Kaddish was the lowest rung designed for the uneducated. Rabbi Noirlingen concluded with the following counsel:

Therefore, every mourner over a father or mother, should be diligent with great effort to increase in his learning as much as he is able according to his wisdom (Noirlingen 1723: 192b).

Some two centuries later, another hierarchy was offered by Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried (1804–1886) in his abridged compendium of Jewish law:

Even though recital of the Kaddish and the prayers assist the parents, nevertheless they are not the essence. Rather, the essence is that the children should walk in a straight path, because in this they grant merit to the parents (Ganzfried 1864: §26:22).

After citing a proof text, Rabbi Ganzfried turned to parents:

And a person should charge his children to hold fast a particular commandment, and if they fulfill [the parent's bidding] it is considered greater than the Kaddish.

Rabbi Ganzfried writing in Ungvár (then in the Kingdom of Hungary) offered a different preference scheme from the one offered by his predecessor in Frankfurt-am-Main. Both hierarchies identified Kaddish at the bottom of the ladder.

Following the approach that Kaddish should only be said by sons (an issue outside the present discussion), Rabbi Ganzfried concluded: “And this is a good rectification [*tikkun*] even for someone who does not have sons, only daughters.” If Kaddish could not be said, there were other acts that could be done. In essence, these replacements were preferable to Kaddish recital.

While rabbis mentioned shades and replacements, they did not champion their use. The pandemic-related literature seldom discussed the applicability of these precedents to the coronavirus reality. Rabbis did not offer explanations for why they were not promoting these solutions. From the perspective of Jewish law, most of the suggestions did not raise any halakhic red flags. The existence of ample sources might have led rabbis to feel comfortable reproducing the ideas.

It could be that leaders felt that introducing substitutes would add further disruption to time-honored rituals at a time when life, and Jewish communal life in particular, was so unsettled. It could also be that rabbis were hesitant to suggest substitutes for fear of long-term consequences: If there were rabbinically approved substitutes for Kaddish, perhaps they would be preferred beyond the pandemic?

Even when substitutes were mentioned, they were not embraced by mourners. It is likely that the shades and replacements were perceived as a pale shadow of the real Kaddish experience. The substitutes did not offer the palliative energy that Kaddish recital in a communal setting has come to provide. The responsive soundscape associated with Kaddish was sorely missing. It appears that mourners want to say Kaddish, not some other prayer, and they want to say it in a communal

setting. Seen in this light, it seems that Kaddish substitutes—both shades and replacements—are unlikely to impact Jewish practice beyond the pandemic.

Workarounds

A third group of solutions might be termed workarounds; that is, a method of circumventing a limitation in a system. The system—in this case the traditional Jewish system of law, ritual, and practice—says that Kaddish should be recited at a prescribed time, and this recital requires the presence of a quorum. Hence a workaround would circumvent one of the ritual's elements: *presence*, *quorum*, *recital*, or *prescribed time*. I set aside the idea of redefining Kaddish itself, since I included that under the substitutes rubric. Even if a mourner decided that the Kaddish text was non-negotiable, what of the other elements of the ritual? Virtual quorums discussed above challenged the notion of *presence*: A quorum was required, as was recital by the mourner, but presence was expanded to include virtual presence. Other workarounds include quorumless Kaddish, proxy Kaddish, and catch-up Kaddish.

Quorumless Kaddish

One workaround addressed the *quorum* requirement, arguing that Kaddish could be said without a quorum. The quorum requirement was recalibrated as a preferable element of Kaddish, but not *condicio sine qua non*. According to this line, in times of necessity, Kaddish could be recited without a quorum. This path—which we might term quorumless Kaddish—was not widely touted as a solution during the pandemic. The idea was raised and rejected by Conservative Rabbi David Golinkin (2020c, d). From the perspective of Jewish law, it is difficult to identify sources that provide a basis for quorumless Kaddish, and at first blush the notion goes against a central element of the mourner's prayer: the quorum requirement.

As Rabbi Golinkin pointed out, the idea of quorumless Kaddish harks back to the Second World War, when it was suggested by the Committee on Army and Navy Religious Activities (CANRA) as a solution for soldiers and sailors serving in the US forces in distant locations.

CANRA published various brochures on chaplaincy activities during the war years. CANRA also responded to questions of Jewish law that confronted Jews serving in the US forces. This task was entrusted in the hands of the Responsa Committee consisting of Reform Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof (1892–1990), Orthodox Rabbi Leo Jung (1892–1987), and Conservative Rabbi Milton Steinberg (1903–1950). After the war, a collection of the Committee's responsa was published under the title *Responsa in War Time*.²⁴ In his preface, the director of CANRA, Rabbi Aryeh Lev (1917–1983), noted the value of this document:

²⁴ The work was republished in 1961 and was recently made available on Sefaria (Collected responsa in wartime no date). The 1961 edition was retyped and did not include the index that appeared in the first edition (*Responsa in war time* 1947: 87–[96]; *Responsa in war time* 1961).

The present pamphlet reflects the remarkable agreement which was effected by the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis on CANRA in reference to the practical problems of Jewish law confronting the Jewish chaplain and his GI congregation (Respona in War Time 1947: [3]).

This collection, those behind the effort, as well as the respona—all deserve further attention. Of the 48 published respona, 23 deal with death and its accompanying rituals. One responsum is germane to our discussion:

May a soldier or sailor who is on lonely outpost duty for a considerable period of time (as for example, men on coast guard duty) in the event of Yahrzeit say Kaddish alone, since he cannot possibly assemble a minyan? (Respona in War Time 1947: 51).

Like most of the respona in the slender volume, CANRA's answer is succinct, without discussion and without references. Two solutions are offered to the soldier or sailor; the first offers a justification for quorumless Kaddish (I will presently return to CANRA's second solution):

Just as in the case of the tefillah it is preferable to say it with the congregation and yet it is permitted to be said silently alone, so the Kaddish which is primarily part of the congregational response may also be recited silently alone.

Why was quorumless Kaddish not widely discussed as a solution for those in isolation during pandemic? From the perspective of communal leaders, advocating this route would undermine an important aspect of community, and undercut the notion of mourning as a communal undertaking.

The aforementioned Rabbi Freehof returned to the topic of quorumless Kaddish after the war when he was asked about the elderly or sick who could not come to synagogue to recite Kaddish on the anniversary of death. In this case, Rabbi Freehof seemed more hesitant to provide a license:

Now in modern times the feeling of piety at the *yahrzeit* date is one of the justifiable motives which urges people to come to public worship. It would surely not be for the good of Judaism if we weakened this motivation and allowed the spread of the custom of saying Kaddish on the *yahrzeit* at home (Freehof 1963: 17).²⁵

From the perspective of mourners, the lack of community, as represented by the quorum, transforms the practice from a communal enterprise into private bereavement. This is not just a change of venue; it alters the essence of the responsive ritual.

Given that Kaddish recitation without a quorum was not encouraged during COVID curfews and quarantines, and considering its shaky legal underpinnings, it is

²⁵ Rabbi Freehof concluded with a slightly different solution than what he had recommended as part of CANRA: "If the person ... is eager to recite the [Mourner's] Kaddish and cannot come to the synagogue, which would be preferable, then let him study a chapter in the Bible and recite the [Rabbi's] Kaddish after it" (Freehof 1963: 18. Cf. Golinkin 2020c, d). This too is a form of quorumless Kaddish. For more discussion, see the divergent Reform opinions in *Teshuvot for the Nineties* (1997: 23–28).

unlikely that quorumless Kaddish will gain purchase in Jewish communities beyond the pandemic.

Proxy Kaddish

Another workaround redefines the notion of mourner's *recital*, and has been termed proxy Kaddish. A person other than the mourner is deputized to recite Kaddish for the deceased on behalf of the mourner. This is a recognized rubric that has been employed throughout the ages.²⁶ Proxy Kaddish was widely used during the pandemic, in two forms: community-based proxy Kaddish and international proxy Kaddish.

Communities offered proxy Kaddish services when synagogues were open but individuals quarantined. The United Synagogue in Britain, for example, advertised this as a free service which was titled the Kaddish Pairing Project (Wilson 2021; United Synagogue no date).

Waves of the pandemic struck at different times in different places; thus while one community was under strict lockdown, another community was free to gather for prayer. The World Wide Web and the speed of information transfer meant that the ability to appoint a proxy was unhampered by local lockdowns or personal isolation orders. In South Africa, for example, the only legally active quorum in Johannesburg was held in a home for the elderly. That service reportedly recited Kaddish on behalf of some 1200 people from all over the world (Moshe 2020; Shepherd 2020).²⁷ Jewish organizations with branches around the globe advertised proxy Kaddish services over the internet when local prayer gatherings were impossible (Chabad no date).

Proxy Kaddish was CANRA's second solution for soldiers and sailors during the Second World War who were unable to join a quorum to recite Kaddish:

Furthermore, the CANRA will arrange for Kaddish to be recited in a congregation in honor of the departed relative of any soldier or sailor who writes in to CANRA or makes such arrangement with the chaplain. The soldier or sailor should report the date of the Yahrzeit and the name of the relative (Respona in War Time 1947: 51).

Given the popularity of proxy Kaddish during the coronavirus outbreak, might this solution gain traction after the pandemic? To answer that question, it is imperative to understand the mechanism's roots. Classic proxy Kaddish was a service provided for a fee; hence the wealthy were able to take advantage of the possibility. Those who subcontracted Kaddish were childless men or women who made arrangements before their demise for Kaddish to be said for their souls, or those who were not disposed to exert the effort to regularly attend synagogue services, or people who were unable to recite Kaddish. This last group included women in traditional settings

²⁶ Proxy Kaddish was featured in Nathan Englander's *Kaddish.com* (2019). This fictional novel explores the visceral commitment to Kaddish that I mentioned in the introduction.

²⁷ By request, that quorum also performed fifteen baby-namings for girls around the world (Shepherd 2020).

that did not provide an opportunity for female Kaddish recital. It must be said that outsourcing Kaddish has been criticized when a person is able to recite the prayer but hires someone else out of convenience. Thus vicarious Kaddish recital has been adjudged a legitimate but non-preferred route (Usiel 1935: 11–14; Freehof 1969: 180–181; Goldstein no date).

I have yet to find evidence of proxy Kaddish during previous pandemics, presumably because everyone in the Kaddish reciter's vicinity would have been under the same quarantine conditions. For example, in the 1786 epidemic that hit Tiberias, the local Hasidic community went into isolation. In post-epidemic correspondence, the community emphasized that it had religiously continued to pray in a quarantined courtyard quorum (Cooper 2020: 7–8).

Modern telecommunication facilitates the possibility of reaching someone in a distant land to ask them to recite Kaddish. In our times, the internet has expanded this possibility exponentially. That explains why proxy Kaddish services were popular during COVID-19. The deep roots of the mechanism explain why Jewish organizations that are not renowned for blurring the lines of traditional Jewish law and practice advocated this solution. Might more mourners avail themselves of this service once coronavirus has passed?

It would seem doubtful that beyond the pandemic we will see a significant change as a result of pandemic-related proxy Kaddish. This assessment is based on three points: First, while halakhists justified the practice, they also critiqued it, declaring that it was preferable that the mourner should recite Kaddish, not a subcontractor. De facto that position may have been challenged, but de jure it remained the standard position. Second, subcontracting Kaddish has existed and been employed—despite the critique—in non-pandemic conditions. Even internet-based proxy Kaddish existed before coronavirus (Dolstein 2019; Hadassah no date). There is no reason to assume that the present pandemic will result in an increase in the use of this contentious service once the pandemic is over. Third, Kaddish recital by a proxy does not answer personal bereavement needs. The mechanism merely provides for the desire to pray on behalf of the deceased.²⁸ Proxy Kaddish does not address the grieving process of the mourner. In this vein, Rabbi Freehof reiterated CANRA's proxy Kaddish suggestion in his later responsum, while acknowledging that it was not always adequate: “[T]he very fact that this inquiry has been made indicates that there are some who would like to say Kaddish themselves, even though they cannot attend the services” (Freehof 1963: 15). Thus we can expect outsourcing Kaddish to continue as it did before Corona, and it is unlikely that the pandemic will significantly affect its prevalence.

Catch-Up Kaddish

A further possible workaround focuses on the *prescribed time*: Kaddish is traditionally recited during the yearlong mourning period and on the recurring anniversary

²⁸ Even that point is subject to dispute, as some authorities opine that Kaddish is only efficacious if recited by children of the deceased.

of death. Could someone who missed Kaddish because of lockdown or quarantine, catch-up on the lost opportunity at a later date? This possibility was discussed by Orthodox Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon during the pandemic (Rimon 2020).

Rabbi Rimon rehearsed the prevalent customs for the Kaddish recital period. Kaddish was designated to be said for twelve months—the maximum period a wicked person’s soul stays in Gehenna (*Mishnah*, Eduyot 2: 10). As a sign that the deceased was not evil, mourners do not say the prayer for the entire period. This custom has two iterations: Ashkenazi Jews cease reciting Kaddish after eleven months, while Sephardi Jews stop for the first week of the twelfth month before continuing until the end of the month.

In the circumstances of the question posed to Rabbi Rimon, the mourner wanted to catch up on days lost due to stay-at-home orders by continuing to recite Kaddish in the twelfth month. Rabbi Rimon explained that not reciting Kaddish in the twelfth month is an indication of respect for the deceased parent. Adding days of Kaddish recital in that month would contravene the spirit of those days.

There was no discussion of catch-up Kaddish beyond the twelve-month mourning period, or of missed Kaddish on the anniversary of death. Presumably they were not to be given serious consideration.

Rabbi Rimon concluded the responsum by posing the question “What can be done?” and suggesting substitutes as a means of offsetting the lost days.

Missing Kaddish and exploring the possibility of catching up was not a pandemic-specific problem (Wineberg no date). In his short essay “Kaddish in Cambodia,” Élie Wiesel (1990: 132) entertained the idea. Given that catch-up Kaddish was not widely discussed during the pandemic, it is doubtful that the coronavirus experience will significantly change the catch-up landscape.

Conclusions

The taxonomy of solutions that I have outlined is a suggested frame for considering how individuals and communities have coped with the Corona Kaddish conundrum.

To be sure, one might advocate different terms or a different classification. Moreover, there may have been other solutions that have not been widely documented or that may still crop up. The categories I have catalogued could be augmented with further examples and nuanced iterations. Furthermore, it is difficult to measure which solutions were favored, whether they were gender-specific, and what the distribution of each path was. In the present context, I have offered sample examples for each solution from a variety of locations, without making a claim for comprehensiveness.

Indeed, the tale of Kaddish in Corona could be told in other ways, and further lines of inquiry might be explored. Which solutions were preferred by particular communities or denominations? Can we identify differences in the rabbinic

guidance and responsa based on gender?²⁹ To what extent was the adoption of a particular path by mourners dependent on movement affiliation, ethnicity, gender, urban landscape, centralization of rabbinic leadership, or local government restrictions? Were there mourners who did not embrace any of the suggested solutions and just stopped saying Kaddish, and how did they cope with the grieving process? Providing answers to these questions and tracing the storylines of particular sectors of the Jewish community require different research methods that are beyond the present scope.

Notwithstanding the outstanding questions, the collated data provide for initial observations. Thus, liberal communities were more willing to orchestrate virtual quorums than communities on the spectrum of Orthodoxy. Notwithstanding, some Orthodox communities allowed virtual participation where a quorum was physically present. Other Orthodox authorities went further, permitting Kaddish in a virtual quorum but not other quorum-dependent prayers (Sharon 2020; Lau 2020). Conservative rabbis advocated shades of Kaddish. Balcony quorums were popular in Haredi enclaves.

More importantly, the prosopographic image that I have sketched tells a story about the contemporary Jewish community. The value of tracing the gamut of paths lies not in the specific terms and scheme, nor in the textual genealogy of a particular solution. Rather, the significance lies in the common characteristics that emerge from the collective study: what the cluster of possibilities says about Jewish tradition and about Jewish ritual in the past, present, and future.

Comparing the present experience with past encounters raises the question why such a collection of Kaddish solutions was not a feature of previous pandemics. We have no comparable evidence from the Spanish flu (1918–1920) or from other pandemics of such a gamut of possibilities for Kaddish during quarantine. It is possible that we now have tools to access and document practices that existed during past pandemics but were hidden from sight. This is unlikely, since we can presume that some evidence of pandemic-specific Kaddish solutions would have survived, just as records of other aspects of Jewish life under the cloud of disease survived.

It seems more likely that in the past, mourners accepted that Kaddish recital was simply not possible in certain pandemic-related scenarios. An example of such a reaction is evinced in the lack of animated discussion across denominational lines of solutions for other rituals that were hampered by COVID-19. For example, solutions for communal reading of the Torah were not discussed with the same fervor and devotion as solutions for Kaddish. This may have been the norm during past pandemics for all quorum-related rituals, including Kaddish. What then is different about the coronavirus reality that spawned such an abundance of solutions, across denominations and across regions?

One way to understand the gamut of solutions is to realize that this is the first pandemic of the digital age—a period characterized by information availability and sharing. The unprecedented digitization of content and uploading of

²⁹ In addition to the female rabbis cited above, see Hashkes (no date.) For a broader perspective on responsa by Orthodox women see Cooper (2021b: 393–403).

culture provides access and increased exposure. Voices—rabbinic and lay—that may not have been heard or may not have had influence, reach new audiences. This, in turn, triggers further conversation and creativity. The increased volume of voices participating in the discussion—both in terms of sound and in terms of quantity—contributes to the erosion of central and local rabbinic authority. The COVID-19 experience is, therefore, incomparable to pandemics that predate the current information era.

Before the onset of the coronavirus, scholars explored the effects of technological developments on religious communities (Campbell 2010, 2013, 2015; Neriya-Ben Shahar 2017). The coronavirus infused this field with new research windows, as the pandemic “marked a unique and important moment” for the interface of contemporary religion and technology (Campbell 2021). Religious leaders and scholars of religion have responded with a panoply of studies, essays, reflections, opinions, and documentary accounts, focusing on different religions and various faith communities (*CoronAsur* no date; Campbell 2020a, b, c, d; Campbell and Shepherd 2021). The present documentary account and real-time analysis of the Corona Kaddish experience contributes to the discourse on the social impact of digital religion.

While the technology perspective focuses on the supply and consumption of information, it is also possible to understand the surplus of solutions by looking at the demand and expectations of mourners. The elevation of the personal journey and individual religious experience over communal adherence to practices of yesterday increased the anticipation of individual mourners that a means to recite Kaddish should be provided. The notion that an individual might chronicle his or her Kaddish journey rather than just say Kaddish, and that others might be interested in that personal odyssey, is indicative of this tendency. This reflects a recognition of the therapeutic value of the Kaddish, and more broadly an evolving relationship with the traditional prayer. Thus mourners demanded adaptation of the traditional ritual and innovation to suit the pandemic reality, so that they could recite Kaddish in a meaningful manner.

As with the supply side, so too with the demand side: the story of Kaddish in the times of the coronavirus taps into modern trends of profound individualism in contemporary religious experience, particularly in America (Bellah 1985; Roof 1993; Wuthnow 1998; Cohen and Eisen 2000). Scholars have demonstrated how religious fulfillment of the “sovereign self” trumps dogma, institutional rules, and traditions. This autonomy does not preclude the quest for community (Eisen 1998). The expectation that the Corona Kaddish conundrum could be solved, that there was a plethora of solutions, and that Kaddish was still a communal enterprise fits the model of individualized religion in a communal context.

Yet it is important to realize that the emphasis on the needs of the consumer of religion does not mean that the quest for Kaddish solutions was rootless. Indeed, the entire account bespeaks a commitment to the time-honored ritual. None of the suggestions discussed were created *ex nihilo*; rather, the solutions drew on existing—though often forgotten or neglected—texts. Links to the Jewish bookcase served as counterweights to unbridled change and freewheeling innovation. This is emblematic of the ongoing evolution of Jewish tradition, a heritage steeped in citation and moored to textual sources (Marmor 2014).

The image that emerges from the array of solutions is that there is a latent store of rich sources. These slumbering resources hibernate until such time as they are called upon by the community. The fact that no entirely new rituals were proposed speaks to the vitality of Jewish tradition and suggests that perhaps other hibernating texts can be awoken for issues that plague contemporary Jewry. This dormant trove could undergird renewal.

From the perspective of Jewish ritual, two somewhat contradictory points can be made. First, Jewish ritual practice may not be as frozen as many people think and experience. Perhaps inertia and the gravitational pull of preservation over innovation keep existing rituals in orbit.³⁰ Yet the world has been shaken like a snow globe: particles flying in all directions, and what appeared to have been settled is suddenly in a chaotic swirl. As the shaking stops, the particles are left in suspension as they float back down to ground. It is unclear where these disturbed flakes will land. The final chapter of the tale of Corona Kaddish has yet to be written.

While I have attempted to assess whether the solutions will survive the pandemic, I acknowledge that any stance I have taken will be moot, since the Jewish people—an amorphous body unaware of its power to shape Jewish practice—will choose its own adventure and decide these questions over time.³¹ This leads to a second point from the perspective of Jewish ritual.

With a smorgasbord of possibilities, practitioners of Judaism demonstrated a commitment to the traditional ritual, and declared—anonously and perhaps unconsciously—that Kaddish must continue. Moreover, ad hoc solutions and workarounds were deemed preferable over shadow images and replacement rituals, suggesting the resilience of the ritual and the need for communal settings for its performance. Mourners want to recite Kaddish in the presence—physical or virtual—of others, even when a pandemic is raging.

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³⁰ On the tension between preservation and innovation in Jewish tradition, see Cooper (2012: 223–228).

³¹ For this principle in other contexts associated with contemporary changes in Jewish law, particularly women serving as respondents in Jewish law, see Cooper (2020: 403–406).

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