

# “WHAT DID THE WAR,

## *The Changing Face of Israel's Female Soldiers*

SAMUEL M. KATZ

T

HE OPERATORS, weighed down by their heavy Kevlar body armor, moved silently across the unpaved street strewn with wild grass and litter. Surprise was key on this dark and balmy night in the Galilee. As stray dogs barked aimlessly at the darkened summer skies, the Border Guard anti-terrorist policemen clutched their M16 assault rifles and mini-Uzi submachine guns. It had been a long and bloody day for the border policemen, and adrenaline was keeping them sharp and focused.

Earlier that morning, at the Meron Junction near Safed, a Palestinian suicide bomber detonated himself on the Egged No. 361 bus, killing nine and wounding dozens. The Shin Bet, masters at picking up the shattered remnants of the intelligence puzzle left in the wake of each suicide blast, had managed to assemble a short list of men—and women—who had assisted and transported the bomber, West Bank native Jihad Hamada, toward his target. The fact that the suspects, members of the noted Bakri clan, were Israeli Arabs, full-fledged citizens of the Jewish State, was inconsequential to the cops lined up outside the house in the village of Ba'ana. Politics meant little to them. All that mattered that August night in Galilee were the



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YOU DO IN  
MOMMY?"



details of their target. How was its door fixed to its frame? How many men were inside? Did they have weapons? Were there explosives in the location? Were women and children inside the house?

The lead Shin Bet investigator was after evidence to use at trial and intelligence to prevent additional bombings. So the Border Guard special operations unit was tasked with getting inside the home quickly, securing everyone inside before the suspects could resist or compromise material needed for the Shin Bet investigation. Just before 3 a.m. the order came to enter the two-story

**“I WANT TO BE WHERE THE ACTION IS. I CAN SHOOT AND FIGHT JUST LIKE A MAN. I JUST WISH THE ARMY WOULD GIVE US THE CHANCE TO PROVE OUR WORTH.”**

home. The operators breached the door and then, with flashlights mounted on their weapons, fanned throughout the house. The suspects were rousted from their beds, searched for explosives and weapons and then dragged off to a nearby police station for questioning. A middle-aged woman living in the house, wearing a traditional black night dress, cursed in Arabic at the officers aiming their M16s at her head, screaming that the Jews had no right to be inside her family's house. She flailed her arms while the officers restrained her, enraged at the prospect that she was going to be searched by a male. But one of the operators smiled as she revealed a swath of long red hair fastened inside the black balaclava that concealed her identity. With her M16 assault rifle slung across her body armor, she said in perfectly accented Arabic, “I am a girl and you are going to be searched!”

For as long as there has been a State of Israel, the image of Israel's women soldiers, wearing a short skirt and carrying an Uzi ready to be fired, has been one that the world has accepted and Israel happily sold.

Postcards on sale throughout Israel still showcase pretty 19-year-old girls in olive drab wearing colorful berets and cradling loaded weapons. Yet for much of Israel's 55-year history, women might have indeed been conscripted to serve two years of mandatory military duty, but, for the most part, they served in the rear, far from front lines, as secretaries in combat units. Today, however, Israel is a nation at war without a prescribed front line. The war is along Israel's frontiers and inside its cities. Israel's female combatants have been propelled into situations they have not faced since Israel's bloody struggle for independence. They are now finding themselves in combat and dying in the line of duty.

During the years before, and during the struggle for an independent Jewish state, women played an important role along the front lines. The early Zionist settlers promoted equality of the sexes, and women were full-fledged combatants in *Ha'Shomer*, “The Guard,” the first organized Jewish fighting force in Palestine. During WWI Sarah Aahronson ran the highly successful NILI espionage network which assisted the British against the Turks (and when captured, committed suicide rather than risk betraying her comrades). In 1920, three women fighters died in the battle of Tel Hai, the isolated northern outpost commanded by the legendary Joseph Trumpeldor. Women joined many underground groups, serving as full combatants in the Irgun and Lehi. Geulah Cohen, a former member of Knesset, was a legendary underground fighter. In the Haganah (Israel's pre-independence army) and its elite *Palmach* strike units, women received extensive weapons training, and made up one third of the total strength of the latter. Some of these female guerrillas and guards were known throughout Palestine for their marksmanship and courage under fire, though they served mainly in support roles. Women achieved their greatest notoriety as weapons smugglers, since polite British soldiers often declined to body-search them.

During WWII, Palestinian Jewish women, as well as men, volunteered to help the British war effort—often undertaking extraordinary missions deep inside enemy lines. Two such women, the poet Hannah Sennesh and Havivah Reik, were part of an elite 32-member intelligence unit parachuted into Eastern Europe to organize Jewish partisans and to provide transit for escaping Allied prisoners. Both were eventually caught, tortured and executed by the SS.

The 1948 War of Independence was the only one of Israel's wars in which women actually fought on all



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fronts as combatants beside men. In Tel Aviv, women anti-aircraft spotters and Bren gun crews helped fight off Egyptian air raids. A young German-born refugee, Rachel Stahl, commanded a *Palmach* company in attacks on the northern town of Safed, while in the southern desert women fought gallantly in the ranks of the *Palmach*'s "Negev" Brigade in defense of isolated and heavily outnumbered settlements. In the bitter battle for Jerusalem, Haganah women, most notably in the *Palmach*'s "Harel" Brigade, fought Arab irregulars and Arab Legion troops. A woman pilot, Yael Rom, even flew combat missions with the fledgling Israeli Air Force. In all, 12,000 women served in the newly formed IDF during the 1948 War; scores were killed and wounded in the conflict.

The establishment of the IDF and an influx of new immigrants into the fledgling new nation, along with the cessation of full-scale hostilities along Israel's newly established frontiers, ended, for the most part, the need to have women serving on the front lines and in harm's way. During the 1956 Sinai Campaign, three female Air Force officers—Captains Yael Rom, Yael Finkelshtein and Rina Levinson—were among the C-47 pilots who flew the 202nd Parachute Brigade to the Mitla Pass jump. But they were the exceptions.

Following the 1967 War, women routinely served inside the Occupied Territories without any special notice or attention. "I remember working in Nablus, and although we never left the base unless we had a weapon and had at least one male soldier along as an escort, serving inside the city, even walking around the Casbah wasn't considered dangerous, warranting special consideration," recalls Smadar, a 40-year-old computer executive who served as an intelligence officer in the West Bank in the early 1980s. "We used to eat in restaurants in the city and buy things from the market. I served there two years and never once had an incident." During the 1982 "Peace for Galilee" invasion of Lebanon, female soldiers were sometimes brought close to the front lines to assist in the day-to-day operation of their units but were always brought back to Israel—and safety—at night.

Under the provisions of the 1959 Military Service Law, all women reaching the age of 18 are conscripted into the IDF for two years (men serve for three). Thereafter, they are required to serve in the reserves until the age of 35, though few are ever recalled later than their 24th birthday, if ever at all. Married women, pregnant women, women with criminal records, and women able to prove contrary religious convictions are exempt. The advent of so many new immigrants from

**Soldiers from the Karakal infantry unit practice charging an "enemy" stronghold during offensive maneuvers.**

the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia has swelled the ranks of the conscripts to the point where several recruitment cycles of female soldiers have been canceled altogether, and service is often shortened from two years to 21 months.

The declining need for female conscripts has coincided with the increasing openness of military professions, once reserved solely for men, to women soldiers. For years women have wanted more from their two years of active duty than the chance to make coffee for commanders, or sit inside cramped offices doing menial tasks that belittled their motivation to serve and their intellectual capacity. Yet, according to Dr. Reuven Gal, former chief psychologist of the IDF, in his groundbreaking book, *The Making of the Israeli Soldier*, "Though many of the Israeli female soldiers grievously complain throughout their two years of military service that they are not utilizing their full intellectual potential, they nonetheless do not wish to better their situation by insisting on combat roles."

Indeed, the thinking in the 1990s was that it was acceptable for female soldiers to push the envelope and get dirty like the men (serving as instructors or in other gritty tasks) but that combat duty was out of the question. In a 1984 interview to *Washington Jewish Week*, Colonel Amira Dotan, commander of the Female Corps, said, "We [females] fight for equal rights and opportunity, but we fight also to remain women and not become a man."

Women wanting to do more during their military careers, even hoping for a chance to serve in a front line unit, were stymied up until 1995, when Alice Miller, a young flyer hopeful, turned her impossible dream to become an Israel Air Force top gun into a lawsuit in order to be allowed to endure the rigors, grueling exams and the nearly impossible chance (the attrition rate inside the IAF's pilots course is an astounding ninety percent) to earn her wings. Once the Miller case went to the Israeli Supreme Court and the decision came back in her favor, the doors in the IAF and the rest of the IDF have gradually swung open, allowing women to serve in a number of conventional and unique combat tasks.

According to the newspaper *Yediot Acharonot*, the IAF's first female combat pilot, known for security reasons only as Roni, has taken to the skies, even participating in sorties over enemy territory. The IAF has noted that female combat pilots are eligible to be sent on all missions, including those that fly over enemy lines. Roni is the first female fighter pilot, though several women fly as navigators in F-16s and

F-4 Phantoms. Other women serve as airborne paramedics in the IAF's elite para-rescue commando force known as Unit 669; female soldiers must remain behind inside their choppers, while the male operators deploy to rescue personnel trapped behind enemy lines.

Women also serve in combat roles in the Artillery Corps; in Air Force anti-aircraft batteries; in Combat Engineering units, especially as NBC (nuclear, biological and chemical) warfare specialists; in the Navy; and, in *Sablav*, or "Orchid," a military police unit stationed inside the volatile precinct of Hebron.

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ECEMBER 12, 2002

was a cold night by Hebron standards. The wind howled and the bone-numbing temperatures made security operations around the Tomb of the Patriarchs a challenging undertaking when the ambush came. Military policemen from the Israel Defense Forces *Sablav* unit were permanently stationed in the dangerous city, and they knew of the dangers. But *Sablav* was unique because more than one-third of the unit's personnel were females. Sergeant Maor Kalfon and Corporal Keren Ya'akobi, a 19-year-old volunteer from Hadera, were manning a roadblock when terrorists opened up with automatic weapons fire at close range. The two were killed before they could return fire. Corporal Ya'akobi was the first Israeli female combat fatality of the current Intifada and the first female soldier killed in the line of duty in many years.

*Sablav* was originally designed as a riot control force inside Hebron, primarily as a unit to deal with protests and other incendiary activities by Jewish settlers. But with the outbreak of renewed Palestinian attacks and terror in September 2000, *Sablav* became a front line combat force like the Golani Infantry Brigade and the paratroopers, even though so many of its personnel were females. The women, it should be noted, received the same combat training as the men. The women might have known how to use their M16 assault rifles and Motorola communications gear just like male soldiers, but the IDF was unprepared for female soldiers being buried in military ceremonies.

There was a time when, after male soldiers fell in battle, the female soldiers in the unit assembled at the grave and wept openly at their funerals. At Corporal



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(Top) A squad of female trainees learns how to evacuate a wounded comrade under fire. (Bottom) A female officer and her male partner patrol the streets of East Jerusalem.



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Ya'akobi's funeral, it was the male comrades in arms, who had patrolled Hebron with her and were often pushed through the fear and danger by her charismatic smile and infectious motivation, who openly cried—incapable of dealing with the death of the beautiful 19-year-old.

In an impassioned interview three days after his daughter's death, Yigal Ya'akobi told the newspaper

*Ma'ariv*, "I want to beg Keren's forgiveness. Her forgiveness that I always gave her what she wanted and that I never said no. I was against her serving in Hebron, but I always said, 'Keren I salute you, you are doing what you want because you believe in it even though I am against it.'" Keren was offered a slot in the officers' course and a chance to leave Hebron but because she was a

month away from earning her “combat certificate” she chose to remain with her unit.

The death of Corporal Ya’akobi, and the possibility that more female soldiers could be hurt, kidnapped or killed, shocked many inside the Israeli security establishment. “We all knew that something like this might happen,” claimed K., a retired intelligence officer, “but it was like 9/11, we all feared that it would happen but still were shocked and didn’t know how to react once it did.” The IDF and the Military Police did not alter their operational guidelines after Corporal Ya’akobi’s death. “The IDF is not reconsidering

the appointment of female soldiers to serve in front-line units after the death of Corporal Ya’akobi,” Chief Military Police Officer Brigadier-General Mickey Barel told the newspaper *Ha’aretz* the day after the incident in Hebron. “When women are posted on the front line, they have the same chance of getting fire as the men. *Sablav* will continue to perform its duties in Hebron as usual.”

The death of Corporal Ya’akobi underscores a debate that has gone on for years inside the Israeli defense establishment: Can the country bear body bags filled with dead female soldiers or, perhaps worse, female soldiers kidnapped and tortured and raped by terrorists?

The capture of Corporal Jessica Lynch in Iraq, along with other American female soldiers, and the rough treatment they received while in captivity, opened for debate what would happen if something similar happened to a female Israeli soldier. During the first week of fighting in 1948, a *Palmach* unit defending a water line was overrun and wiped out by Arab irregulars, who took one woman fighter alive. When her body was recovered, the appalling evidence of abuse, before and after death, was so traumatic that all women were pulled out of combat areas. The nation was almost overcome by its grief following the kidnapping and subsequent murder of Corporal Nachshon Wachsmann in October 1994 at the hands of Hamas terrorists. The prospects of such a scenario with a female soldier being held captive is too much to bear for even the most seasoned and veteran IDF commanders.

For all the discussion surrounding the combat role for women, the fact remains that a large number of female conscripts, who are as able as their male counterparts, are determined to make a difference in their nation’s defense. One unit where this motivation is expressed day in and day out is Karakal, a light infantry unit that is over 50 percent female and protects the border with Jordan.

Hila, a 19-year-old corporal in Karakal, is one of those soldiers who, by her confidence, leadership skills and motivation, is certainly on her way to a long and decorated career as an officer in one of the IDF top commando units. “I love the fact that I am on the front lines, with my M4 assault rifle in my hand, protecting my country,” Hila admits with pride from her base in southern Israel. “I worked very hard to get here. My basic training was four months long and was the same kind of instruction that the men received. I learned all my weapons and combat skills,

(Top) A foot soldier takes aim with her assault rifle. Women with a paratroop unit (bottom) stand guard outside Ramallah during “Operation Defensive Shield” in April 2002.



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and even though the training was very difficult and very physical, I was determined to make it.”

Karakal is an infantry force in which the women soldiers often have higher profiles than the men. Female soldiers patrolling the long border with Jordan often command squads and lead their male comrades on alerts and operational assignments along what is known as the Peace Border. Yet even though Karakal is officially a combat force, many of the females inside the unit are bitter about having been deployed to a relatively quiet front instead of the occupied territories, where they can really make a difference. “We have a lot to prove,” Hila complains. “The border is too quiet. I want to be where the action is, but this is where the army wants us to be. I can shoot and fight just like a man. I just wish the army would give us the chance to prove our worth.”

**I**F THE IDF IS STILL internally debating the role of women soldiers in its combat units, that argument was settled years ago in the National Police Border Guards. The Border Guards, Israel’s paramilitary police force, is a 25,000-plus force responsible for much of Israel’s internal security, including operations inside the West Bank and along the Gaza Strip. Up until a decade ago, women were not drafted into the ranks of the Border Guards in large numbers. The force was a professional entity, a favorite for Jews from the Middle Eastern diaspora and for the country’s Druze, Bedouin and Circassian minorities. Compared to the IDF and its elite formations, units that often attracted the country’s kibbutzniks and the best of the best, the Border Guard more often than not had the reputation as being a less-than-stellar force. But today the Border Guard has one of the toughest jobs of all the nation’s security forces—dealing on a daily basis with the both the Palestinian and Israeli populations inside the territories, Jerusalem, and throughout all of Israel. The fact that they are an active formation, with a newfound mission, has elevated their status in the minds of many men—and women—seeking a home upon their conscription. “There is one slot open for every three volunteers wanting to join us,” Border Guard commander David Tzur recently told an Israeli daily on the fiftieth anniversary of the Border Guards.

Because it has been far more egalitarian than the IDF in placing women in combat units, many female

conscripts now heading to the IDF’s Conscription Base openly seek a chance to wear the green beret and serve inside a unit that has a chance to see action—whether chasing a car thief near Taibe, along the Seam Line near Tulkarem, or hunting a suicide bomber following a Shin Bet alert in Tel Aviv. “Females serve in all facets of what we do,” claimed K., a Border Guard commander serving near Umm el Fahm and Jenin, “They man roadblocks, execute ambushes, search vehicles, arrest suspects and go in on raids. We train them, equip them and expect them to be able to do their jobs. In fact, we have women serving here that are better, stronger and smarter than men.”

Women have made great strides inside the ranks of the Border Guard and especially inside the ranks of the five Border Guard regional special operational units. These teams (“Alon” in the north, “Tzabar” in the center of the country, “Lavi” in Jerusalem, “Barak” in Tel Aviv and “Rotem” in the south) are combined anti-crime and counter-terrorist forces similar in mission and scope to IDF special operations units. “To get into one of these teams,” claims Superintendent N., deputy commander of Alon, “the women must pass a *gibush*, or physical and psychological selection process, and then upon acceptance into the squad, undergo an intense training regimen where they are operators, and they go on all the unit’s operations no matter what the risk.”

Inside the regional Border Guard teams, units that operate in full tactical kit as well as in plain clothes, women have been an asset. “If we are after a terrorist, or even a serial rapist, the bad guys would naturally be suspicious of two men sitting in a car,” says M., a former commander of Lavi. “But a female adds that element of legitimacy to plain-clothes operations.”

“There are, of course, dangers to this work,” M. adds. “The females must come face-to-face with terrorists and violent criminals, and they are often presented with that life-and-death question of shoot or be shot.”

Y., a petite though highly assertive 23-year-old detective in one of the Border Guard regional units assigned to temporary security duty in Jerusalem, is typical of the kind of women who are offered the chance to serve in one of Israel’s elite counter-terrorist units. “I didn’t want to join the army and sit behind a desk or make coffee. I come from a large family with many brothers, and I always knew I was

*Continued on page 62*

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## Female Soldiers *continued from page 47*

as tough as they were. I wanted to prove myself, and the Border Guards gave me that opportunity."

During Passover, assigned to Jerusalem for the massive security operation surrounding the chaos in the Old City on Easter Sunday and the Jewish Blessing of the *Kobanim*, Y. wears her Kevlar body armor and walks around the Old City clutching her M-16 assault rifle. "I am here to stop anything from happening," she says with pride as she takes a break and lights up a cigarette, "and the fact that I am a woman doesn't matter at all. The guys in the unit

have seen me in action. They have seen me kick down doors in East Jerusalem and go undercover in narcotics buy-and-bust operations. I will perform like them, and probably better," she says, referring to her male comrades. "In the field, when there is the threat of combat and death, no one cares if you are a man or a woman. They only care that you can do your job under fire!" Women assigned to these units provide Border Guard special unit commanders with an added asset. Male personnel are not permitted to search female suspects.

Still, even in the world of the Border Guard elite units, there are jobs that are not open to women. "Females do not serve in our undercover units," one regional team commander admitted. "The women would love to serve on missions inside the West Bank, or even inside Arab towns like Umm el Fahm or other villages in Galilee, but this isn't open to them yet. Maybe one day in the near future, females will also wear Arab dress and go into Palestinian towns to snatch terrorists."

Female officers also serve inside the ranks of the national police *Ya'sam*, or SWAT, teams, trained to respond to bus hijackings and executing high-risk arrest warrants.

The very nature of the current conflict,



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where shooting attacks and bombings are not only being perpetrated in Hebron or Gaza but in Hadera and Haifa, has blurred the lines of what is front line service for both male and female soldiers. On October 21, 2002, 14 people were killed and some 50 wounded when an Islamic Jihad car bomb containing about 100 kilograms of explosives was detonated next to the No. 841 Egged bus, while traveling along the Wadi Ara toward Hadera. The bus had pulled over at a bus stop when a jeep driven by a suicide bomber from Jenin approached from behind and exploded. Among the dead were three Border Guard policewomen who had worked near the site of the blast, at the Border Guard memorial where they helped the families of Border Guards killed in action cope with their losses.

"There really isn't a front line anymore," commented Gil Kleiman, spokesman for the Israel National Police, at a somber ceremony celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Border Guard and honoring those who have fallen in the line of duty. "Even though these females weren't in units where the likelihood of encountering the enemy was high, they were nevertheless victims of the terrorist strikes that all Israelis encounter."

Just before midnight in northern Israel near Jenin, where the West Bank and Israel proper blend into one, Border Guard operators (in full tactical kit) are manning a proactive roadblock looking for terrorists. Wearing black masks to conceal their identities, the operators—including 10 women—are looking for possible suicide bombers being smuggled into Israel for a strike the following morning. The women operators, like their male counterparts, lay on the prickly mountain weeds peering through their ACOG scopes at any oncoming vehicles. If bullets fly, they will be in the thick of the late-night fusillade. Hundreds of kilometers away, along the border with Jordan, Hila is gearing up for a late-night patrol of the frontier. Her face is covered in thick black camouflaging ink, and she double and then triple checks her assault rifle for the night out along the fence; night-vision equipment and fragmentation grenades are also taken along for the operation. When asked if she would want her daughter to follow in her footsteps, Hila pauses, suddenly realizing that the thirst for "action" has life-and-death consequences, and then admits, "No. I wouldn't want this for my daughter. This is dangerous and I wouldn't want my daughter to be in harm's way!"

### Kaddish *continued from page 51*

Henkin said, "Of course. Do you want me to say kaddish?"

"Kaddish? I don't know what you're talking about. Just do something that says I was a Jew."

When Frankfurter died in 1965, Professor Henkin said kaddish at a private memorial service in Washington, D.C. Among those present were Lyndon Johnson, who was then president, and former Secretary of State Dean Acheson. "I explained that it was not a prayer for the dead but a magnificent song of God's praise."

Eight years later, in 1973, when Professor Henkin's father died, some of his students started a tradition at Columbia Law School, right in Professor Henkin's office. Every afternoon, Jewish students would gather there so that he would not have to seek out a minyan. He could say kaddish without leaving the Law School. When his year of mourning was finished, students kept coming. That daily mincha minyan continues to this day, almost 30 years later.

In late June we hit another dry period at Ramath Orah's daily minyan. We went for three days without one. One day we were seven men and then for two days we got up to nine, but we never broke into the double digits. The die-hards, however, kept coming. But on Thursday even I had to stay home because Shira had to leave on an early flight to Washington for business. I had to get the children ready and onto the school bus. At 7:30, while I was serving breakfast, the phone rang. It was my friend Allan. "Professor Henkin insisted I call," he began. "We've got nine here. Can you make it?" I told him that I didn't have child care. "I'm sorry," I said. I felt awful. There was no minyan that day because of me. And no kaddish.

When we were in our second week of no daily minyan, one of my friends said, "Ari, you have to start thinking of yourself and not just the shul. Why don't you go somewhere else?" I explained that my goal was to get to shul to try to say kaddish and not necessarily to say kaddish. If I gave up and went elsewhere, there'd certainly be no minyan.

But a few days later I did give up. I sent an e-mail to the synagogue board. "Today, for the third day in a row, there was no minyan. I think we have to think seriously about shutting down the minyan for the summer. Just so you know what's coming: I'm gone as of Monday, Allan is going on a two-week honeymoon, Dan is moving to the beach, Professor Henkin is going to

Geneva, and on and on. We need to make a decision immediately."

I thought I knew the shul well, but the reaction surprised me. One of the regulars was especially furious. "Never!" he said. "You can't have a shul without a daily minyan. What am I to tell people when they call? Synagogue is closed for the summer? Nonsense. With or without you, with or without me, this synagogue will always be here. Ramath Orah will survive."

And so for the rest of the summer, Ramath Orah tried, at least, to have a daily minyan. Sometimes it succeeded, sometimes it didn't. But it opened every morning, like an old antiques shop that opened for business even if no customers came.

To me, kaddish is more for the living than for the dead. I believe that in my daily recitation of the prayer, I was coming to terms with who my father was and who I am. If I missed a day of kaddish, I suffered, not my father. Kaddish in way is a kind of afterlife. I knew my parents would be physically gone someday, but their kaddish would live on. I like to think of kaddish as a portal for the dead to connect to life. When I die, I want my children to say kaddish for me, but for themselves, too.

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