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December 5, 2011: Why Do We Mourn?

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Title: Why Do We Mourn?

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12/5/2011—I'm in Florida looking at assets, thinking about my father and reading Leon Wieseltier's 1998 book, *Kaddish*. Wieseltier is an orthodox raised, somewhat skeptical thinker, about my age. When his father died, he strictly followed the Jewish mourning custom of saying the mourner's prayer, the *Kaddish*, three times a day in the company of ten Jews—only men in most of these synagogues. I have mixed feelings about this book. The problem that it raises at its surface is whether or not to follow a very time-consuming tradition. This is a peculiarly Jewish issue, or at least an issue for certain Jews. It no longer makes sense to me. It's like asking whether remodeling your house is spiritually enriching because it takes up all your time. On the other hand, Wieseltier follows the path of his consciousness, which I am told is a blank spot for me. But couldn't I just follow the path of my consciousness for a year? Of course the *Kaddish* ritual adds Jewish religious philosophy to his thinking. But so does reading his book. Here is an example of such philosophy. At the beginning of the book, Wieseltier quotes the Jewish Rabbi and thinker Nahmanides—"the religious genius of Spanish Jewry in the thirteenth century." Nahmanides's first answer to the question of why we mourn is this: "It was the destiny of man to live forever, but as a consequence of that ancient sin, human beings have gone down to the slaughter." Death separates us from our true nature. Wieseltier rejects this statement: it has little to do with the mourning of real people. But I think he is wrong about this. In my father's case, no one could be sad that he finally died because he was frustrated and suffering. What I feel sad about is his decline, not his death. And so mortality is the issue. Alone among animals, humans think about themselves. And I think Nahmanides is right that we think about ourselves living forever in some form or other. This is why religion is so plausible. And even if we know this is impossible, we still think of ourselves as participating in the circle of life, which is just another way of living forever. (And sometimes we write books under the illusion that a piece of us will thus live forever).