

In order to prolong your days and the days of your children upon the Land. (11:21)

The *Talmud* in *Berachos* 8a relates that, when Rabbi Yochanan heard that there were elderly Jews in Bavel/Babylonia, he was surprised, since it is written in the Torah, “In order to prolong your days and the days of your children upon the Land.” This is a reference to *Eretz Yisrael*, not to *chutz l’aretz*. There is no promise of longevity in the diaspora. Once they informed Rabbi Yochanan that the elders of Bavel were people who rose early to attend *shul* in the morning and remain in the *shul* until late in the evening, he said that this was the merit that earned them such a unique reward. It is a wonderful lesson, very inspirational, but what is the reason? **Horav Yisrael, zl**, the *Viznitzer Rebbe*, gave a practical explanation, bordering on the anecdotal.

The *Rebbe* had occasion to be on the road when it was time to *daven Minchah*. Since he was in the vicinity of a *shul* in a small town, he stopped there to *daven*. When *Minchah* was concluded, all of the *shul*’s worshippers (there were not many) recited *Kaddish Yasom*, the Mourner’s *Kaddish*. The *Rebbe* was surprised by this, since one recites *Kaddish* only during the first year following the passing of a close loved one – usually a parent. The *Rebbe* turned to the *shamesh*, sexton, of the *shul*, and asked, “Are they all *yesomim*? (Are all the members orphans during the first year?)”

The *shamesh* replied, “Sadly, our *minyan* is comprised solely of those who must recite *Kaddish* for a loved one. Otherwise, we would not have the required quorum of men. The men of our town are all involved in business and do not have time to break away to *daven*.” (At least *Kaddish* still carried weight for them, even if *davening* with a *minyan* did not).

When the *Rebbe* heard the *shamesh*’s reply, he said, “Now I understand the dialogue in the *Talmud Berachos* 8a that ensued between Rabbi Yochanan and scholars concerning the longevity of the people of Bavel. When informed that the Babylonians had achieved longevity, Rabbi Yochanan was taken aback, since this phenomenon was inconsistent with the *pasuk* in the Torah, whereby Hashem promises old age only to those who reside in the Holy Land. Upon hearing that they attended *Shul* regularly, he assumed that it must be their commitment to *shul* attendance, both morning and evening, which was the catalyst for their special reward.

“How did Rabbi Yochanan know this? Where do we find *shul* and *minyan* attendance as a merit, a talisman to ward off a premature visit from the *Malach HaMaves*, Angel of Death? Upon visiting this *shul* and observing a *minyan* comprised of *Kaddish zuggers*, reciters, my question was resolved. When people attend *minyan/shul* only when someone close to them dies, ‘they’ are arousing judgment, creating a situation whereby the Angel of Death is ‘called in’ to ‘assist’ in seeing to it that the people attend *shul*. If reciting *Kaddish* is their only motivator, then a ‘reason’ for reciting *Kaddish* will be created.

“When Rabbi Yochanan heard that in Bavel, *shul* attendance was exemplary, with people coming

early and leaving late, so that they could spend as much time as possible in *shul*, he realized that, in this community, the Angel of Death could be put on hold. The people attended *shul* because they wanted to – not because they had to. Why not reward these people with long life so that they could continue doing what is vital to them – learning and *davening* in *shul*.”

This story's lesson is quite clear. My commentary would only be superfluous.