



[This letter could be read before a recitation of the Kaddish.]

Henrietta Szold

“Thank you for your gracious offer, but...”

Henrietta Szold, besides her commitment to Zionism, was a close friend of Mathilde and Solomon Schechter and was among the founding generation of Women’s League. While that generation of women was very well educated, Henrietta Szold’s Hebraic and rabbinic skills were unparalleled among her female contemporaries. This letter provides us with a glimpse into the world of this Jewish proto-feminist – at a time when such a response was inconceivable to most women.

Letter to Haym Peretz on saying *Kaddish* for her mother (New York, September 16, 1916)

It is impossible for me to find words in which to tell you how deeply I was touched by your offer to act as “Kaddish” for my dear mother. I cannot even thank you — it is something that goes beyond thanks. It is beautiful, what you have offered to do — I shall never forget it. You will wonder, then, that I cannot accept your offer. Perhaps it would be best for me not to try to explain to you in writing, but to wait until I see you to tell you why it is so. I know well, and appreciate what you say about, the Jewish custom; and Jewish custom is very dear and sacred to me. And yet I cannot ask you to say Kaddish after my mother. The Kaddish means to me that the survivor publicly and markedly manifests his wish and intention to assume the relation to the Jewish community which his parent had, and that so the chain of tradition remains unbroken from generation to generation, each adding its own link. You can do that for the generations of your family, I must do that for the generations of my family.

I believe that the elimination of women from such duties was never intended by our law and custom — women were freed from positive duties when they could not perform them, but not when they could. It was never intended that, if they could perform them, their performance of them should not be considered as valuable and valid as when one of the male sex performed them. And of the Kaddish I feel sure this is particularly true.

My mother had eight daughters and no son; and yet never did I hear a word of regret pass the lips of either my mother or my father that one of us was not a son. When my father died, my mother would not permit others to take her daughters’ place in saying the Kaddish, and so I am sure I am acting in her spirit when I am moved to decline your offer. But beautiful your offer remains nevertheless, and, I repeat, I know full well that it is much more in consonance with the generally accepted Jewish tradition than is my or my family’s conception. You understand me, don’t you?