

Kaddish as Prayer and Confession

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Kaddish prayer has become popular to the point of cliché in Jewish culture and religious practice. Whether in the original Aramaic and Hebrew or transliterated into English and other languages, most Jews are to some degree or another familiar with its refrains. This is as much to do with its association with the rituals of mourning as it is with the fact that in one variation or another it is the most repeated part of Jewish liturgy. How did this prayer, composed sometime in the centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, which says nothing about death or mourning, come to play such a significant part in Jewish religious consciousness? Should it be regarded simply as a formulaic ritual or can we recover some spirituality from the content and context of its function within the liturgy? This essay is intended to be less an academic analysis of the evolution of a prayer than an attempt to uncover its spiritual significance and message, an affirmation of life and one's relationship with God rather than a prayer.

The loss of dear ones is a difficult and often traumatic experience. It plays out both in the communal realm and in the personal. The Kaddish prayer as it has evolved to this day is an iconic example of how its originators found a way of combining the two spheres. In addition, whether by intent or usage, it has become a spiritual confession which incorporates a mystical dimension as well as an obligatory one. But first, some background.

Death and Mourning in the Bible

The Five Books of Moses are sparing in their references to the rituals of death and mourning. That death itself is, in the words of Samuel Butler, "the way of all flesh" strikes one immediately when God is clearly as fretting that Adam may somehow come to eat of the Tree of Life and thus live forever (Genesis 3:22). (The first example of death, however, is not Adam's, but Abel's death at his brother's hand.)

With respect to mourning, however the message of Scripture is are not so clear. When Sarah died Abraham according to the text "went to mourn Sarah and to cry over her (Genesis 23:2). Was this distinction between mourning and crying a hint at the distinction between public and private grief and rituals? Jacob wore sackcloth and mourned the presumed death of Joseph (Genesis 37:34). Here too the private and the public seem to be pursued on two different levels, the public and the private.

The response to Jacob's death combines Egyptian ritual with proto-Hebrew mourning rituals. After his death, Joseph specifically weeps over and kisses his father (Genesis 50:1, 3, and 10). Forty days of mummification follow. The language "for thus they completed the days of..." incidentally mirrors the period of time that Esther underwent cosmetic preparation for her night with the king (Esther 2:12). This might have been intended as humorous comparison of cosmetic procedures for the living and the dead...or a less humorous

comparison of a woman being sentenced to a kind of living death in a harem and actual physical death. The mourning proceeds to a sort of state ceremony dictated by Egyptian custom.

In the ancient world there were different gods of death. Sheol in the Canaanite world was the intermediary state of death in which souls were judged while the body decayed. Mot was the Ugaritic god of death. Yagon was a Philistine god of death throes and so is the word allusively used in the story of Jacob's agony over Joseph's apparent death. All of this explains some of the sequences in Biblical death narratives, but still do not enable us to understand the emergence of specifically Jewish rituals of death.

Life after Death

The question of life after death is treated at best indirectly in the Torah. Leaving aside rabbinic attempts to find scriptural supports for their beliefs regarding posthumous existence in the Bible, there simply are no unequivocal passage in Scripture that speak directly to the matter. The nearest one gets is the phrase "and he was gathered to his people" (Genesis 25:8 et al.) used of Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Aaron and Moses. Does "gathered to his people" mean literally that his bones were collected after the body had decomposed and then placed in a family ossuary? Or does it mean that the spirit or soul of the dead person went to join the souls of its predeceased kinsmen in some subterranean Sheol or celestial paradise. Perhaps it is nothing more than a poetic way to describe death. No clear answer emerges, but support for all these views can be found set forth in traditional Jewish biblical commentaries.

Why are the Five Books not then explicit about life after death? After all, both in Egypt and Mesopotamia, belief in an afterlife played a highly important part of people's lives and it seems odd to imagine that the Israelites were uninterested in a topic that so intensely occupied their neighbors. One can only speculate. Perhaps it was intentional, this formal lack of engagement with the issue. Or possibly the belief was so deeply entrenched that it was taken for granted and no biblical author felt the need to discuss it in detail. Perhaps it was simply that the Torah was primarily concerned with life, with providing a framework and a system for living rather than for death. Or perhaps it was simply that the Torah was concerned with providing a framework for living and wished specifically not to foster interest in death and its consequences.

In current Jewish thought it is assumed pretty universally that we have what are called souls: divine sparks or something akin that continue to exist after we die. Rationalists such as Maimonides (1135-1204) take the view that only those of us who cultivate our souls will enable them to return to God after our deaths, but that we otherwise will simply eradicate them.^[1] Mystics—in this somewhat oddly supported by popular sentiment—argue that souls are indestructible, that they are recycled (so to speak) until they have achieved their spiritual missions, and that there is an ongoing relationship between souls on earth and souls on high.^[2] It is this relationship specifically that lies behind the popular belief that reciting

Kaddish for a lost relative is of help to the souls of those who have died.

Such a belief was not always unquestioned: King Kohelet himself asks, "And who knows if the spirit of man rises upwards and the spirit of the animal descends into the earth?" (Kohelet 3:21). Clearly, the issue of what happens to the human spirit after death was a matter of interest in ancient times, even if there is no biblical passage in which cogent, developed theory of posthumous existence is set forth clearly. This should not surprise us, however, given that the Bible is overwhelmingly a pre-philosophical (or at any rate, a non-philosophical) text.

The rituals of death and mourning we are familiar with nowadays, although based on biblical texts, are largely post Talmudic. The very idea of praying for the soul of the departed itself is innovative rather than conservative. Indeed, for all the Talmud certainly discusses communicating with souls of the dead the departed and things that might prevent the soul from rising to Heaven (cf, e.g., the material collected at B. Brakhot 18b), the idea of relatives actually praying for the soul of the departed does not figure as a significant custom or law until much later on. And so, starting in the post-gaonic (i.e., early medieval) period, we begin to see two distinct functions in the laws of mourning. One is the personal, the emotional response of the survivors and how to express their grief. But the other is the communal, expressive of the responsibility to act in accordance with the rituals that the community expects and which describe the community's responsibilities towards the mourners as much as their public obligations.

Nowadays, in traditional communities, these two sets of ideas are universally accepted. For example, consider the custom that dictates that one only recite Kaddish for eleven months out of the twelve mourning months for deceased parents. The most common explanation is that saying ever last Kaddish might inadvertently suggest that the departed had no merit of his or her own.^[3] The other reason is to signal to the mourner that the time has come to get on with life. Either way, though, the earliest references to such a way of thinking are clearly medieval rather than talmudic.

Two questions suggest themselves for consideration. How did the text of the Kaddish emerge? And how did that prayer come to be associated with mourners?

"May His Holy Name be Blessed Forever"

It is misleading to call the Kaddish a prayer, because, at least historically, prayer is generally supposed to be petitional. However, the Hebrew word for prayer is *t'fillah* and, like all Hebrew words, *t'fillah* has three-letter root, in this case *pay-lamed-lamed*. Words generated from this root are used several times in the Bible to express an idea or hope. But the word used more regularly to denote the act of praying is *l'hitpalleil*, which is a reflexive verb that literally means "to express oneself." Thus prayer in this early form is less a recitation of a set formula and more an unstructured expression of inner feelings. But by the time we get to established rabbinic practice in the early rabbinic period, the word *t'fillah* is used primarily to reference the formal thrice-daily Amidah prayer, a set

liturgical frame that allows little room for individuality or free expression. This is because communal prayer had come by then to replace the (defunct, destroyed) Temple as the main setting for public religious worship.

During the periods of the two Temples, Judaism in its public expression was essentially focused on passive attendance at Temple ceremonies and sacrificial rituals. At some stage, however, the idea developed of bringing the community together in local centers outside the framework and rubric of Temple worship. Rabbinic tradition has it that this was primarily to study rather than to pray. However, passages like Daniel 6:11 suggest clearly that praying three times a day was already the norm centuries earlier. Over the next five hundred years, public prayer became more common but without being formalized and made requisite. Only after the Temple was destroyed and the main rabbinic court was removed from Jerusalem to Yavneh, in fact, did Shimon Ha-pakuli formalize the so called Eighteen Benedictions at the liturgical core of Jewish public prayer.^[4] This is the same prayer elsewhere referenced, including by myself, as Amidah, i.e., the prayer recited standing. The "Bet HaMidrash" the House of Study and the "Beit HaKnesset" the House of the Community" then became the core of Jewish public life and this is where the Kaddish makes its first appearance.

The Kaddish is an essential element of public worship services and as such comes under the rubric of public prayer even though it is a devotional declaration and not a petition at all, and is directed exclusively towards God. In fact, it acts as a marker delineating the different stages and importance of parts of the service. Nor is this public feel to the Kaddish at all *sub rosa*: the very fact that the text of the Kaddish is primarily Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Jewish community, suggest as much. (Almost the rest of the formal liturgy, apart from a few specific prayers and poems, is in Hebrew. There are minor variations of form across the various Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, but the mix of Aramaic and Hebrew is universal.)

The text itself is anchored by a central refrain: *y'hei sh'meih rabba m'vorakh le'olam u-le'al'mei almaya* ("May His great Name be blessed forever and for all worlds to come"). The origin of this is the Hebrew Book of Job:

And he said "I came naked out of the womb of my mother and I shall return naked God has given and God has taken may the name of God be blessed."^[5]

At some stage in the Talmudic era, this phrase was adopted as a seminal expression of devotion. Its significance became such that the Talmud says that "any evil decrees already pronounced against an individual will be forgotten if that person answers "May His great name be blessed" with all his heart."^[6]

There is no evidence, however, as to why and how this phrase was co-opted into public services. Although Temple worship was largely sacrificial and ceremonial, there was a liturgical component to the service as well, as the Mishnah makes clear in passages like this one from Tractate Tamid:

The appointee declares "Recite one blessing" and they recited

one blessing [that is, one of blessings that introduce the Shema]. They recited the Ten Commandments, the first chapter of Shema, the second chapter of Shema and then the third chapter of Shema, then they blessed the people with three blessings: Emet V'yatziv, the Avodah and the blessing of the *kohanim*. On Shabbat they would add a blessing for the watch [of *kohanim*] that had completed its turn of duty.^[7]

But there is no mention here of any part of the Kaddish. Somewhere in the development of the liturgy after the destruction of the Temple the expression acquired a uniquely significant place as illustrated by this excerpt from the Babylonian Talmud in which Rabbi Yossi encounters Elijah, who speaks to him:

[In the ruin] I heard a spiritual voice moaning like a dove saying "Woe to children who, because of their sins, have made Me destroy My House, and burn My sanctuary and exile them amongst the nations." And he [i.e., Elijah] said to me "By your life, it is not only once that [this voice] declaims this but it repeats it every day, three times. Not only but when the community of Israel come into their synagogues and study houses and answer "May His great Name be blessed throughout the world and for all worlds to come" He nods His head and says "Happy is the King who is praised thus in his own house. What of the father who is forced to exile his children? But it is worse for the children who have been exiled from their father."^[8]

In other words, this refrain as part of the daily services is the most intimate, reconciliatory link to the Divine in the light of the destruction of the Temple. The significance of this prayer is further evidenced by this quote:

Rabbi Huna said "If someone comes into the synagogue and finds them praying (that is saying the Amidah prayer), if he can begin and complete what he has missed before before the leader has reached "Modim," he should proceed. Otherwise he should wait".... It was asked "What about stopping in the middle of his own praying to join in with "May His great Name be blessed"? When Rav Dimi came, he said "Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon, pupils of Rabbi Yoḥanan say that one does not interrupt except to say "May his great name be blessed," for even if he is involved in esoteric study he must still break off" and that is the law.^[9]

According to tradition the obligation to recite daily prayers and the text of the Amidah itself were formalized to compensate for or to replace the sacrificial system. But we have no obvious clue as to why a connection developed between the Kaddish and mourners.

We also know from several sources in the Talmud that there was a disagreement within the rabbinic schools between those who considered prayer to be the highest expression of one's interaction with God and those who considered study the most important. The latter argued that in theory at least, study

would lead to action. This division continued to be reflected in the ongoing competition between the mystical schools with their focuses on religious experience and the institutional and authoritarian leadership which emphasized obedience. Although in fact the two points of view were to a large extent elided into one common rabbinic position, this division remains an important feature of religious life to this day. The introduction of the Kaddish as a prayer for mourners illustrates how these two strains were merged.

The Kaddish

Amongst the earliest sources that talk about the Kaddish we have passage preserved in the Talmud at B. Sotah 49b that responds to a remark by Rabbi Joshua cited by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel to the effect that a non-accursed day has not passed since the Temple was destroyed. This text also follows several references to the significance of studying Torah to compensate for the loss of the Temple.

Raba said: And the curse of each day is severer than that of the preceding one, as it says "In the morning you will say "If only God would bring evening." And in the evening you will say "If only God would bring morning."... So how does the world survive? Through the Kaddish recited after studying Torah and the response of "May His great Name be blessed" which is said in the Kaddish after studying Aggadah as it says, "A land of thick darkness, complete, a land of the shadow of death, without any order" (Job 10:22). If there is the study of Torah it illuminates the thick darkness."^[10]

And we have this to consider as well a text in a far later collection of *midrashim* on the Book of Proverbs:

Rabbi Yishmael says "When Israel gathers in the study houses to listen to words of *aggadah* from a learned man and afterwards they say "May His great Name be blessed," at that very moment God is elevated in the universe and says to His serving angels, "Come and see how this people that I have placed in my universe so much praise Me." They then cover Him with honor. That is why it says "In the multitude of people is the honor of kings" (Proverbs 14:28).^[11]

In both these cases we have the association of Kaddish with this core phrase "May His great Name be blessed." The destruction of the Temple is what God mourns. We humans also mourn those close to us who we lose. To recite the response is to accept divine authority following Job's example. This is what makes the connection between Kaddish for study and Kaddish for mourners. This too illustrates the attempt to bring prayer and study together. Originally study in itself was the way the community responded to a loss. One needed to strengthen the community, to compensate it for its loss. If one could not study then one could to least recite the Kaddish said after study. The earliest source we have that connects Kaddish to mourners is in the

nineteenth chapter of the extra-talmudic Tractate Sofrim.

The Rabbis instituted the Kaddish, initially, to follow study. Mourners, even those who had not studied for whatever reason, could join in the Kaddish at the end of the study session. Its Aramaic made it more familiar to the masses for whom it rather than Hebrew was the common tongue. However the original Rabbinic Kaddish was a complex and scholarly Kaddish. Its original form is mainly reserved nowadays for the burial service or the completion of studying a folio of the Talmud. In its daily place we have what we call the Rabbanan Kaddish, also called the Kaddish D'rabbanan or the Kaddish Al Yisrael. (It is called Al Yisrael because of the opening words of its additional section. But it also called this because referring to Yisrael involves the wider community and not just the community of scholars. This in itself illustrates one of the stages in the developmental process of the liturgy.)

The other important feature was the use of the Kaddish as a marker within the communal services quite apart from the connection with study. What has become the accepted practice today is the result of this process. Since Kaddish D'rabbanan was recited after study, parts of the Mishnah were introduced into the services to ensure that some study took place daily. Whenever that happened, the Kaddish D'rabbanan followed. But, in addition, there was the Half Kaddish which marked the transition from Psalms to the obligatory reading the Shema and its blessings or after reading the Torah before the Haftarah or before the conclusion of the service in the various alternatives depending on the day. A longer version of the Kaddish, called the Kaddish Shalem or, after a passage that appears only in it, the Kaddish Titkabbeil, introduced after the Amidah, which was in fact the only part of the service officially called "prayer." The Kaddish Titkabbeil marked the end of the essential core of the daily services.

What developed as the Mourner's Kaddish (sometimes also called the Kaddish "Yehei Shlamah") fell somewhere between the Kaddish Titkabbeil and the Half Kaddish. Its simpler form made it easier for the ordinary person to say it and thus join in with the community in a public way in honor of the departed. And, over time, extra psalms were added to the service to give further opportunities for reciting the Mourner's Kaddish. There was much debate in rabbinic circles whether one person or more should recite the Mourner's Kaddish. Central European custom tended towards a more disciplined approach, whereas the Eastern European approach tolerated the din of many people speaking at once and not always staying together.

The result of all this was that Kaddish evolved, rather informally as the way a mourner joined in with the community to strengthen it and compensate it for the loss of one of its members. It was indeed a response that required one to be part of the community for it needed a *minyan* and in a way it incorporated the private into the public. Ideally a mourner should lead the services and this obligation is still a factor in the determination of which worshiper should serve as prayer leader. But such a public response could not compensate for the sense of private loss. And that I suggest is where the connection to the soul of the dead came in.

Kaddish for the Souls of the Departed

There are various talmudic narratives that discuss the fate of the soul after death. One of the most famous, presented in the Bavli at Berakhot 18b, describes souls hanging around in the graveyard at least partially to bring back reports of what goes on in the Upper World. But it is not until late gaonic and medieval times that one finds sources that discuss the connection between souls rising to heaven and prayers recited on earth to aid the transition. Many of these sources rely on later adaptations of a legend about Rabbi Akiva to establish a connection between saying Kaddish and the soul of the departed. I am tempted to suggest that the Christian predilection for lighting candles for the departed, later adopted by Judaism, might be an example of a loaned ritual.^[12] The origin of the legend is to be found in the Minor Tractate Kallah Rabbti 2:9 and expanded in the medieval Midrash Tanhuma, the Maḥzor Vitry of Rabbi Simḥah ben Samuel of Vitry (d. 1105) and the Sefer Or Zarua of Rabbi Isaac ben Moses of Vienna (1200-1270). In its much more modern incarnation, it reads

Rabbi Akiva once saw someone struggling with a heavy load of wood on his shoulders and complaining about his lot in life. Thinking he might be a slave who deserved freedom Rabbi Akiva asked him tell him about his life. He explained that he was the soul of someone who had sinned on earth and his punishment was to go on carrying this load of wood. He was unable to stop to talk otherwise his burden would be increased. Rabbi Akiva asked if there was any way to free this soul and the 'dead' person replied that the only way was if he had a son who would be able to get up in front of the congregation and say Barkhu (in other words to conduct the services) or Yitgadal V'yitkadash (in other words, to recite the Kaddish) after which the congregation would reply, *barukh adonai ha-mevorakh le'olam va-ed* or *y'hei sh'mei rabbah*.^[13]

This legend does not tell us how the custom of the language developed. But it does show how the Mourner's Kaddish evolved from simply a communal ritual into one that carried significance for the soul and the memory of the dead person. Not only are the origins obscure, but somewhere in medieval times the custom developed not to say the Kaddish for one's parents for the whole year. Instead one stopped at the end of the eleventh month.^[14] This reinforces my contention that saying Kaddish came to be regarded as a means of helping the soul of a departed individual on its journey even though in earlier sources there is no indication of this. Holding the recitation at eleven months merely meant that the deceased did not need all the help he or she could get, a sign of respect on the part of the living with respect to a late parent.

Confession

The Tzidduk Ha-din prayer is a form of confession that is made between man and God. In its talmudic form, it was recited on one's deathbed. It is both a justification of one's being and an entreaty for divine forgiveness. By the sixteenth century, it was incorporated into the daily prayers except on

festive occasions. The initial opening phrase "God is pure in His deeds, His ways are just" derives from Deuteronomy 32:4 but also provides a link to the talmudic lesson that one must bless good for the bad as much as for the good.^[15] In an expanded form in our liturgy, it is part of the burial service, a public acceptance of divine will, and a recognition of the existence of another spiritual world and dimension.

The fact is that this formal resignation to divine will ("We bless God for the bad as well as for the good") is the predominant expression in talmudic theology of how to respond to tragedy and to the bad things that happen, and primary among them is death. And this brings us full circle back to Job.^[16] The Kaddish actually implies this very point that Job makes. At the moment of our greatest pain, we can say how great the Almighty is "May the great name of God be blessed." We accept our fate because we realize our impotence and our subservience to greater forces. Religion does not answer the questions. It simply gives a framework for coping with the problems and challenges of life.

Although it is unknown whether the development of this dimension to reciting Kaddish was formally introduced by a specific individual or is simply a folk custom that took root, it added an element of guilt assuaged, responsibility and personal grieving into the mourning practices. It pulls us away from the dead person, away from the community into the recognition of our own mortality. It is law and custom that reinforces community ties, but it is personal *kavvanah* that links us to God.

This practice has been remarkably effective. Indeed, many Jews who are otherwise unobservant appear to find solace and meaning in saying Kaddish three times a day during the year of mourning for parents. Some even continue their involvement after the eleven months is up, although the majority admittedly do not.

It does seem to my more rational mind that the more utilitarian and logical function of Kaddish is to reinforce the community and our role in it. And this ought to be a sufficient public and private response to loss. But that human nature being what it is, the primordial desire to believe we will see our loved ones again simply overpowers any rational response to loss.

Perhaps the significance, the hold, the Kaddish has on us speaks to the persistence of superstition or the natural feelings of human guilt. It could therefore be seen as a concession to human frailty in the way that the ritual known as *k'ri'ah*, which involves tearing one's clothing upon hearing of the death of a loved one, channels a need for a violent reaction into a harmless one. Maybe one should explain it in a way similar to Maimonides' effort in *The Guide for the Perplexed* to explain the function of sacrifices as a way to wean the Children of Israel away from animal sacrifices in stages. Perhaps our preoccupation with life after death, with doing our best to help the souls of the departed to rise to heaven, is simply such a profound emotional reaction to death that it had to be given a place and a role in our religious lives. But in my opinion that is not the essential message of the Kaddish.

Throughout the rabbinical tradition—and I would say throughout the biblical

too— one can detect two different approaches to religious engagement, the rational and the mystical. Rabbi Nachman Cohen develops the idea in *Mirrors of Eternity; Understanding the disputes of Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nechemia*, where he writes that there has always been a mystical strain that sees reciting the Kaddish, regardless of the meaning of the words, as a way of transcending our material world.^[17] It is a way of accepting our fate, of devotion to God. It gives one an opportunity to participate in the religious community without raising awkward questions of belief or its absence. It is a rote verse rather like a mantra that requires focus without intellectual engagement, an expression of self that amounts to a combination of pain and loss as well as belonging and loyalty both to one's late relations and one's community. It might rise to a howl of pain or to a quiet expression of acceptance of the divine order. The words are less important than the effect. They amount simply to the equivalent of "Here I am, here I stand as a Jew in the face of loss and the support of tradition and this is the formula I have received to give it public and private significance."

In conclusion one may simply say that the rabbis offered three alternative responses to death that Kaddish incorporates: reinforcing the community in response to the loss of a member, praying for the soul of the departed to return to its divine source, and bringing comfort and solace to the bereaved. It is up to us embrace them all or to choose the one that resonates with us most individually in our time of loss and pain. But, whichever one we choose, it places us firmly within community while allowing our individuality to deal with the pain of loss and to decide what resonates and how, what comforts and what reinforces.

^[1]M.T. Hilkhoh Teshuvah 8:3.

^[2]See, e.g. Zohar I 93b or Zohar II 127a.

^[3]See, e.g., the comments of Rabbi Moses Isserles (called the Rema, 1520-1572) to S.A. Yoreh Deiah 376:4.

^[4]B. Berakhot 28b.

^[5]Job 1:21.

^[6]B. Shabbat 119b.

^[7]M. Tamid 5:1. The appointee (in Hebrew, the *m'munneh*) was the priest appointed to supervise that day's ritual worship. The Avodah is the prayer preserved as the ante-penultimate blessing of the Amidah, the one beginning with the word R'tzeih. Emet V'yatziv is the blessing moderns know as the first blessing following the Shema in the Morning Service.

^[8]B. Berakhot 3a.

^[9]B. Berakhot 21b. The expression "When Rav Dimi came," which appears almost twelve dozen times in the Talmud, references the arrival in the east of Rav Dimi, who was a Palestinian sage, cf. Rashi's comment to B. Moed Katan 3b, s.v. *ki ata rav dimi*.

^[10]B. Sotah 49a.

^[11]Midrash Mishlei 14:3.

^[12]See, e.g., the discussion of this in Jacob Katz's book, *Tradition and Crisis*, trans. Bernard Dov Cooperman (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 000.

^[13] *Sefer Or Zarua*, ed. Zhitomir, 1862, part 2, p. 11b

^[14] See above, note 2.

^[15] B. Berakhot 33b.

^[16] See above, note 3.

^[17] Published in Yonkers, NY by the Torah Lishmah Institute in 1996.