

KADDISH – UNDERSTANDING THE UNDERLYING VALUES TO THIS MOST MISUNDERSTOOD PRAYER

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | July 15, 2019

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One of the most known and recognized Jewish prayers, if not the most well-known prayer of all to both Jews and non-Jews, is the Kaddish. Ask anyone what this prayer is about and they will tell you that it is the prayer for the dead or the prayer that mourners recite. And yet, there is no mention at all of death in the Kaddish prayer, nor is there even a reference to the afterlife or anything to do with loss of life or bereavement. Yet, it is this prayer that is repeatedly recited by mourners at a Jewish funeral.

The original Kaddish prayer, in fact, was composed relatively late in Jewish history, and for many years was recited only by non-mourners. Yet somehow, it is these words that are associated with the death of a Jew and are traditionally chanted daily by Jewish children for nearly a year after their parents have died. Why? Why was this prayer chosen as the mourner’s prayer if it is not related to death? What are the underlying values of this prayer which make it so important that it may not be prayed privately but only publicly in the synagogue before a minyan-Jewish quorum? When and why did this prayer come about and when did it become the mourners’ prayer? What do the words signify that make Kaddish so special? By examining the words, their underlying ideas, and their origin through traditional sources, we will see that this is probably the most misunderstood prayer in Judaism, and, at the same time, one of the most important.

THE TEXT OF THE KADDISH

Before delving into the importance, origin and deeper meaning of the Kaddish, it is important to first become familiar with the simple text. At the end of this chapter, an analysis of the key words of the essential sentence of the Kaddish will be explored as well.

There are a number of different forms of the Kaddish recited daily in the prayer services in the synagogue, some by the Cantor and some by the mourners. However, the first few sentences remain the same in all types of Kaddish prayer. We translate here the shortest form of Kaddish, known as the Half-Kaddish.

*Magnified and sanctified may His great Name be,
In the world created by His will. May He establish His kingship.
In your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the House of Israel,
Swiftly and soon, and say: Amen.
All: May His great Name be blessed forever and all time.
Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, mighty, uplifted and lauded
be the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He,
Beyond any blessing and song, praise and consolation, that are uttered in the world – and say Amen.*

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE KADDISH PRAYER

There are numerous statements in the traditional Jewish texts which show that the Kaddish is not just “another” prayer, but rather a crucial prayer for helping to keep life and the universe functioning. The Mishna, amplified later in the Talmud, describes the change in the physical world that occurred following the destruction of the Holy Temple.¹ Every day was filled with curses, the dew did not provide the earth with proper nourishment as before, the taste of all fruit was

¹ Mishna Sotah 9:12, Sotah 49a

diminished, and each day was worse than the last. The Talmud then asks: if so, then how does the world manage to continue to exist at all? It answers that this is so only because of the *Kedusha*-holiness sentences in the *Uva Letzion* prayer and the Kaddish recited after Torah learning by the Jews. This passage certainly needs to be understood, and will be explained in detail below. But it is clear that this Kaddish prayer is vital to the earth's actual existence.

In a different Talmudic tractate, Rabbi Yossi describes how he entered one of the ruins of the Temple, and he heard G-d's voice repeating (three times daily) "Woe to my children, the Jewish people, for I destroyed My Holy Temple and exiled them. The only reason I am consoled is because the Jews enter the synagogues and Houses of Study and recite the Kaddish prayer."² Then G-d is happy both as the Jews' King and their Father, and regrets their exile from His table. This story's message also needs to be understood, but it is clear that the power of the Kaddish prayer is such that its recitation is the only thing that consoles G-d following the exile of the Jewish people. A similar Midrash helps us begin to understand what is so special about Kaddish. Rabbi Yishmael says that when G-d hears Torah being taught to the Jewish people followed by the saying of the Kaddish, G-d is happy and uplifted. He turns to the angels and says, "Come and see how the nation I created praises me."³ Thus, it seems, that the words of praise for G-d found in the Kaddish prayer and recited by Jews are what make it so special and satisfying to G-d.

Another passage also shows the power of the Kaddish. Rabbi Joshua says that whoever says the words with all his or her might *Yehai Shmei Rabbah Mevorach*-May His great Name be blessed (the words that both the congregation and Cantor/mourner recite), that person's (evil) decrees are torn up. Resh Lakish adds that whoever adds the word "Amen" to this phrase and articulates this word with all his or her might will have the gates of the Garden of Eden opened for him or her. Rashi explains that "with all one's might" signifies with great fervor and concentration, and "Amen" signifies testimony that G-d is a loyal King⁴. Another Midrash states that if a person answers the Cantor's/mourner's call with the words "*Amen Yehai Shmei Rabbah Mevorach*-Amen, May His great Name be blessed," all of his or her sins are wiped away and all evil decrees against that Jew are cancelled.⁵

These words are not hyperbole. Shulchan Aruch and Rema, in the Code of Jewish law, bring these ideas as part of normative Jewish practice – i.e., every Jew is supposed to have full concentration when uttering these words and should say the words loudly. Rema also says that a Jew should literally run to the synagogue in order to hear the Kaddish.⁶ This advice/Jewish law about the loudness and running to hear Kaddish is not expressed in Shulchan Aruch concerning any other prayer in the entire service. Thus, there is something unique in the Kaddish that one should run after it in order to recite its words. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (also called by the name of his book, the *Chofetz Chaim*) adds that this idea from the Midrash – i.e., that anyone who says these words with complete fervor will have any evil decree by G-d annulled – as part of Jewish law. And it is also a Jewish law that by saying these words out loud, the person will have greater concentration, which in turn will invalidate any negative pronouncement in Heaven against this person.⁷ These words have such power that even a Jew who says them merely in a dream will achieve the World to Come.⁸ Chofetz Chaim calls the commandment of answering the Kaddish "a great mitzvah-commandment,"⁹ a term he never uses for any other Jewish law! He goes on to say that Kaddish is more important than

² Berachot 3a

³ Midrash, Mishlei 14:3

⁴ Shabbat 119b with Rashi commentary

⁵ Midrash, Mishlei 10:2

⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 56:1

⁷ Mishna Berurah nos. 1, 5, in his commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 56:1

⁸ Berachot 57a

⁹ Mishna Berurah no. 6 in his commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 56:1

saying the *Kedusha* prayer or the *Modim* congregational prayer in the synagogue – i.e., that if a Jew has to choose between answering these three public prayers in the synagogue, Kaddish is the most important.

All these statements indeed show how critical, essential and significant the Kaddish prayer really is. Our question, then, is what underlying ideas make it so special? What do these few words actually signify that make them so important for the world and for the Jewish people? By examining its origins and the underlying ideas, we will discover the unique power and message of the Kaddish.

ORIGIN OF AND DEEPER MEANING OF THE KADDISH PRAYER

We saw above that the essence of Kaddish is the public recitation by the entire congregation of seven words in Aramaic (not Hebrew), “*Yehai Shmei Rabbah Mevorach Le-Olam Ulmai Olmaya-May His great Name be blessed for ever and ever.*” Where do we find these words in the sources? What is their origin? And what is their special significance?

When Jacob was about to die, and he asked Joseph to swear to bury him in the Land of Israel. Joseph swore this to him, and then the verse says that Jacob bowed upon the bed’s head.¹⁰ On this verse, one Midrash explains that Jacob said for the first time the words Jews say daily in an undertone after the Shema payer, “*Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto Le-olam Va-ed*-Blessed be the Name of His glorious Kingdom, for ever and ever.” On this passage, Targum Yonatan, whose commentary is in Aramaic, translates this phrase as “*Yehai Shmei Rabbah Mevorach Le-olam Uleolmai Olmaya-May His great Name be blessed for ever and ever,*” the essential words of the Kaddish.¹¹ Thus, there seems to be a clear parallel or even translation between the Hebrew “*Baruch Shem...*” and the Aramaic “*Yehai Shmei...*”

This parallel is even more pronounced in a more famous Midrash, based on the verses when Jacob gathers his twelve sons around his deathbed and says he will reveal to them the events of the “end of days,” but then Jacob immediately blesses each of the twelve sons instead.¹² The Midrash explains what actually occurred. When Jacob called his sons together, G-d asked him why He was not invited as well. Then the future was suddenly withheld from Jacob, and he understood this to possibly signify that his sons might not be worthy of carrying on the Jewish tradition. To assure their father that they felt the same way about the honor and greatness of G-d that Jacob and his forefathers did, they all told their father that most famous verse in Judaism: “*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*-Listen, our father Jacob/Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One.” Jacob understood and believed them, and then answered his sons’ acknowledgement of G-d with that undertone verse of “*Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto Le-olam Va-ed*-Blessed be the Name of His glorious Kingdom, for ever and ever.” In translating this Midrash to Aramaic, Targum Yerushalmi again substitutes the Hebrew words “*Baruch Shem...*” with the Aramaic “*Yehai Shmei...*” of the Kaddish.¹³ Therefore, these words of the Kaddish are an acknowledgement of G-d’s great Name that should be forever blessed. (Why these words are specifically recited in Aramaic will be discussed below.)

The same parallel between these Hebrew words and the Aramaic words of Kaddish is acknowledged in the words of another part of the service. Another Midrash asks: where in the prayers do Jews actualize the concept enunciated in the Torah verse, “When I proclaim the Name of the L-rd, (you should) ascribe greatness to G-d”?¹⁴ It answers that in the Shacharit Morning Service and again at the beginning of the evening service, the Cantor calls out, “Blessed be the L-rd, the

¹⁰ Genesis 48:31

¹¹ Midrash Sifri, Deuteronomy 6:4, Targum Yonatan on Genesis 49:3

¹² Genesis 49:1-3

¹³ Midrash Tanchuma, Vayechi 8, Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 99:5, Targum Yerushalmi on Genesis 49:2

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 32:3

blessed One (*Barchu...*), and the congregation responds, “Blessed is the L-rd, the blessed One, for ever and all time.” The Midrash continues and says that this same sequence occurs during the Kaddish when the Cantor (or mourner) calls out, and the congregation responds, “*Yehai Shmei Rabbah Mevorach Le-olam Uleolmai Olmaya-May His great Name be blessed for ever and ever.*”¹⁵ Once again, there is a parallel between the Hebrew praising of G-d’s Name on high and the Aramaic version in the Kaddish.

But what does it all signify? Why is it so important that Jews praise G-d? And what makes praising G-d in the Kaddish (as opposed to all the other prayers praising G-d) so crucial that Kaddish seems to be the most important prayer?

The answer begins with a beautiful and poetic explanation for the importance of making G-d’s Name great as an essential role of all human beings and Jews, articulated by Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen (1843-1926).¹⁶ Of all the different creations that the infinite G-d created in the vast universe, He created one very small dot, insignificant in the scheme of the cosmos – Earth. In it are thousands of species, with one that is relatively puny and weak, barely three cubits tall – man. He is truly a miniature universe who can use his power for good or evil. The first to realize man’s ability to reach great spiritual heights was Abraham, then Isaac, followed by Jacob and his sons, the Twelve Tribes. G-d gave their descendants the Torah as a guide to help use everything material for His service. By using everything on earth to serve and revere G-d, man fulfills his purpose in the universe. Based on this explanation, anything man does to make G-d’s Name greater in the eyes of others realizes man’s goal and the reason for his creation. This is the Kaddish prayer, and more specifically, the words affirming G-d’s great Name. This concept is acknowledged in the Midrash, which says that any time Jews do G-d’s will in the world, His Name becomes greater and enhanced.¹⁷ But from where do we know that this act is a specific obligation for Jews – to enhance G-d’s Name in the world?

In the Torah, the Jewish people are commanded to make G-d’s Name holy, which Rabbeinu Bechaye explains as a positive mitzvah-commandment to publicly make G-d’s Name greater in the mind of others. And the idea of doing this “publicly” signifies that it must occur before a minimum of ten Jewish adult males, i.e., a minyan, a Jewish quorum.¹⁸ Thus, when Jews declare in a minyan G-d’s great Name, i.e., the words of “*Yehai Shmei...*,” they fulfill this commandment and man’s ultimate purpose in the world. Maimonides also makes it clear that this Torah commandment is part of Jewish law,¹⁹ and he explains it is a sacred obligation to publicize G-d’s existence and greatness in the world, no matter what negative consequences might arise as a result.²⁰ That this is G-d’s true goal in the world and His purpose in creating man was first described by Ezekiel. In the ultimate World War at the end of days, he predicts that as a result, all human beings will recognize the greatness and holiness of G-d, which is expressed in the very first words in the Kaddish text that is recited daily.²¹ The connection between Ezekiel and the first words of the Kaddish, “*Yitkadal Veyitkadash*” was reaffirmed as late as the twentieth century by the acknowledged authority in Jewish law.²²

But why is Kaddish in the Aramaic language, and not in Hebrew? And what is the true meaning of the passage quoted above that the only reason the world continues to exist is because of the *Kedusha*-holiness sentences in the *Uva Letzion* prayer and the Kaddish recited after Torah learning by the Jews²³? Based on the explanation above about man’s role, we can begin to arrive at answers to

¹⁵ Midrash , Sifrei Ha-azinu, “Ki Shem Hashem *Ekrah*”

¹⁶ Meshech Chochma commentary on Leviticus 19:2

¹⁷ Midrash, Mechilta on Exodus 15:1

¹⁸ Leviticus 22:32 with Rabbeinu Bechaye commentary.

¹⁹ Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 5:1

²⁰ Maimonides, Book of Commandments, Positive Mitzvah 9

²¹ Ezekiel 38:18-23

²² Mishne Berurah No. 2, commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 56:1

²³ Sotah 49a

these questions. In the *Kedusha*-Holiness prayer of the Shmoneh Esreh-Silent Prayer that Jews recite, Jews echo the words of the angels who proclaim G-d as holy three times, based on the words of Isaiah.²⁴ Jews say in *Kedusha* that the angels' words are true, but only echo the expression of the angels. However, G-d wants more of Jews, more than what the angels can offer Him. The perception of holiness of G-d must be ingrained into the Jew and not remain an imitation. Therefore, when the same phrases about the holiness of G-d are repeated by Jews in the *Uva Letzion* prayer, there is a difference.²⁵ There, it is uniquely human. Why? Because Jews say these words in Aramaic, and this language is the only one that angels do not understand and cannot speak.²⁶ Thus, by proclaiming G-d's holiness in a language that is uniquely human, Jews take "ownership" of this prayer and concept. That is G-d's true desire for mankind and His purpose for the world. Similarly, just as in *Uva Letzion*, the Aramaic words of Kaddish proclaim G-d's holiness and greatness in the world. This concept is amplified in greater detail and in Kabbalistic terms by the Zohar.²⁷ Therefore, Kaddish is not recited in Aramaic because it was the vernacular of that time. That language was chosen by the rabbis in order to declare that this allegiance to G-d's holiness and specialness is uniquely human. And that is why that it is only these two prayers – *Kedusha* of *Uva Letzion* prayer and the Kaddish – as well as the unique Torah learning by Jews, that allow G-d to let the world continue to exist. These uniquely human activities – Torah learning and sanctifying G-d's Name publicly – is a distinctive human way to make G-d special, according to Rashi.²⁸

THE ORIGIN IN JEWISH LAW OF THE KADDISH PRAYER AND ITS CUSTOMS

In the nineteenth century, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Halevi Epstein wrote that the Kaddish was originally composed after the destruction of the First Holy Temple (586 BCE) in order to counteract the effect of that destruction. G-d's Name in the world was significantly diminished as a result of that devastation, and His Name was even desecrated. Thus, the Kaddish, as noted above, was said in order to make G-d's Name enhanced in the world once again, as well as to sanctify G-d's Name.²⁹ The very first mention of the Kaddish in the Talmud corresponds to that same time period, but describes it quite differently.³⁰ Bridegrooms and mourners (the connection to mourners will be discussed in the next section) would gather in the synagogue, and after a section of Torah learning would be taught, the Kaddish would be recited. Some of the phrases of the Kaddish text were borrowed from the prophets, like Ezekiel, noted above. One expression, "*Olmei Olmaya*," seems to originate from a verse in Daniel,³¹ while a famous phrase at the end of Kaddish, "*Oseh Shalom Bimromav*" is taken from Job.³²

Although Rabbi Amram in the ninth century mentions that the Kaddish prayer is recited at the end of the service, he gives no details at all.³³ It is only much later that Kaddish is discussed at length by Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe in the 1200's in his book of Jewish law, *Or Zarua*. There, he states that Kaddish should be said by the Cantor following the reading of the Torah, and describes seven specific times Kaddish should be recited daily throughout the three prayer service.³⁴ Later, Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe (1530-1612) describes these laws in more detail, in a similar way to the *Or Zarua* – i.e., that Kaddish was repeated in services in the same manner that it is in today's

²⁴ Isaiah 6:2-3, *Kedusha* prayer recited publicly in synagogues daily in morning and afternoon services

²⁵ *Kedusha*-Holiness of *Uva Letzion* prayer

²⁶ Shabbat 12b

²⁷ Zohar II:129a

²⁸ Rashi commentary on Sotah 49a

²⁹ Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim 55:1

³⁰ Soferim 19:12

³¹ Daniel 2:20

³² Job 25:1-2

³³ Siddur Rav Amram Gaon

³⁴ *Or Zarua*, Section 2, Hilchot Shabbat 89:7

synagogues, and he stresses that not only should Kaddish be recited seven times daily, but that it can only be said in a minyan-quorum.³⁵

There are various differences in each type of Kaddish and within each service, and numerous customs have arisen while saying the words of the Kaddish themselves. For example, the reason that the Evening Service has no Kaddish at its beginning, like the Morning and Afternoon Services, is that Kaddish requires the recitation of or the learning of a few verses before it can be recited, which is lacking in the evening service. In addition, even if verses are recited alone, not in the context of a service, Kaddish can be recited following them. And if the learning is from the rabbis (and not verses from Scripture), Kaddish may and should be recited following this as well, but a different form of Kaddish known as *Kaddish Derabanan*.³⁶ At various points in the Kaddish, the Cantor is supposed to bow. At the end of the Kaddish, before the last verse, the person saying Kaddish should take three steps back (the same practice at the end of the Shmoneh Esreh-Silent Prayer), to symbolize that one is leaving G-d's presence. At the conclusion, the person should then take three steps forward.³⁷

CONNECTION OF THE KADDISH PRAYER TO MOURNERS

One Talmudic passage above noted that Kaddish was connected to bridegrooms and mourners, but gave no reason. In explaining the prayer, there seems to be no direct connection of Kaddish to those whose relatives died, as this seems to be a prayer that all Jews should recite. It is clear, then, that when the Kaddish was originally established in the Prayer Service, it had nothing to do with mourners or death. When and why did this important prayer become a mourner's prayer?

The most famous story that helps explain why specifically mourners should say this prayer is a Talmudic passage in an obscure tractate related to Rabbi Akiva.³⁸ A similar story is cited in a Midrash but related to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai.³⁹ The most detailed account of this story (relating to Rabbi Akiva) is described in the *Or Zarua* book of Jewish law written in the Middle Ages.⁴⁰ What is that story? Rabbi Akiva once saw a bizarre man who was carrying a load heavy enough for ten men and running as swiftly as a horse. When asked why he worked so hard, the man said that he was a dead man, and that he was punished each day by being sent to chop wood for a fire which then consumed him.

What was his transgression? During his life, he was a tax collector who oppressed the poor and was lenient with the rich. When Rabbi Akiva asked if there was any way that this man could be saved from that existence, he was answered: if he had only left a son who would stand before the congregation (as a Cantor) and call out "*Barchu Et Hashem Hamevorach*-Blessed be G-d, Who is to be blessed," and the congregation would respond and bless G-d (which is part of today's daily service in the morning and evening). Or if this son would proclaim to the congregation "*Yitkadal Veyitkdash Shmei Rabbah*-May G-d's great Name be exalted and sanctified," then the man would be released from his punishment. But he died leaving a pregnant wife who knew nothing about Judaism, and not knowing if she gave birth to a son. Rabbi Akiva vowed to see if he had a son who he might teach. Rabbi Akiva searched far and wide, and eventually found that he had a son, but was not even circumcised. He gave the boy a Brit Milah and taught him, and eventually the son led the congregation with the words the man had said. That night Rabbi Akiva saw the man in a dream and was told that he was released from punishment.

³⁵ Levush commentary, Orach Chaim 55:1

³⁶ Rema, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 54:3 with Mishne Berurah commentary, numbers 7-9

³⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 54:4-5 with Mishne Berurah commentary

³⁸ Kallah Rabatti, chapter 2

³⁹ Midrash, Rabbi Eliezer Zuta 17:14

⁴⁰ Or Zarua, section 2, Hilchot Shabbat 50

Based on this story, it was in the time of the early Rishonim (1000-1300) that the Rabbis attached the Kaddish prayer that already had existed for centuries, to be recited by mourners. Why? It was an already established principle from Talmudic times that a child's deeds could atone for the actions of a parent.⁴¹ On the verse that describes atonement in the Torah, Rabbeinu Bechaye, who lived from 1255-1340, explains that atonement is attained after death by those who give Tzedakah-charity on behalf of the dead person as well as by a child, who sanctifies the parent through his or her actions and also by saying the Kaddish prayer in the synagogue, as was demonstrated in the story of Rabbi Akiva.⁴² Rabbi Judah the Pious, who died in the early 1200's, also writes that a child who learns Torah and does good deeds brings merit for the deceased parent.⁴³

While Kaddish was known as a daily prayer in the service, as seen above in Rav Amram Gaon's Siddur, Kaddish was originally a prayer recited by anyone in the congregation. The earliest actual mention of Kaddish as a prayer to be recited specifically by mourners is mentioned by Rokach (1165-1240).⁴⁴ Or Zarua in the 1200's writes that in Germany there was a custom for a mourner to say the Kaddish at the end of the morning prayer service, but this was not a custom in France, where Kaddish was recited by people whose parents were alive as well.⁴⁵ Thus, the universal custom for a mourner to recite Kaddish was only established later in the Middle Ages.

Since in Rabbi Akiva's story the son could attain the father's atonement by leading the congregation in *Barchu* (a function of the Cantor), it is the custom until today that a mourner has preference to lead the congregational prayer on non-holidays. However, since boys who were not yet thirteen could not become Cantors leading the service, Kaddish was originally instituted just for them, so that they could attain the parent's atonement as well.⁴⁶ The same author states that it is preferable for a mourner to lead the congregation in prayer, even more than reciting the Kaddish, and even leading only part of the service is important.⁴⁷ But Kaddish may not be recited in private, as is the case with many other prayers involving holiness.⁴⁸ Kaddish may only be recited in a Jewish congregation of at least ten male adults, because only in a congregation, publicly, can G-d's Name be truly sanctified.⁴⁹ Until very recently, only one mourner recited the Kaddish in each congregation. When acrimony developed between mourners who vied for this honor, the practice of reciting the Kaddish by all mourners in unison arose, and became common practice in almost all congregations.

The author of the Code of Jewish Law writes that Kaddish is recited for twelve months after a parent's death (in practice it is recited for eleven months), since during that time, the soul endures Divine judgment which ends at the year after death. It is also the practice of the mourner to read the Haftorah, and to lead the first weekly prayer service of the week on Saturday night, since that is when the souls return to *Gehinom* after Shabbat.⁵⁰ (It is noteworthy that in Jerusalem and some other cities, there is a custom that a person who has Yahrzeit [anniversary of a parent's death] during that week, should lead the Saturday night prayer service rather than a mourner during the 12 month mourning period for a parent.) These very practices are also brought down as the Ashkenazi customs by Rema in Shulchan Aruch, almost word for word.⁵¹ It was the last Kaddish of the service that was left to mourners, especially young mourners who were not old enough (thirteen years old) to lead the prayer service, or other adult mourners who could recite Kaddish but were not

⁴¹ Sanhedrin 104a

⁴² Deuteronomy 21:8 with Rabbeinu Bechaye commentary

⁴³ Sefer Chasidim 1171

⁴⁴ Rokach HaGadol, Hilchot Shabbat 50, 53

⁴⁵ Or Zarua, section 2 Hilchot Shabbat 50

⁴⁶ Darchei Moshe HaKatzar, Yoreh Deah 376

⁴⁷ Rema, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 376:4

⁴⁸ Berachot 21b, Megillah 23b with Rashi commentary

⁴⁹ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 55:1 with Mishne Berurah commentary, no. 2

⁵⁰ Beit Yosef commentary on Tur, Shulchan Aruch 376

⁵¹ Rema, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 376:4

knowledgeable enough to lead the entire service.⁵² The Torah giant of the twentieth century, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, quoting Shelah, says that the good deeds and commandments that a child does after a parent's death are an atonement for that person's soul, which not only save that soul from the pain of *Gehinom*, but also lead the soul directly to the Garden of Eden, near the righteous. How a child behaves in the year after death not only helps that soul, but also fulfills the commandment to honor one's parent.⁵³

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa (1765-1827) gave an alternative understanding of the Kaddish prayer. He says that a mourner's longing for sanctification in saying the Kaddish is proclaiming the significance of even a single soul in G-d's universe. In any human army, the loss of even a single soldier goes nearly unnoticed. New recruits quickly take the place of lost soldiers. But to G-d, even the loss of a single soldier is very consequential, and G-d's kingdom has been diminished as a result. Thus, the mourner has to "rebuild" G-d's kingdom by attempting to attain greater sanctification of G-d's Name through the Kaddish. Since every Jew is also considered a child of G-d,⁵⁴ when one Jew dies, G-d has also lost a child, and He too must be comforted.

Two of the great rabbis of the twentieth century also add to our understanding of the Kaddish and its relationship to the mourner. Rabbi Ben Zion Uziel, first Sephardi Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel (1880-1953) writes that the child is the actual continuation of the parent, through his or her actions, words and taking the parent's place in the community. Through these means the child provides merit for the parent in the world of souls.⁵⁵ In another book, Rabbi Uziel traces the entire history of Kaddish with many of the sources quoted above, and then adds that with the words of Kaddish, the child enhances G-d not only through his own actions, but also by causing others to acknowledge G-d's greatness through their words, as they answer the call in Kaddish and say "*Yehai Shmei Rabbah...*"⁵⁶ Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1902-1993) believed that, at first, every man questions G-d when experiencing death, and sees no difference between the death of animals and that of human beings. After acknowledging these legitimate feelings, a person then should come to the conclusion, beginning at the funeral, that man does have a unique status in the world and a holy purpose before G-d. Thus, by reciting Kaddish, it is an act of defiance of death, a statement not only about the greatness of G-d, but also about the greatness of man. It is a negation of despair.⁵⁷

UNDERSTANDING THE UNDERLYING CONCEPTS OF THE KEY WORDS OF KADDISH

Before analyzing the seven or eight key words of the Kaddish (those that the congregation answers to the call of the mourners to make G-d's Name holy), it is important to note how one is supposed to say these words, as well as the significance of the numbers and letters of these words.

Earlier, we saw in the Talmud that one is supposed to say these words of "*Yehai Shmei...*" with all one's might, and then all of one's sins will be erased.⁵⁸ How exactly, then, is a Jew supposed to recite these words? Rashi interprets this passage by saying that a Jew should have great intention and fervor while saying these words, or intellectual "might." Tosafot, on the other hand, interprets these words literally, and says that Jews should literally shout these words very loudly, using physical might.⁵⁹ Maharal rejects both Rashi's and Tosafot's interpretations. He says that "with all one's strength" signifies that these words must be enunciated clearly and distinctly, and not slurred or

⁵² Rema, Shulchan Aruch 132:2 with Mishne Berurah no. 8

⁵³ Sefer Shemirat HaLashon 2:4

⁵⁴ Mishna Avot 3:14

⁵⁵ Responsa Piskei Uziel, *She-elot Hazeman* 3

⁵⁶ Responsa Mishpetai Uziel, Volume 1, Orach Chaim 2

⁵⁷ "Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering, and the Human condition," Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Ktav, 2003, pp. xvii-xix, 194

⁵⁸ Shabbat 119b

⁵⁹ Commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot on Shabbat 119b

rushed.⁶⁰ In deciding practical Jewish law, Mishne Berurah cites a combination of Rashi and Tosafot. While the goal is to reach the fervor and intention espoused by Rashi, he implies that one of the ways to achieve this goal is to answer the mourner with all one's bones and limbs, so that the physical response will affect the emotional and intellectual realms as well.⁶¹ He goes on to say that the Kaddish is so important that a Jew should never talk or interrupt during this very important prayer. He relates a story of a Torah scholar who, after his death, came to his student in a dream. He had a large, ugly mark on this forehead. When the student inquired why it was there (and why he was punished thusly), the Torah scholar said it was because he used to speak occasionally when the Kaddish was being said. This story, once again, points to the importance of this particular prayer.

The commentaries analyze at length the seven words that the congregation's answers: "*Yehai Shmei Rabbah Mevorach Le-Olam Ulmai Olmaya*—May His great Name be blessed for ever and ever." Why specifically these seven words? Maharal cites the number seven as a complete cycle in nature. Thus, these seven words in Kaddish signify the completion of G-d's holiness.⁶² Tur sees a parallel between these words and the seven levels of Heaven that these words need to traverse in order to reach G-d.⁶³ Mishne Berurah agrees with Tur,⁶⁴ but Rabbi Yosef Caro disagrees. He says the world was created with seven words (the first verse in the Torah) and G-d introduced the Ten Commandments with a verse of seven words.⁶⁵ These seven words, then, are a spiritual creation connecting the Jewish people to G-d, just as the Ten Commandments did. Rabbi Caro adds that these seven words must be exactly twenty-eight letters. This is based on a much earlier source, Rabbi Simcha ben Shmuel, Rashi's student.⁶⁶ Why twenty-eight letters? The Talmud stated that these seven words must be recited with all of one's *Ko-ach*-might. *Ko-ach* has the numerical value of twenty-eight, and recalls the verse in which G-d gave this might to the Jewish people as an inheritance.⁶⁷ The twenty-eight letters, then, represent the special relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. In addition to the twenty-eight letters of this seven-word phrase, there are exactly twenty-eight words from the "*Yehai Shmei*" until the end of the shortest form of Kaddish – the Half-Kaddish. The number twenty-eight is also represented by the twenty-eight "stages" or "times" of life described by Ecclesiastes ("For everything there is a time: A time to be born, a time to die...").⁶⁸ This teaches man that in every part of life and in every circumstance, man must search for a way to connect that circumstance to G-d and as a means to serve G-d.

Right before this seven word declaration in Kaddish, the congregation adds another word, that some rabbis say is also connected to the phrase – Amen. In the same passage that instructed Jews to say these seven words with all one's might, Resh Lakish adds that saying Amen with all one's strength opens up the Garden of Eden for that person. What is this word "Amen" that Jews recite in many circumstances following a blessing? The Talmud states that this word is a contraction for "*E-I Melech Ne-eman*—G-d is a faithful King." Rashi explains that by saying this word, a Jew is declaring his or her testimony about the Creator, a G-d, a King who is worthy of faith.⁶⁹ Thus, Amen, is derived from the Hebrew word for faith, *Emunah*. By saying this word, a Jew affirms that he believes in the statement that has just been pronounced. Then, the Talmud states that he who pronounces this one word, Amen, following a blessing, is even greater than the person who recited that blessing (or Kaddish).⁷⁰ How can this be true? After explaining the derivation of the word Amen from Emunah-faith,

⁶⁰ Maharal, Netivot Olam, Netivot Ha-avodah 11

⁶¹ Mishne Berurah commentary, no. 1 on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 56:1

⁶² Maharal, Derech Chaim 5, page 274. Chidushei Agadot, page 5

⁶³ Tur, Orach Chaim 56

⁶⁴ Mishne Berurah commentary, no. 2 on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 56:1

⁶⁵ Beit Yosef on Tur, Orach Chaim 56

⁶⁶ Machzor Vitry, Introduction 8

⁶⁷ Psalms 11:6

⁶⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:2-8

⁶⁹ Rashi commentary on Shabbat 119b

⁷⁰ Berachot 53b

Rabbeinu Bechaye answers our question by stating a well-known Jewish legal principle: the testimony of one Jew has some weight in a Jewish court and elsewhere, but the testimony of two witnesses has the greatest weight of all. When one Jew makes a statement of faith in G-d, it has the legal equivalent of one witness. By answering Amen, there are now two witnesses giving that testimony before G-d, giving it much more force and standing.⁷¹ Therefore, the one who responds is greater than the one who prompted him or her, because the second reinforces the statement of the first.

Thus, the actual number of words pronounced is eight, not seven, including Amen. Maharal explains that eight has the power to go beyond the natural completion or cycle, and reach the realm of the supernatural.⁷² Thus, the cosmic implications of the eight words of “*Yehai Shmei...*,” including Amen, are beyond man’s comprehension to understand their vast impact in the universe.

There are two other words, which seem innocuous, within this seven (or eight) word expression, that need to be understood on a deeper level. The word “*Shmei*” signifying in Aramaic “His Name” – i.e., the Name of G-d, is spelled in most Siddurim-Prayer Books with three letters (*Shin, Mem, Heh*), in order to preserve the twenty-eight letters of these words. But Machzor Vitry spells it with four letters (*Shin, Mem, Yud, Heh*). Although still grammatically correct in Aramaic, this slight change alters the deeper meaning of the word. This latter spelling signifies a contraction of two words (*Shem* and *Y-a*). In this view, the opening words of the Kaddish is based on the Torah’s words describing G-d after the battle with Amalek, and the Midrash cited by Rashi that G-d’s Name and His throne cannot be complete or whole until the Name of Amalek is erased from the earth.⁷³ G-d’s glory, represented by *Y-a*, is diminished by the continued existence of the forces of evil seeking to destroy the Jewish people and the idea of G-d from the world. Only at the End of Days, when the enemies of G-d and the enemies of the Jewish people are finally defeated permanently, will G-d’s Name emerge in its full glory. That is the hope of the Kaddish in trying to raise G-d’s holiness, and it represents an effort to see these days come quickly. This is also how Tosafot understand this word,⁷⁴ as does Tur.⁷⁵

Finally, we come to the very last word of the phrase: *Yitborach*-G-d should be blessed. This word and idea has to be understood, just as it needs to be understood every time Jews recite a blessing and say “*Baruch*-Bless G-d.” Human beings need blessings, not G-d. How, then, can a person possibly bless G-d? And what can this word possibly signify in this context of the Kaddish? Chinuch explains that Jews are not giving G-d anything to bless Him, but, rather, it is an acknowledgement that G-d is always blessed, in the sense that He is perfect and complete.⁷⁶ Rashba explains the word *Beracha*-blessing from the word *Braicha*-spring. Just as a spring flows with an inexhaustible flow of water that constantly refreshes and resupplies itself, so, too, this word acknowledges G-d as the source, the vehicle that allows Him to do good for others.⁷⁷ Aruch HaShulchan adds that the idea of this prayer is that G-d should be seen as a blessing by the entire world “*Le-olam Uleolmai Olmaya*-for ever and ever.” Unlike previous events in Jewish history, such as the destruction of the Holy Temples when G-d was diminished and not seen by all as a blessing and as great but possibly as a G-d who was desecrated, Jews pray that G-d should be looked upon as Holy, Great and a source of blessing, not only now, but permanently and forever.⁷⁸

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⁷¹ Kad HaKemach, “*Emunah*”

⁷² Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, page 5

⁷³ Exodus 17:14-17 with Rashi commentary

⁷⁴ Tosafot on Berachot 3a, s.v. “*Ve-onin*”

⁷⁵ Tur, Orach Chaim 56

⁷⁶ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 430

⁷⁷ Responsa Rashba 5:51

⁷⁸ Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim 56:3

interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.