



THE RECITATION OF KADDISH

The laws and concepts of mourning, for both national and personal loss, are found extensively throughout Rabbinic literature and are addressed comprehensively in the *Shulchan Aruch* and *sifrei halacha*. With that said, it is worth noting that the mourning practice that is arguably the most adhered to, namely the recital of Kaddish, has origins that are somewhat murky at best. We would be hard-pressed to open a Gemarah or the *Shulchan Aruch* and locate precisely where the mandate for the “Mourner’s Kaddish” comes from. It is also worth noting that this tefillah doesn’t seem in any way connected to mourning. In the coming pages, I will address the history of this ubiquitous practice and discuss some of the reasons for its adoption into the mourning rituals.

The basis for the recital of Kaddish is

quite ancient. The *Targum Yerushalmi* explained that when Yaakov Avinu called his sons together to bless them (Breishis 49:1), the sons responded to their father’s words, *Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad*. In response, Yaakov replied *Yehei Shemei rabbah mevorach l’olam va’ed* — May His great name be blessed forever and ever. A similar version of this conversation is recorded in *Pesachim* 56a, but the Targum specifically records as Yaakov Avinu’s response *Yehei Shemei Rabbah*, the centerpiece of Kaddish.

The significance of the words *Yehei Shemei* are mentioned in a number of other sources in Chazal. The Gemarah at the beginning of *Berachos* 3a, records a conversation between Rebbe Yossi and Eliyahu HaNavi in which Eliyahu said that:

בשעה שישראל נכנסין לבתי כנסיות ולבתי
מדרשות ועונין יהא שמייה הגדול מבורך

הקדוש ברוך הוא מנענע ראשו ואומר אשרי
המלך שמקלסין אותו בביתו כך מה לו לאב
שהגלה את בניו ואוי להם לבנים שגלו מעל
שולחן אביהם.

When the Jewish people enter the synagogues and study halls and recite, “May His great name be blessed,” the Holy One Blessed be He shakes His head (in approval) and says “How fortunate is a king that they praise in His own home.” Now [that the Jews are in exile], “What is going to be with a father Who exiled His children and woe unto the children who have been exiled from their father’s table.”

Similarly, the Gemarah in *Shabbos* 119b emphasizes the importance of Kaddish in saying:

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי כל העונה אמן יהא
שמייה רבא מברך בכל כחו קורעין לו גזר דינו.
R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: Anyone who responds “May his great name (etc.)” with all of his might, his sentence will be torn up.

Last, Chazal highlights the centrality of Kaddish in *Sotah* 49a, which states that following the Churban the world continues to exist only because of the recital of Kaddish:

ואלא עלמא אמאי קא מקיים אקדושה
דסידרא ואיהא שמיה רבא דאגדתא.

How does the world remain in existence? Through Kedusha D'Sidra (the Kedusha said in U'va L'Tzion) and through Yehei shemei rabbah said after learning Aggadic passages.

While the actual words of *Yisgadal v'yiskadash* are not mentioned in Shas and only appear in later Medrashim (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Yeshayahu* 296), these sources and others highlight that the essence of Kaddish, which consists of amplifying G-d's "name" in the universe, is clearly traced back to the earliest of times. The *Aruch HaShulchan* (*Orach Chaim* 55:1) in fact traces its origin to the time immediately following the destruction of the first Beis HaMikdash. Specifically, once Klal Yisroel were dispersed from their lands and no longer felt G-d's presence through the vehicle of the Beis HaMikdash, the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah constructed a tefillah that would allow individuals to feel that they still had the opportunity to sanctify and amplify the name of G-d. The *Aruch HaShulchan* points to the above Gemarah in *Berachos*, which clearly links the recital of *Yehei shemei* with the overall feeling of brokenness following the Churban.

The centrality of Kaddish is manifest both in halakhic and Aggadic sources. For instance, a question was posed (*Berachos* 21b) as to whether or not a person can interrupt reciting *Kerias Sh'ma* in order to answer *Yehei shemei*. While the Gemarah concludes that one should not interrupt, the

Gemarah never even entertains the possibility of interrupting *Sh'ma* for *Kedusha*. The mere fact that the possibility even exists to respond to Kaddish during *Sh'ma* is certainly striking.

Similarly, Tosfos in *Berachos* 3a, discuss why Chazal instituted that Kaddish be said in Aramaic as opposed to most of tefillah, which is in Hebrew. Both answers provided by Tosfos appear significant. The first is that the malachim were deprived of saying Kaddish and therefore, as a way of avoiding making the Celestial Angels "jealous," the prayer was written in Aramaic, a language that is apparently unknown to the malachim. Tosfos's second answer is due to the significance that Chazal has ascribed to *Yehei shemei*, as demonstrated in the aforementioned Gemarah in *Sotah*. They wanted to guarantee that even the most uneducated Jew would understand the tefillah and therefore instituted that Kaddish would be said in the vernacular of the day, which was Aramaic.

The concept that the malachim would feel jealousy toward Bnei Yisroel because they were given the opportunity to recite Kaddish is discussed at length by many of the ba'alei machshava (see the *Gesher Hachaim*, *Chelek Aleph*, ch. 30 and *Meshech Chochma* beginning of *Parshas Kedoshim* among others). They point to the Gemarah in *Chullin* 91b, which says that man's ability to sanctify G-d's Name and sing *shirah* is more exalted and beloved than the comparable actions of the malachim. The essence of Bnei Yisroel's superiority lies in the *Kedusha D'sidra*, which is the beginning part of *U'va L'Tzion*. The very statement of *v'ata kadosh yosheiv*

tehillos yisroel — You are holy sitting among the prayers of Israel — is recognizing that sanctity is created not necessarily by the malachim on high but by the efforts of corporeal man below. The malachim are capable of recognizing and exclaiming G-d's sanctity but it is Bnei Yisroel, through their efforts and tefillos, that can create and add to that Holiness. It is that concept of man as the mekadash that somehow makes the angels feel inferior, and in proclaiming the words *Yisgadal v'yiskadash shemei rabbah* we are reaffirming man as a potential sanctifier.

While these and many other sources reflect both the importance of Kaddish as well as its ancient lineage, they in no way shed light on the specific practice of mourners reciting Kaddish. At what point was it instituted that a child should recite Kaddish for a parent?

The earliest source that specifically mentions Kaddish in conjunction with a mourner is found in *Meseches Sofrim* (19:12), in which the following custom is found:

משחרב בית המקדש התקינו שיהו החתנים והאבלים באים לכנסת כדי לגמול להם חסד חתנים לקלסן ולהלוותם לבתיהן אבלים לאחר שיגמור החזן תפלה של מוסף הולך לו אחורי דלתי של בית הכנסת או בפני הכנסת ומוצא שם האבלים וכל קרוביו ואומר עליהם ברכה ואחר כך אומר קדיש.

When the Temple was destroyed, it was instituted that grooms and mourners come to the synagogue in order [for the kehillah] to perform kindness for them. The grooms, for the purpose of praising them and escorting them to their homes. For the mourners, after the chazan would finish the Mussaf prayer, he would go behind or in front of the doors of the synagogue and find the mourners and their relatives and recite a blessing on

their behalf and afterwards, he would recite Kaddish.

While *Maseches Sofrim* does not specify who exactly said the Kaddish and for how long it is to be recited, clearly the concept of saying Kaddish as part of the mourning process dates back well over 2,000 years.

There is a well-known story that would seem to shed light on our practice. The story can be found in numerous sources but is most identified with the passage found in *Ohr Zaruah* (*Hilchos Shabbos* no. 50). The story is about Rabbi Akiva who meets a man who he immediately recognizes is an apparition. The man looked horrendous and spoke of his intense suffering since his death. Upon Rabbi Akiva's inquiry as to what could be done to alleviate his current state, the man responded that if his son would say Kaddish for him in public then he would be released from this punishment. The story concludes that Rabbi Akiva found this son, circumcised him, taught him Hebrew and how to say the Kaddish and in short order the man was released from his purgatory. This story is recorded by the Geonim and Rishonim (*Rivash* #115), is codified by the Ramo (*Yoreh Dei'ah* 376:5), and serves as the basis for our custom that a child says Kaddish for eleven months for a parent.

What is the desired effect of a child's Kaddish? The simple understanding is that a child saying Kaddish for a parent serves as an atonement for the parent's sins. Based on this reasoning, the poskim ask, why should Kaddish only be for eleven months when the *dino shel Gehhenom* is said to be twelve months? The answer of course is that we don't want to assume that a parent was in fact wicked and

therefore there is no need to assume that a mother or father are subject to the judgement of the wicked. Hence we are instructed to recite it for eleven and not twelve months.

While this answer is certainly valid, and is in keeping with the story recorded by the *Ohr Zaruah*, it does put a somewhat uncomfortable bent on what many feel is an incredibly meaningful way of honoring a parent. Perhaps we can argue that this reasoning can be expanded. It is not simply that a parent is in need of atonement, which is being assisted by the child's Kaddish. Rather the recital of Kaddish reflects the legacy of the parent, in that he or she has a child who continues to perpetuate the name of G-d and to some degree the parent's legacy and values, even after their passing. This perspective is very much in keeping with statements throughout Shas. The concept of *b'ra mezakeh l'abba* — the son is a merit to a living or deceased parent (*Sanhedrin* 104a), or *mah z'ro'oh bachayim af hu bachayim* — just like the son is living the father continues to live (*Ta'anis* 5b), speaks to the impact that the child has in perpetuating the legacy of a parent even after their death. Children who continue, both through the Kaddish and more important through their actions, to exemplify the values of a parent brings an atonement and a comfort to the soul of the deceased. This also explains why the text of the Kaddish *Yasom* (Mourner's Kaddish) is in no way related to the parent or to mourning. The responsibility of the child is to be *mekadesh Shem Shamayim* — to sanctify the name of Heaven — which hopefully is a reflection on who the parents were.

Rav Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, in

his landmark sefer *Gesher Hachaim*, (Vol. I ch. 30 4:1) records another perspective as to why Kaddish was instituted for the mourner. He says that Kaddish is another form of *tzidduk hadin* — testifying to the righteousness of G-d's judgement. It would be natural, argued Rav Tukachinsky, that a mourner would be angered or disturbed by the way in which Hakadosh Baruch Hu was running the world, so as a result, we institute that the *avel* has the opportunity to repeatedly proclaim *Yisgadal v'yiskadash shemei rabbah*.

Last, it would seem logical that the Kaddish was instituted for the mourner specifically because we recognize the comfort that is brought to man by feeling G-d's presence. Just like in the story in *Berachos*, which informs us that Hakadosh Baruch Hu can be "found" in the *Beis Hakneses* and that in some way he is also mourning for the *Churban*, so too, man after he has suffered his own *churban* finds solace in this ancient practice. Even during, or perhaps specifically during, our lowest points, we can understand that we can bring G-d's presence into the world and can hopefully be comforted by that presence. This is especially true in light of the communal nature of the *tefillah*, in which the mourner feels buoyed by the presence of the larger community. While *churban* — be it the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash* or the more common forms of loss and grief — are almost by definition times of enormous pain, we recognize the eternal wisdom of the Torah and Chazal, which give us opportunities to find comfort within that grief.