

An Introduction to the Mourners Kaddish

By Irwin Ruff

Originally the Kaddish, which is a combination of Hebrew and Aramaic, was a formula of dismissal after study of the Torah. In the prayer, the leader proclaims God's greatness and holiness, and alludes to hope for the messianic era. Over time this became the standard way of ending a period of study or prayer, and thus developed into a separator between parts of the worship service.

Gradually, it became the custom to allow mourners or people observing *yahrzeit* (the anniversary of a person's death) to lead the Kaddish at prescribed places in the service. Kaddish can be said only in the presence of a minyan (quorum of 10 people required for public prayer), and reciting it is clearly a leading of the congregation in praising God.¹ On Shabbat morning in our congregation, the Mourners Kaddish is recited in two places: near the beginning of the service (if a minyan is present) and at the end. On Friday evenings, the Kaddish is recited in the middle of the service (between Kabbalat Shabbat and Maariv) and at the conclusion.

The Kaddish does not mention death, but consists of statements of God's greatness, and of wishes for the establishment of His kingdom and of peace. But by saying the Kaddish, we are keeping the memory of the departed person alive not only for ourselves but also for the congregation. An additional aspect, especially in the case of a new mourner, is that in spite of the pain of the death of a close one, a mourner still proclaims publicly "... May His great Name be exalted and sanctified ... May His great Name be blessed forever and ever". Although we cannot understand why death came when and how it did, nevertheless we acknowledge that God is just.² Even if, in the beginning, such statements of faith are difficult in the face of the pain of recent loss, we hope that our sense of faith and strength will be renewed as we heal over the period of time in which we recite this prayer.

Saying the Kaddish following a person's death also gives mourners an opportunity to show fidelity to the memory and Jewish legacy of the person who passed away. We are confirming Jewishly that the deceased's presence in this life had meaning and influence.

Finally, we say the Kaddish as part of the community—both the minyan required for prayer, and also within a community of mourners which rises to recite it. The pain of loss is a shared one, and draws us closer to one another, creating a sense of shared loss, and of comfort.

(1) Each paragraph recited by the mourners ends with an invitation to the congregation to say "amen—I agree," to which the congregation responds.

(2) Derived from: Artscroll *Kaddish*, Mesorah Publications, 1980. pp. xviii-xxi.