

## Exploring Jewish Prayer: The History Of The 'Kaddish'

January 12, 2007

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*Abstract: "When we think of the Kaddish, we immediately think of the mourner's Kaddish. It may surprise you to learn, however, that the association of Kaddish with mourning was not the original purpose of the prayer. That came later."*

For the focus of my teaching tonight, I should like to explore Jewish liturgy, Specifically, let's learn something together about the history and the meaning of the Kaddish prayer.

The Kaddish was composed in the first century. It is written in Hebrew and in Aramaic. Why Aramaic? Because first century Jews did not speak Hebrew as their daily language. In Palestine, Aramaic was the vernacular language of the Jews. (Incidentally, what was the other major vernacular language of the Jews? Why of course, it was Greek!).

Now when we think of the Kaddish, we immediately think of the mourner's Kaddish. It may surprise you to learn, however, that the association of Kaddish with mourning was not the original purpose of the prayer. That came later.

In fact, there are 4 different types of Kaddish. Originally, one form of this Kaddish – called the full Kaddish or *Kaddish titkabel* -- was recited upon the conclusion of Torah study. Subsequently, the whole Kaddish and the partial Kaddish and the mourners' Kaddish were included within the prayer service.

So now let's look at the actual text of the full Kaddish/*Kaddish titkabel* to understand what this prayer really says and why it was so frequently repeated in the prayer service.

How would you characterize this prayer? What are its themes, its motifs?

- 1) It is an elaborate praise of God
- 2) It calls for God to rule the world and make things right
- 3) It calls for God to rule the world now so that we live to see it
- 4) It asks God to accept our prayers
- 5) It asks God to bring peace

This Kaddish was used to conclude the prayer service. We can quickly comprehend why. Why? It hits all the right themes: God is great. God is in charge. God is going to bring peace. It's a perfect ending. I would go even further to say that the power of this prayer is its messianic dimension.

Now let's understand the difference between the Full Kaddish and the *Chatzi Kaddish*, which means the partial Kaddish. What do you see? The partial Kaddish is obviously

shorter. It is missing the last 3 paragraphs of the full Kaddish. So it doesn't mention peace, but it still praises God and calls upon God to come quickly to rule the world.

The partial Kaddish appears several times in the prayer service. Why? It serves as a marker, letting the person praying know that you are moving from one section of the prayer service to another.

Finally, let's look at the mourner's Kaddish. First of all, how does it differ in text from the other two forms of Kaddish? It is longer than the partial Kaddish, restoring two of the three paragraphs. The paragraph calling for the acceptance of our prayers is absent. Why? Undoubtedly we have prayed for our loved one to live. It is therefore inappropriate in a mourner's Kaddish.

But what is the most surprising realization about the mourner's Kaddish?

- 1) It nowhere explicitly mentions death!
- 2) However, the reference to peace may be an oblique reference to "May the soul rest in peace."
- 3) The Kaddish seems to focus on the living.
- 4) The Kaddish is a praise of God even in the face of loss.

In summary, when we pray the mourner's Kaddish, we are expressing a messianic hope, we are praying that God will bring peace on earth -- peace for the living and peace for the dead.

I hope you have enjoyed this brief exploration into the history of the Kaddish, one of the most fascinating prayers in our liturgy.