

EMOR (LEVITICUS 21:1-24:23)

Kaddish and Other Overrated Mitzvahs

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Have you ever heard the expression "My *Kaddish*'l – My Little *Kaddish*," referring to one's oldest son? The intent behind this expression is the assumption that once a person has brought a child into the world, that person may now rest easily with the knowledge that there will be someone to say Kaddish after he is gone.

What is the magic of Kaddish that it draws even the most non-observant Jew into the synagogue? What does it mean? What is its significance?

Kaddish is a prayer, or, more accurately, a proclamation, that appears numerous times in various versions, interspersed throughout the three daily prayers. Kaddish is recited, regardless of whether or not a mourner is present.

The gist of Kaddish is "*Yisgadal v'yiskaddash* (or, for those who prefer the Sephardic pronunciation, *Yitgadal v'yitkaddash*) *shemei rabbah* – may His great Name be magnified and sanctified in the world..."

The origin of this Aramaic declaration is a verse in this week's Torah Portion: *I must be sanctified among the Israelites.* (Leviticus, 22:32)

The Torah requires us to publicly praise the Name of G-d. (This, by the way, is the reason that it is pointless to say Kaddish at home. Kaddish is a PUBLIC proclamation.) The Congregation is called upon to praise G-d and respond: "*Amen. May the Great Name be blessed forever and ever.*"

It is customary for a mourner to recite not just the Mourner's Kaddish that appears 1-4 times in a particular service, but to actually LEAD the service and recite ALL of the versions of Kaddish that are recited throughout the service.

Why?

We are given a certain number of years to fulfill our missions on earth. It is the job of each of us to serve G-d and make the world a better place. Once we are called to meet our Maker, the mission, for better or for worse, is over. There is nothing more we can do.

Or is there? Judaism teaches that a person's good deeds continue long after he is gone. Every time you and I discuss an observation from Rashi's commentary, Rashi, in a sense, comes alive and continues to teach Torah to the world, centuries after his death.

A person who has died can no longer perform Mitzvahs. However, when that person's child enters the synagogue and publicly praises G-d's Name, it is considered almost as if the departed person himself is doing the Mitzvah. We, the surviving, have the ability to do good deeds on behalf of those who no longer can.

Please forgive the slightly irreverent title of this week's message. To a certain extent, Kaddish IS overrated. Some people assume that Kaddish is recited, and then you're all set. Kaddish is only the beginning. Many have the custom to study sections of the Talmud in memory of those who have passed away. One will often find, in a Shivah house, a sign-up sheet for friends and relatives to volunteer to collectively study the 525 chapters of the Mishnah within the next 30 days. Charity is given in memory of the departed. In fact, ANY Mitzvah done in memory of someone who has passed away is considered a great tribute to that person. (More information on arranging Mishnah study in memory of a loved one can be found [here](#).)

In another sense, Kaddish is actually UNDERrated. The *Peleh Yo'eitz*, one of the classic books of ethics, makes a fascinating suggestion regarding this topic. He suggests that the mourner should consult with his rabbi to determine if he is WORTHY of saying Kaddish and studying Mishnah for his own father! Perhaps, proposes the author, the mourner is not sufficiently scholarly and righteous to perform this important mission. Perhaps he should secure the services of a more learned person to make sure the Mitzvah is done right!!!

(NOTE: To my knowledge, this suggestion of the *Peleh Yo'eitz* is NOT standard procedure. The mourner should attend synagogue three times a day when possible. A proxy is designated if the mourner is unable to say Kaddish, or if there is no mourner.)

The *Peleh Yo'eitz* goes on to say that the obligation does not end with the year of mourning. He says that one should ALWAYS look for opportunities to "elevate the souls" of departed relatives by learning, praying, giving charity, and being better Jews in every way.

After all, isn't that what they want us to do?

Have a great Shabbos.

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