MOURNER'S *KADDISH*

CECIL BLOOM looks for answers to questions about this best-known but puzzling Jewish prayer. What are its origins? Why is it in Aramaic? Why is it recited in memory of the dead, when it makes no mention of death? Why is it recited for eleven months after a death?

Many male Jews who attend *shul* infrequently nevertheless do so to observe the anniversary of the death of a parent– the *Yahrzeit* – in order to recite the Mourner's *Kaddish*. This most sacred of Hebrew prayers should also be recited daily for eleven months following the parent's death. By fulfilling this obligation of honouring a parent, this custom has drawn many Jews back to religious practice.

The prayer itself, which can only be recited if there is a quorum (*minyan*)of worshippers, has its origins in the period of the Second Temple, when it was intoned by a preacher at the close of his discourse to his congregation. Except for the last verse, its language is Aramaic. This may have been because Hebrew as a language of prayer was forbidden in the days of the Roman Emperor, Hadrian. When Jews were subsequently allowed to pray freely, Aramaic was retained as a reminder of bygone suffering. But an alternative suggestion is that, because few people knew much Hebrew, it may have been thought desirable that the praise of God, the basis of the prayer, should be understood by everyone present. There is also a legend that Aramaic was used 'to confuse the angels'. A so-called 'half *Kaddish*' marks the end of a distinct section of the service and the 'full' *Kaddish* containing some extra verses, is recited shortly after completion of the *Shemoneh Esrei* (the eighteen benedictions).

The complete prayer is not found in the Bible or in Talmudic or Midrashic literature and appears to have grown gradually until the Gaonim period in the seventh century into its present form.

Mourner's *Kaddish* is identical to the full *Kaddish* prayer pronounced by the *chazan* in his liturgy, except for one verse at the end of the prayer. It apparently originated in the 13th century in Germany at the time of oppressive persecution by the Crusaders. Its recitation is based on the legend that Rabbi Akiva taught it to an orphan in order to save the latter's father from perdition. How the prayer became such a marked token of reverence for a parent's memory is, however, not entirely clear.

The Talmud says that sinners of Israel are judged to be in *Gehinnom* (purgatory) for twelve months after death and the prayer was originally recited for a full year in order to redeem the parent's soul from the torture of *Gehinnom*. Later, it became the practice to say the Kaddish for eleven months to avoid any implication that the parent was a wicked person. A 'Rabbinical *Kaddish*', that contains a few more extra verses, is usually recited by mourners after the study of the *Mishna* or other rabbinical writings.

In Orthodox circles, the *Kaddish* is only recited by males, not females, and the word *kaddish* has crept into the Yiddish language through parents who would cry with joy on the birth of their first son – "*Mein Kaddish*!". Those anxious to pass down traditional beliefs to succeeding generations believed that a son reciting *Kaddish* after they died would be likely to retain these traditions. When there are no children, male individuals unrelated to a deceased were especially commended if they took on the duty of reciting the prayer for the whole eleven months.

Curiously, the prayer as recited during the months of mourning and at the *Yahrzeit,* has no special connection with the dead. It may have become the mourner's prayer because it originally mentioned the resurrection of the dead but this passage now appears only in the *Kaddish* for the burial service. The prayer is effectively an act of petition for the departed's soul even though not one word of death is uttered. It is a doxology, a chant of praise glorifying God. Originally, it was said at the close of the *shiva* period for a scholar but was afterwards said for all deceased to avoid putting non-scholars to shame. Great emphasis was attached to the congregational response *yehei Shmei raba mevorach l'olam ulalmei almaya* (Let His great name be blessed for ever and to all eternity). The Talmud declares that since the destruction of the Temple the world has been sustained by the *Kedushah* (sanctification) of the *Shemoneh Esrei* and by this *Kaddish* response, which are both considered to be more important than any other liturgical responses. The Midrash says that, as the congregation proclaims the words of this response, the Holy One forgives.

The Kaddish prayer has attracted the attention of composers. Salomone Rossi in the late 16th century was the first known to have set the prayer to music but a number of settings for the *chazan* have been made. There are thirteen different settings for use during week-day, *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov* services, as well as ones for special occasions, but only a few are now widely used. Secular musicians, too, have been attracted to the prayer. The non-Jew, Maurice Ravel, composed a song later transcribed for violin and orchestra and one of the most recent significant settings has been by Leonard Bernstein whose third symphony, a large scale work, a semi-oratorio part-dramatic monologue, is subtitled *Kaddish*. Bernstein dedicated the work to John F Kennedy, who was assassinated on the day he was orchestrating the final section. But the most exotic adaptation of the prayer must be one based on the *Marseillaise* anthem composed in the 19th century.

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