

helped our people from generation to generation and will continue to do so for generations to come.

In today's rapidly changing world, we need to seek comfort and tranquility in the stability of Tradition. Many people utilize Tradition only in times of great sorrow and duress. Fortunately, we have these customs to help to guide us during these difficult periods in our lives. We must again thank and praise God for supporting us and for granting us life, thus embracing the precious words of the Kaddish.

### III.

## COMMENTING, LEADING AND MEDITATING ON THE KADDISH

### Linear Translation and Commentary on the Mourner's Kaddish

By Rabbi Daniel Nevins

#### INTRODUCTION

##### Genre

There are three major genres of Jewish prayer: praise (הודאה), petition (בקשה), and thanksgiving (שבח). The latter two genres relate to the needs and experiences of people, whereas the first focuses on the sanctity of God. Praise-prayers seek to transport the person beyond his or her own needs, and as such, are the purest liturgical form.

The rabbis classed several praise-prayers in a special category called "matters of sanctity" (דברים שבקדושה). These liturgical selections include the call to prayer (ברכו), the section of the reader's Amidah called "Kedushah" (קדושה), and the Kaddish (קדיש). All of these prayers require a *minyan*, a quorum of ten Jews who constitute a miniature version of Israel. While individual meditation is a praiseworthy and even necessary element of a spiritual life, Judaism instructs us that the Creator's praise is most impactful when announced in public. This requirement has sustained many a synagogue, as Jews learn to seek one another out in their goal of spiritual transcendence.

These "matters of sanctity" are all recited responsively, with a call and response interplay between a leader and the

congregation. Their purpose is to sanctify God's name in this world, even as Isaiah described the angels' unceasing song in heaven.

## Language

The words of the Kaddish are an amalgam of Hebrew and scholarly Jewish Aramaic, which was the language of Jewish Torah scholars in the early Talmudic era. The familiar cadence of the Kaddish derives from the reflexive grammatical form (*Ithpael* in Aramaic; *Hitpael* in Hebrew) shared by ten of its opening words. Thus, *Yitgadal*, *v'Yitkaddash* in the first paragraph, and *Yitbarach*, *v'Yishtabach*, *v'Yitpoar*, *v'Yitromam*, *v'Yitnasei*, *v'Yithadar*, *v'Yitaleh*, *v'Yithalal* in the third paragraph, are all reflexive verbs that are nearly synonyms for God's exalted stature.

Aside from the pleasing cadence of this string of verbs, there is a theological message in their grammar. Rather than directly praising God, we ask that God be praised—it would be presumptuous to assume that we ourselves can cause God to be great. Moreover, this prayer praises not God's essence, but God's name. There is therefore deep humility and reverence embedded in the very grammar and diction of the Kaddish.

## Origins

The origins and original function of the Kaddish are shrouded in mystery. Its kernel is clearly the Aramaic verse from the book of Daniel (2:20), "May His great name be blessed forever and ever," which has a Hebrew equivalent in Psalms 113:2. This phrase, which is reverently referred to throughout Talmudic literature, became the cornerstone for the various versions of the Kaddish, which originated in Palestine, and were developed further in Babylonia. The original use of the Kaddish had no connection to mourning; this association is first mentioned explicitly only in the thirteenth

century. By that time, the legend of Rabbi Akiva saving a man's soul from perdition by teaching his son to recite Kaddish in synagogue had spread. This is apparently the ultimate cause for the medieval practice instituting קידושיתום, the Mourner's (literally, orphan's) Kaddish. The Sephardic (and some Chasidic) traditions include in the first paragraph a request that God's redemption and messiah be delivered (ויצמח פרקנה וקרב משיחה).

Great and holy<sup>1</sup> shall  
His<sup>2</sup> great name<sup>3</sup> be in the  
world that He created by His  
will!<sup>4</sup>

May His kingdom be  
established by your life and  
in your days<sup>5</sup> and in the life of  
the entire House of Israel.<sup>6</sup>  
Now, and speedily,<sup>7</sup> and say  
"Amen!"<sup>8</sup>

May His great name  
be blessed<sup>9</sup> forever and  
ever!<sup>10</sup>

Blessed, acclaimed, glo-  
rified, elevated, raised high,  
beautified, exalted and  
praised<sup>11</sup> be the name of the  
Holy One, **blessed be He!**<sup>12</sup>

וַיַּגְדֵּל וַיַּקְדִּשׁ שְׁמָה רַبָּא  
בְּעַלְמָא דִי בָּרָא כָּרְעִוָּתָה  
וַיַּמְלִיךְ מִלְכּוֹתָה  
בְּתִיכְוֹן וּבְיוּמִיכְוֹן  
וּבְמִיחָרָה דָכְלָ בֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל  
בְּעַגְלָא וּבְזָמָן קָרִיב  
וְאָמָרוּ: אָמֵן

וְהִיא שְׁמָה רַבָּא מִכְהָה  
לְעַלְמָם וּלְעַלְמִי עַלְמִיא

וַיַּתְבְּרָה וַיַּשְׁפַּבַּח  
וַיַּתְפָּאַר וַיַּתְרֹום וַיַּתְגַּשֵּׁא  
וַיַּתְכִּיר וַיַּתְעַלָּה וַיַּתְהַלֵּל  
שְׁמָה דָקוֹרְשָׁא בָרִיה הַוָּא

[God is] Beyond<sup>13</sup> all blessings, songs<sup>14</sup> praises and consolations that are said on earth, and say “Amen.”

May great peace come<sup>15</sup> from heaven and life for us and all Israel, and say “Amen.”

May He Who makes peace above also make peace for us<sup>16</sup> and for all Israel, and say, “Amen.”

—Mourner’s Kaddish reprinted from  
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[www.singlshps.com](http://www.singlshps.com).

1. **Great and Holy.** Jewish theology balances two visions of God—transcendent and immanent. The transcendent vision of God—mighty, awesome, even frightening—is indicated by the first word, *Yitgadal* (“Great”). We often first think of God in terms of greatness, but Judaism seeks to move us to a more intimate relationship with God. The second word, *v’Yitkadash* (holy), is a source of connection between God and humans, for we are instructed to become holy via the commandments, even as God is known as The Holy One, Praised be He. This understanding of a God whom we can imitate is more immanent. Both modes of relating to God are necessary for a balanced Jewish perspective.
2. **His.** The masculine pronoun is here used to describe God, although the attributes of God alluded to in this prayer are alternately masculine and feminine in Jewish mystical theology.
3. **Great name.** We bless God’s name but do not presume to comprehend or affect God’s essence.

לְעָלָא מִן כֵּל  
בְּרָכְתָא וְשִׁירְתָא  
תְּשִׁבְחָתָא וְנִחְמָתָא  
דְּאָמִרָן בְּעָלָמָא  
וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן

יְהָא שָׁלָמָא נָבָא מִן שְׁמָיָא  
וְתִיעַם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל  
וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן

עֲשֵׂה שָׁלֹום בְּמִרְמָיו  
הָוּא יָעַשְׂה שָׁלֹום  
עַלְינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל  
וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן

4. **In the world.** Isaiah envisioned the angels sanctifying God’s name “in the upper heavens.” Our task is to make this created realm a laboratory producing holiness, thereby affirming the worth of our existence.
5. **By your life and in your days.** Is this phrase redundant, or does each word contribute new meaning? The former phrase implies that the totality of our lives should function to sanctify God, but that is a very tall order. In fact, Rabbi Akiva is said to have died satisfied (despite his tortured end) that he had fulfilled the command to love God “with all your being.” For most humans, the method to accomplish this goal is much more mundane: through daily decisions to live a life of goodness. Thus “in your days” may be a more accessible way to sanctify God “by your life.”
6. **The entire House of Israel.** Never underestimate the significance of our collective service to God. This prayer may not be uttered without a *minyan*, in fulfillment of the verse “I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel.” (Leviticus, 22:32) God is said to rejoice in our unity, and to bemoan our division. When our collective existence becomes a “*Kiddush HaShem*” (sanctification of God’s name), the redemption will surely be near.
7. **Now and speedily.** The messianic yearning of the Kaddish first emerges with these words. No mere recitation, this is an urgent demand addressed to the congregation to transform the world.
8. **Say “Amen!”** The congregation affirms all that the reader has said with this response, which is an acronym for the Hebrew words אל מלך נאמן (God, the faithful king). The Kaddish is essentially a call and response prayer.
9. **May His great name be blessed.** This is the kernel of the Kaddish, based on Daniel 2:20 and Psalms 113:2. The Talmud and commentaries (Shabbat 119b) emphasize that this response should be said vigorously, either through intense concentration or through raising one’s voice in praise of God. Mystics read significance into the seven words and twenty-eight letters of this phrase, seeing it as a pillar of creation (seven days) and a source of strength (from the word כח “strength,” whose numerical value is 28).
10. **Forever and ever!** An alternative understanding, based on the commentary *Metzudat David*, would be from this lower world to the supernal realm. In other words, may our humble praise resound across the heavens! The Jewish mystical tradition understands human actions on earth as impacting the heavenly realms beyond our comprehension.
11. **... and praised.** This concludes a string of eight verbs (in the reflexive grammatical form) praising God. Each word brings its own nuance

but as a group they form a doxology, or powerful paean of praise. Added to the first two words of the Kaddish, we have ten verbs of praise, corresponding to the ten mystical *sefirot* or dimensions of God's essence that are discernible to humans.

12. **Blessed be He!** This phrase is said by the reader and then repeated by the congregation. In some congregations, the response is “Amen.”
13. **Beyond.** During the ten days of repentance from Rosh HaShannah through Yom Kippur, this phrase is replaced with **לעלא מלען**, “over and beyond all,” because during this time we strive for an elevated spiritual sense even as God’s sovereignty is more keenly apprehended.
14. **Blessings, songs.** In addition to being a prayer said by mourners, the Kaddish is used throughout the service to introduce or conclude various sections. This reference acknowledges that God is far greater than all of the praise that we utter in our liturgy.
15. **May great peace come.** Until this point, the Kaddish has offered pure praise of God. In a shift of genre, it now adds two Hebrew petitions asking for peace on earth.
16. **Also make peace for us.** This paragraph appears to repeat the message of the prior one, which also asked for peace. But while the former petition was oblique, asking “may peace come from heaven,” the closing prayer is more insistent, asking that God intervene in the affairs of this world, sharing the heavenly peace with the people Israel during our lives. Nevertheless, the entire Kaddish prayer is extremely humble, never addressing God in the second person, and asking only for the most elevated of blessings, for peace.

## Leading the Kaddish: Impact on a Cantor

By Cantor Howard Glantz

As a young *chazzan* (cantor) just out of school, I remember feeling uncomfortable leading the Mourner's Kaddish at the daily *minyan* service with a quorum. After all, I was not a mourner, and I had vivid recollections of being urged to sit down in the chapel of my parents' *shul* as soon as the Mourner's Kaddish was announced in that only mourners stand for and say the Kaddish prayer in traditional circles.

The words were certainly familiar. Of all the liturgy in the *siddur* (prayer book) or *machzor* (prayer book for the High Holy Days), the *Kaddish*, in its various forms, is the most repeated text. The words rolled off my tongue as quickly as my telephone number and I enjoyed marking Shabbat and Holy Days with the traditional tunes and *nusach* (the traditional modes prescribed for chanting the liturgy). But somehow, leading people in a Mourner's *Kaddish*, I anticipated as being something very different.

Of course, I forged ahead performing this job requirement. Slowly and deliberately, I carefully enunciated each syllable of the Kaddish. As I became more and more accustomed to it, I viewed leading the Kaddish as a helpful task. With each person having a slightly different pace and pronunciation of this affirmation, I found that many could stay with the text easier having a leader to keep the pace steady and the words precise. Yes, it often struck me that I was not one of "them"—I had not experienced the obligation of say-