

Kaddish: The Living Prayer – for the Dead

When former US President eulogized assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin in 1995, he mentioned that the Jewish prayer for mourning – what we call the Kaddish prayer - does not actually mention death. It is an accurate – and fascinating observation. The prayer mentions neither death, nor mourning – nor the deceased.

Why does the prayer for the dead not mention death?

What is the Kaddish prayer really about?

If you are reading this, you are likely familiar with this well-known prayer and its memorable opening words, *'Yisgadel veYiskadesh Shmei Raba'* – *May His Great Name be glorified and sanctified*. It is said often in shul and is a classic obligation after the death of a relative (11 months for a parent, while for a child, spouse or sibling, it is said for only 30 days). Interestingly, the prayer is not in Hebrew, like almost all Jewish prayers, but rather in Aramaic – the common language at the time of its composition over 2,000 years ago.

On the one hand, Jewish mourning customs are for the benefit of the mourners. The burial itself, the tearing of 'kriah', the seven days of mourning, recital of Kaddish, and year-long observances have been acclaimed throughout the ages for their cathartic qualities of expressing grief, yet receiving comfort. They help achieve closure and help mourners mourn.

On the other hand, Jewish mourning customs are for the benefit of the dead. In particular, we are taught that the Kaddish prayer recited by mourners is a great merit for the soul of the deceased. How can one person's actions affect someone else's spiritual life in the World to Come? Each person should get rewarded for their good deeds, not for those of another!

The explanation is profound. How I live in this world determines how spiritual I become. The more spiritual I become, the more I will be able to enjoy the pure spirituality of the World to Come. Spirituality is not always easily visible. Sometimes the most important and impactful things we do are hidden from sight – buried beneath what is visible to others, and ourselves. Interestingly, a person's influence is not limited to their direct actions: we influence those around us and especially our relatives – We have a part in *their* prayers/good deeds/spiritual advancement, and therefore can benefit from them. Their recital of Kaddish at this difficult time – declaring that G-d is good and all He does is, ultimately for the good – will, then, help the soul of the deceased rise even closer to the Heavenly Throne. It is, after all, due to the deceased that G-d's presence is being magnified in the world through the recital of the Kaddish prayer itself.

An another level, the Kaddish prayer shows that we are all connected. We can help each other in our daily lives – and in our eternal lives. We are individuals, but not only individuals. We are also families, and communities. By reciting the Kaddish prayer for the deceased, we are giving them merits in Heaven – and strengthening our eternal connection to them - and to G-d. The prayer does not mention death because their connection to G-d, and ours, is very much alive!

For more information, full statistics and other related topics, please see [Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View](#) by Doron Kornbluth (Mosaica Press, 2012) and [cremationorburial.org](#).