

## Lesson 10-Introduction To Mourner's Kaddish

Welcome to this session of Take 5 for Tefila, a program sponsored by the Orthodox Union, as part of their Tefila Education Initiative. In this session, I would like to discuss the origin of Kaddish Yasom, the Mourner's Kaddish.

If you were to review the Talmud and the books of the Gaonim you would not find any references to the Mourner's Kaddish. Among the Rishonim, you begin to find some notes about a practice to have orphans or children recite the last Kaddish of some prayer Services. The Ohr Zarua mentions a practice to have orphans or children recite the Kaddish after Ein K'Oleikeinu in the Mussaf Davening of Shabbos. Rashi in his Siddur refers to a custom of having a child recite the Kaddish after Va'Yitain Lecha in Maariv of Motzei Shabbos. The Machzor Vitri refers to a child reciting Kaddish after the congregation recites a chapter of Tehillim at the end of Tefilas Shacharis and at the end of Tefilas Maariv. While presenting the custom, the Machzor Vitri explains that the practice had been instituted להנך התינוקות, to educate minors. He does not refer to the Kaddish as being a mourners Kaddish.

Our suspicion that these examples represent the roots of the practice to have Mourners recite Kaddish was confirmed by the **מטה משה**, a commentator from the late 1500's. He was one of the first to draw a connection between the practice of a child reciting Kaddish and the death of his parent. Here is what the **מטה משה** wrote:

After Aleinu they recite Kaddish. We learned in Midrashim that a son should recite Barchu and be the leader in synagogue because through these acts he relieves the punishment of his deceased parents as it is written in Midrash Tanhuma for Parshat Noah and in Masechet Kallah in the chapter entitled: Rav Yuda. It was because of minors and adults who did not have the ability to lead the services that ה"ל established the practice of Mourners reciting Kaddish after the death of a parent. For that reason the Kaddish recited by mourners became known as the Orphan's Kaddish.

The **מטה משה** taught us the following about the origin of the Mourners Kaddish:

- First, that a Mourner should strive to be the **שליח ציבור**, the prayer leader in synagogue;
- Two, that the practice was meant to be a meritorious act that benefited a person's deceased parent in the next world;
- Three, that the practice was based on a Midrash;
- Four, that the Mourners Kaddish was established initially so that minors who were ineligible to act as prayer leaders could undertake an act that would benefit their deceased parents;
- Fifth, that the practice was expanded to include adults who did not have the ability to act as

prayer leaders;

Sixth, that in reciting the Mourners Kaddish, the Mourner is reciting the Kaddish that would otherwise have been recited by the **שליח ציבור**.

The Midrash referred to by the **מטה משה** is a famous story about Rabbi Akiva that appeared in books in the late Middle Ages. The Midrash relates that Rabbi Akiva was passing a cemetery where he observed a man who was wearing no clothes running back and forth as the man worked intensely in an activity that served no apparent purpose. Seeing the man work so hard for no reason, Rabbi Akiva asked him: why are you working so hard performing such a useless activity? The man answered: I am dead and because I was an evil person during my lifetime, I have been condemned to perform this tiring but useless activity forever. Rabbi Akiva inquired further: did you ever hear that a means existed by which your punishment could be rescinded. The man answered: I heard that had I left a son and my son had acted as prayer leader in the synagogue, my punishment would have been terminated. The man continued: I know that when I died my wife was pregnant but I do not know whether she gave birth to a son. I also know that if in fact she did give birth to a son, she would not have given him a Jewish education. Rabbi Akiva then sought out this man's wife and learned that in fact the wife had given birth to a son and as the decedent had predicted the wife had not given the child a Jewish education. Rabbi Akiva made an earnest attempt to teach the child but the child resisted. Only after Rabbi Akiva fasted did G-d open the child's heart and the child began to absorb what Rabbi Akiva was teaching him. The day finally arrived when the child had the ability to lead the prayer services in synagogue. Soon thereafter the child's father appeared to Rabbi Akiva in a dream and thanked him for helping to cancel his punishment.

This story became known as **מעשה ברבי עקיבא** and is regularly referred to in discussions about the origin of Mourner's Kaddish. Based on this Midrash, Mourners strive to act as prayer leaders during their year of mourning and on *yahrzeits*.

You may be wondering: why was acting as a prayer leader considered such a meritorious act that it could relieve a deceased parent's punishment in the next world? To answer that question, we need to once again transport ourselves back in time to the period before the invention of the printing press when not everyone owned a siddur and many depended on answering Amen to the Brachos recited by the **שליח ציבור** in order to fulfill their obligation to pray. An orphan who purchased a handwritten Siddur or who studied the prayers until he could recite them from memory was preparing himself to perform an important task; he could then act as **שליח ציבור** and be the one through whom others could fulfill their obligation to pray.

Today some Poskim view the study of Torah and the ability to teach others Torah to be a more meritorious act that one should perform to benefit a deceased parent.