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Kaddish For An Extended Relative

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Most Jews of all backgrounds recognize the custom to recite Kaddish for a parent and attempt to observe it, even if only partially. However, the recitation of Kaddish is sometimes appropriate for a relative other than a parent. In this brief essay, we will examine the background of this practice and its practical implications.

I. Kaddish Background

Maseches Sofrim (19:12) discusses a mourner reciting Kaddish. Many commentaries and codes relay the midrashic tale of Rabbi Akiva to whom someone deceased appeared. The deceased said that he had sinned during his life and now was suffering great punishment for his deeds. Rabbi Akiva taught the deceased's son to recite Kaddish, which saved the deceased from punishment. From this we learn that Kaddish serves to atone for the deceased's sins. While we do not want to accuse anyone of wickedness, since everyone sins in some way, their sons recite Kaddish for them. However, since the wicked are punished for 12 months,¹ we take care to recite Kaddish for less than that length to avoid implying that our parents are wicked.²

Fundamentally, a congregation should recite 7 Kaddishes each day³ — 4 at Shacharis in the morning, 2 at Mincha in the afternoon, and 1 at Maariv at night. The Arizal taught based on Kabbalah that a congregation should recite an additional 5 Kaddishes to total 12 each day — 6 at Shacharis, 3 at Mincha and 3 at Maariv.⁴ Primarily, a mourner recites Kaddish by leading the prayers, at which point he recites most of the Kaddishes above. However, many people are not capable of leading the full prayer service. For Shacharis, an alternative is leading the end of the service, i.e. Ashrei and Uva Letzion, through the end. Because many mourners cannot do that either, they have the option of merely reciting Mourner's Kaddish.⁵ This is particularly true of children, who are not allowed to lead the prayers, but also true of people who have difficulty leading.

Originally, the Rabbis' Kaddish was said after public learning of a part of the Oral Torah. It was recited by either the teacher or a participant in the learning. More recently, mourners say the Rabbis' Kaddish in addition to the Mourner's Kaddish.⁶

II. Priority

In the past, the practice was for only one person to say a Kaddish. This led to a need to create a priority list to determine who has the right to recite Kaddish if there are multiple mourners.⁷ It also led to the expansion of opportunities for Kaddish, which might explain why mourners say

¹ Rosh Hashanah 17a

² Ramo, YD 376:4

³ Bais Yosef, OC 55; Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 30:7:1

⁴ Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 30:7:1

⁵ Ramo, YD 376:4

⁶ Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 30:2-3

⁷ Magen Avraham 132:2 and other commentaries there

the Rabbis' Kaddish. However, the practice today in most congregations is that multiple mourners say Kaddish together. In this way, there is no need to prioritize one mourner over another for Kaddish. The priorities are still relevant in deciding who should lead the prayers.

Generally speaking, only a mourner for a parent recites Kaddish (below we will discuss the exceptions). There are 6 priority levels of mourners for Kaddish or, today, for leading the prayers.⁸ 1) Someone in the middle of Shivah for a parent has top priority. This includes someone who buried a relative on a holiday and has not yet begun Shivah. 2) For the 7 days from the burial, this mourner is the highest priority — and only during those 7 days, even if Shivah continues beyond due to a holiday. The second level of priority is someone observing Shloshim for a parent, meaning in the time from the end of Shivah until 30 days after the burial. 3) The third level is someone observing a year of mourning for a parent. A mourner recites Kaddish for 11 months according to Ashkenazic practice, slightly more according to Sephardic practice. During the time from the end of Shloshim until the mourner stops reciting Kaddish at the end of approximately 11 months, that mourner has the third level of priority.

There are two other levels of priority that cut through because they are one day events. 4) A yahrtzeit is the anniversary of someone's passing (not the burial). A child recites Kaddish every year on his parents' yahrtzeit. Because it is one day a year, a Yahrtzeit takes priority over someone observing the 11 months. Additionally, a Yahrtzeit defers to someone in 30 days only if both will have an opportunity for something. For example, the person in 30 days will lead most of the prayer and the person observing the Yahrtzeit will lead the end, beginning with Ashrei and Uva Letzion. If there are so many people observing Yahrtzeit that they cannot all lead the prayer along with the person observing 30 days, the person observing 30 days should allow those observing Yahrtzeit to take precedence since he can lead the next day. 5) Someone on the final day of the 11 months has a higher priority than anyone else observing the 11 months, but a lower priority than a Yahrtzeit.

In all these matters, people should try to split things fairly and use a lottery system (e.g. draw lots) if necessary. It is more important to avoid fights than to say Kaddish or lead the prayers. The last thing a deceased relative wants is to be the cause of hurt feelings. Standard practice is to not allow a minyan to split into two in order to allow different mourners to lead because the prayer of a larger group shows more honor to Hashem.⁹ However, some authorities allow splitting a minyan for the sake of the mourners.¹⁰ Additionally, a regular attendee at the minyan always has priority over someone who regularly attends a different local synagogue.¹¹ Someone who gathers a minyan or 10 hosts it, and without him there would not be a minyan, takes priority over others.¹²

⁸ What follows is based on Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 30:10

⁹ Igros Moshe YD:4 61:4

¹⁰ Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus 47:14, 55:4

¹¹ Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus 47:11

¹² Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus 47:10

III. Extended Relative

6) There is another level of mourner and that is someone who is reciting Kaddish for someone other than a parent. If a person dies with no sons, the widespread consensus among authorities is that it is improper for a daughter to recite Kaddish but there are some communities that allow it based on a minority view.¹³ If someone passes away without any living sons, it is best for a grandson to recite Kaddish at the funeral and for all 11 months. A son's son comes before a daughter's son. Even if the grandchild's parents are still alive, he may recite Kaddish with their permission.¹⁴ Sons-in-law may do so but grandsons are more appropriate because they are descendants of the deceased. An adopted son is like a grandson in this respect.¹⁵

If the deceased left no sons or grandsons, then a father should recite Kaddish. If not a father then a brother and then any relative. If the person had no relatives who can recite Kaddish, then the family should hire someone to recite Kaddish. It is better to hire someone than to have someone volunteer to recite Kaddish.¹⁶ These relatives or paid people recite Kaddish throughout the 11 months and every year on the Yahrzeit.¹⁷ Additionally, some people have the custom that grandsons — after their parents pass away — recite Kaddish on the Yahrzeit of their grandparents who no longer have a child to observe the day. They also observe the Yahrzeit by reciting the Keil Malei and Yizkor prayers for their grandparents. These grandsons likewise have the lowest priority.¹⁸

Anyone in this sixth category is not technically obligated to recite Kaddish or lead prayers and therefore takes the lowest priority. They can only lead if no mourners wish to lead.¹⁹

While much of the confusion and discord is now avoided because all mourners recite Kaddish together, this has led to another problem. Very often, mourners do not recite the Kaddish in unison but rather each proceed at their own pace. It is important that mourners recite Kaddish together, even better if they stand near each other.²⁰

As mentioned above, a mourner who is not leading the prayers only has to say the Mourner's Kaddish. The Rabbis' Kaddish is not technically for mourners, although today the practice is for mourners to say it. If there are no mourners, someone else should say the Rabbis' Kaddish after Korbanos. The Mourners' Kaddish at the end of Shacharis (for Nusach Ashkenaz, after Aleinu; for Nusach Sfarad, after Shir Shel Yom) is part of the prayer service so if there is no mourner, someone else should say it.²¹

¹³ Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 30:8:5

¹⁴ Ramo, OC 132:2

¹⁵ Yesodei Yeshurun vol. 1, Kaddish:11; Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus 49:8

¹⁶ Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 30:8:6-7

¹⁷ Mateh Ephraim, Dinei Kaddish Yasom 3:14

¹⁸ Mateh Ephraim, Dinei Kaddish Yasom 3:14

¹⁹ Pischei Teshuvah, YD 376:7; Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 30:8:6

²⁰ Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 30:10:12

²¹ Ramo, OC 132:2

IV. Other Yahrtzeit Practices

On the Shabbos before a Yahrtzeit, some have the custom of leading all the prayers, leading just Mussaf, receiving Maftir, saying Kaddish after either Kabbolas Shabbos or all the prayers.²² If the Yahrtzeit falls on Shabbos, then they do this the prior Shabbos.²³ It is a widespread custom for someone to lead Ma'ariv Motza'ei Shabbos before a Yahrtzeit.²⁴ For all these, a yahrtzeit has the lowest of all priorities.

The custom is to recite Kel Malei before a Yahrtzeit after the Torah reading. It is usually done during Shabbos Mincha but technically can also be done on Shabbos morning, Monday or Thursday.²⁵ There are some days when Kel Malei is not recited.²⁶ Mourners should recite Kel Malei earlier to avoid missing it due to the schedule.

On the Yahrtzeit itself, a mourner lights a Yahrtzeit candle and is called to the Torah and leads the prayers, if he is capable. If there is no Torah reading that day, he is called to the Torah the day or two before when there is a Torah reading. Traditionally, a mourner fasts on a Yahrtzeit,²⁷ although many make a siyum on a tractate of Mishnah which permits them to eat. Because of the weakness of recent generations, many do not fast and instead give cake and liquor after Shacharis as a "tikun".²⁸

Like above, a grandson or other person who recites Kaddish for someone also fulfills all the other Yahrtzeit customs. However, since the primary tradition for lighting a Yahrtzeit candle is in shul and the source for lighting at home is unclear,²⁹ a grandson or other person need not do it. Additionally, there is a strong custom that someone whose parents are alive leaves during Yizkor.³⁰ However, a grandson or other person saying Kaddish should still give tzedakah in the memory of the deceased even without reciting Yizkor.

²² Birkei Yosef, YD 284:1; Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 32:2; Pnei Baruch 39:1-2

²³ Pnei Baruch 39:2

²⁴ Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 32:2

²⁵ Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 31:1

²⁶ Gesher HaChaim, vol. 1 31:3

²⁷ Ramo, YD 376:4

²⁸ Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus 71:1

²⁹ Yechaveh Da'as 5:60

³⁰ Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus 79:1