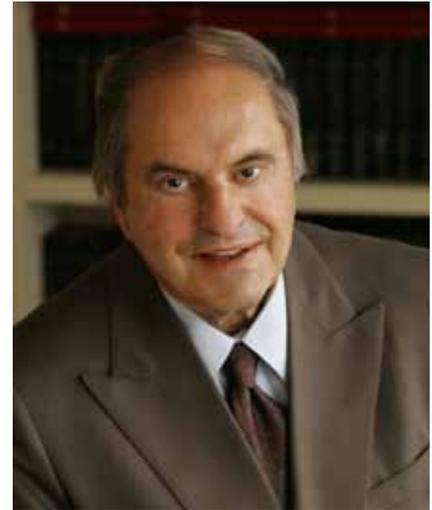


A Prayer Mystery: Who Started Kaddish?

By Simon Rocker, January 29, 2009

The mourners' Kaddish is one of Judaism's most familiar prayers. But where did the custom to recite it originate? It is a question that has intrigued one of the guests at next month's Jewish Book Week, Leon Charney, author of *The Mystery of the Kaddish*. Charney, 67, is one of those men of many parts with a book-length CV. He studied Bible and Talmud at Yeshiva University, New York before financing himself through law school by singing in synagogue — he still has a fine chazan's voice.

After building up a law practice representing showbiz and sports stars (Sammy Davis Jr was a client) he moved into real estate, entering the recent Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans at #321 with a fortune of \$1.5 billion. He advised President Jimmy Carter on the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt and now hosts a weekly current affairs show on American cable TV.



Four years ago he was in the Tel Aviv Hilton when he ran into Saul Mayzlish, an Israeli television reporter, who had interviewed him before. Charney, in mourning for his mother Sara, wanted to know where the nearest minyan was so he could say Kaddish. Mayzlish, who is religious and has written books on Judaism, was struck by his diligence. But when Charney asked him about the origins of the mourners' Kaddish, he didn't know — and so began their literary adventure to discover it. The power of the prayer is undeniable, even for those religiously indifferent in other respects. Charney relates an anecdote. "I met a doctor in Florida saying Kaddish, who told me he was an atheist. I asked him, 'Why are you in shul?'"

He said, 'I want to honour my father.' I asked him, 'What's the best thing you ever did with your father?' He said, 'I used to go to baseball games and have a great time.' 'So why don't you go to a baseball game and say Kaddish, why do you say it in shul?' He couldn't answer me."

Kaddish had been a prayer — a "celebration, nothing to do with death", he points out — recited by the classical rabbis after the study of a passage of Bible. He and Mayzlish trace its adoption by mourners to medieval times as rabbis strove to hold their communities together in the wake of the Crusades. "The Kaddish at that time had been an elitist prayer recited in the synagogue only by rabbis," he said. "So this was technically the first act of democracy in Judaism, allowing the general public to participate." Now the pair are working on a new book, on why, despite the centrality of the Land of Israel, the Babylonian sages abandoned the Jerusalem Talmud.

"Why does a guy like me write these books?" he says.

"Judaism is a brilliant religion and the main function of Judaism is to learn and read."

Leon Charney is in conversation with Rabbi Naftali Brawer at Jewish Book Week, London, February 24, 1pm. The Mystery of the Kaddish, Leon H Charney and Saul Mayzlish, JR Books, £14.99