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The Paradoxes of the Kaddish

Michael Arditti reviews The Mystery of the Kaddish by Leon H Charney and Saul Mayzlish

The Talmud, the great compendium of Jewish theology and law, states that the world exists due to the merit of those people who repeat the Kaddish refrain: Yehei sh'mei rabbah (May His great name be blessed). In this book, Leon H Charney, an American businessman, lawyer and former adviser to Jimmy Carter, and Saul Mayzlish, an Israeli journalist and religious pundit, join forces to examine the meaning, history and symbolism of the ancient Aramaic prayer for which such exceptional claims have been made.

The Kaddish is familiar to Jews and many non-Jews alike as the prayer that a child must recite every day during the 11 months of mourning for a dead parent. The first revelation of the book is that its usage is far more widespread: it is spoken at all daily prayer services and on several other occasions.

Moreover, it is valid only when there is a quorum of 10 men, known as a minyan, thus emphasising the communal nature of Jewish life.

There is nothing in the Talmud or any other ancient source that defines the Kaddish as a prayer for the dead. It was first used as such in the Middle Ages during a period of sustained persecution when the Jews were both targeted by Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land and blamed for the advent of the Black Death.

By the end of the 14th century, the Jews in Germany were almost totally wiped out. The combination of human barbarism and natural disaster gave rise to elegies, poetry, commemoration, fast days and other expressions of mourning.
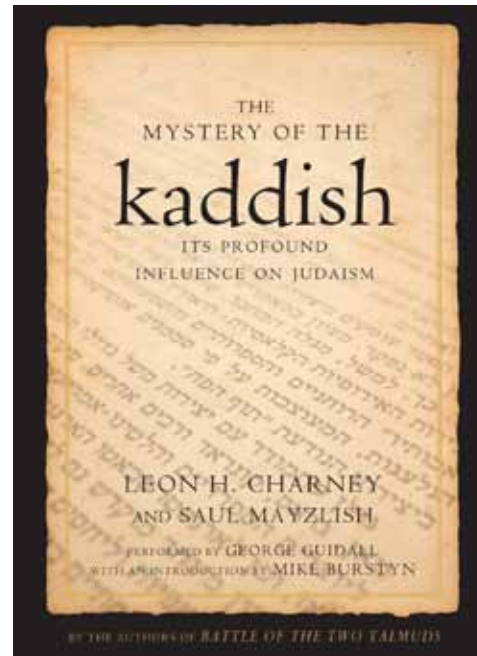
The first paradox in the adoption of the Kaddish as a mourning prayer is that it was inspired by Christian rituals. The rabbis said: "Let us study the habits of non-believers. Observe how they are memorialising their deceased, and let us bring 'kina' or prayer to express Jewish agony."

The second paradox is that there is not a single mention of death in the prayer; rather, it is a declaration of faith in the glory and goodness of God.

The need, both spiritual and psychological, for a Jew to assert God's righteousness at the time of his greatest distress was never so acute as during the Holocaust and the book contains several instances of the Kaddish being used in the death camps.

One of the most poignant comes in a letter written by a father to his son: "You are the only one of our family to stay alive, you are my Kaddishl."

Unlike other Jewish prayers, the Kaddish is not writ in stone. It exists with slight variations of wording and greater ones of melody in different traditions.

The Yemenite Jews recite it both collectively and responsively, with no special trills. The Ashkenazi Jews have 14 different tunes, each for a specific occasion. The Sephardic Jews offer a cantor considerable freedom to improvise within a fixed structure.

Nevertheless, the Kaddish is seen as a unifying force in the often divided Jewish community. One prominent Israeli rabbi justified his mission to a stridently secular kibbutz with reference to the prayer: "In the Kaddish, we first ask for God's name to be glorified, and only afterwards do we ask for it to be sanctified." He maintained that, in building the state of Israel, the kibbutzniks were playing their part in glorifying God's name and trusted that, by converting to Orthodox Judaism, they would sanctify it.

This is a richly documented book, full of fascinating detail about 2,000 years of Jewish history, such as the pinning of yellow stars on to clothes seven centuries before Hitler, the opportunism of the papacy in orchestrating anti-Semitism for financial gain and the extraordinary belief, linked to the Blood Libel, that Jewish men menstruated.

It needs stronger editing; the origins of the Kaddish as an affirmatory prayer and its development during the Crusades and Black Death, for instance, are mentioned several times.

Nevertheless, it offers an enthralling account of one of the oldest traditions of human worship, which will be of interest to people of every faith and of none.