

VAYECHI

Thought of the Week – Kaddish

By Rabbi Shlomo Truzman

Rabbi Meir, in the name of Rabbi Akiva, “What do we learn from the Scriptural passage ‘and the living should take it to heart’; Eccl 7:2”. According to tradition the authorship of Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes, is attributed to King Solomon though others differ. Be it as it may, the above quote is in reference to the performance of acts of loving-kindness for the dead, so that others will act in this manner towards you when the time comes.

One paramount obligation towards the departed is the recitation of Kaddish. Thus, it enjoys a special status in the Jewish life cycle. Our sages instituted this exalted prayer to praise the Holy One, blessed be He, and to sanctify him in public. There are three types of Kaddish: The Reader’s Kaddish, the Kaddish of the Rabbis, and the Mourner’s Kaddish.

Kaddish is first mentioned in the context of the laws of a quorum (minyan) for public prayer. The Kaddish of the Rabbis, the most elaborated one of the three, is recited after a Torah study.

The Mourner’s Kaddish recited by the mourners three times daily for 11 to 12 months depending upon custom of the first year after death. The Mourner’s Kaddish is not mentioned in the Talmud at all. Support for its recital, and the great remedy it produces are learned from an incident involving Rabbi Akiva in Otiyot de Rabbi Akiva. He once met a man whose face was as black as coal who was carrying a load on his head heavy enough for ten people, running along like a horse. Rabbi Akiva asked him what he was doing. The man told him that he was not among the living, and every day he was sent to chop wood, and he was burned with the same wood that he collected.

Rabbi Akiva asked him, “what was your work in the world from which you came?” He said to him “I was a charity treasurer, and I would favor the rich and oppress the poor”. Rabbi Akiva said to him, “Have you heard whether you can rectify this?” the man said, “I heard that if this person (e.g., he himself) had a son who would stand in the congregation and say, “Bless the L-rd who is blessed, and they would respond after him, “Blessed be the L-rd who is blessed for ever and ever,” or if he would say, “May it be glorified, and they would respond, “May His great Name be blessed,” this man would be released from punishment. On hearing this, Rabbi Akiva went to the town of the deceased. His purpose was to seek out if the man has a son who was born to him. He inquired about him in Laodecia, the city of the deceased, and found his son who was an unlearned individual. Rabbi Akiva taught him Torah and blessings and brought him before the congregation. He urged him to say Kaddish for his deceased father. Immediately thereafter the man came to Rabbi Akiva in a dream and said to him, “May it be G-d’s will that your soul rest in Paradise for having saved me from the judgement of Gehinnam.

By disclosing the Kaddish prayer to a young man, Rabbi Akiva revolutionized our mode of worship, brought relief to the departed, and restored to Israel the sanctification of the Name of G-d which had been lost with the destruction of the First Temple.

(Reference: Rabbi Chaim Kolitz)

Shabbat Shalom

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