

The Secret of the Kaddish

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

The kaddish may be the best known Jewish prayer and yet its purpose is mysterious. Though the mourning prayer, it makes no mention of death. Rather, what it proclaims is the greatness and sanctity of God and God's name.

There are many sources and explanations for this enigma. The most common is that at a moment of loss, the affirmation of God's greatness reminds us of ultimate justice. Another explanation resorts to history: since the earliest recitation of the kaddish was not tied to mourning, but rather to study, the prayer became accidentally associated with death.

This just touches the surface of many ingenious and beautiful explanations. But I want to repeat something I heard in the name of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach that struck me as almost inexpressibly beautiful and moving. Noting that the kaddish is about the greatness of God, Rabbi Carlebach said that the prayer is what those who have died would say to us could they speak from where they were. So at the moment of loss we realize that our loved ones — who now know the secrets of what follows this life — are reassuring us about the greatness of God and the kindness of the fate that awaits us all.