

This d'var tefila is on the history of the Kaddish and in particular of קדיש יתום, the Mourner's Kaddish (but literally the Orphan's Kaddish).

It's prompted by my reading while saying Kaddish for my father, especially by Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish*. This is the story of his 11 months, researching ancient and medieval sources to gain an understanding of the meaning of saying Kaddish and of its history and of how it related to his life. In this brief d'var I'll focus on the basic facts and the history.

You may be familiar with some of this already but I hope you'll find something new, as I did.

The common thread in every form of the Kaddish that we say is the *magnification and sanctification of God's name*. This is the meaning of the words יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא. An essential element is the congregational response אמון, יהא שמה רבא מברך לעלם ולעלמי, *May His great name be blessed forever and for all eternity*.

The Kaddish wasn't part of the Temple service or originally of the synagogue service. There is no mention of destruction of the Temple, so it is believed to date from before then. It is thought that the Kaddish (but not the Mourner's Kaddish) originated in the last century BCE as a conclusion to the preaching of aggada, originally an explanation of the Torah or Haftarah reading that was the forerunner of the sermon. (But even then the preaching could stray far from the reading.) After the preaching the people replied אמון, יהא שמה רבא מברך לעלם ולעלמי. The Kaddish eventually was expanded and incorporated into all services, and is first mentioned as part of the daily prayers in the 6th c. CE, in the Palestinian Talmud. The Talmud placed high value on the response ... אמון, יהא שמה רבא מברך --- saying it guaranteed one a place in the world to come.

The preaching of aggada was in Aramaic, which is the language of the commentaries in the Talmud and was the vernacular throughout the Middle East for over 1000 years, roughly from the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests until the Moslem conquest, when it was supplanted by Arabic. The Kaddish is written in a combination of Hebrew and Aramaic. The core passages are Aramaic, for example, ... יהא שמה רבא מברך. The passages at the end of the Kaddish are believed to be later additions, when Aramaic was no longer the vernacular language for Jews, ... יהא שלמא רבא מן שמיא. is Aramaic and is then translated into Hebrew as ... עושה שלום במרומיו.

קדיש יתום is believed to have originated in the Middle Ages, since the older sources don't mention it. For example, Maimonides (12th c) wrote a responsum about the Kaddish but does not mention mourning. The Mahzor Vitry, written in France at the start of the 12th century also doesn't mention it. Two early 13th century rabbinic sources from Germany refer to orphans leading the Kaddish at the end of the service, and one from France later in the 13th century speaks of it as if it were already an institution. It also talks about Yahrzeit, saying kaddish on the anniversary of a parent's death.

So קדיש יתום seems to date from the early 13th century, possibly as a response to the Crusader persecutions. One reason the Kaddish may have become associated with mourning is because of a reference to the coming of the Mashiach and the resurrection of the dead, in the phrase ...וימליך מלכותה בחייכון וביומיכון.... It was believed that sons (Wieseltier has a discussion of daughters saying Kaddish, but I don't have enough time to discuss it) could influence the divine decree by saying Kaddish for a year. The Zohar (14th c) reduces it to 11 months, because 12 months is the period during which the wicked are judged in Gehenna and we don't want to ascribe wickedness to our parents. There is a legend about Rabbi Akiva associated with this that is mentioned briefly in the Sim Shalom siddur (but the legend doesn't date back as far as Akiva).

The tradition originally seems to have been that one mourner said קדיש יתום for all those present. But there were conflicts over who had priority for doing this and for several centuries the rabbis made up elaborate rules, including using lotteries, to resolve these conflicts. There were even reports of fistfights. It was especially a problem during epidemics and pogroms, when a lot of people died at once. However, there was a Sephardic tradition that the mourners said Kaddish together, and the Ashkenazim began to adopt this custom in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was a controversial change, and it's interesting to read the history of the change and how the rabbis saw it in the responsa that Wieseltier quotes.

Shabbat shalom.