

ABSTRACT

DIFFERING EXPLANATIONS FOR THE RECITATION
OF MOURNER'S KADDISH AND THEIR INFLUENCES
ON THE CUSTOM

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The custom of reciting the *Mourner's Kaddish* prayer, *Kaddish Yatom*, began in 12th-century Ashkenaz and Northern France. The custom apparently reached Spain at the beginning of the 14th century and continued on to other countries in the Ottoman Empire. Two explanations were suggested for this custom, the main one being saving a parent's soul from the torment of Gehenna and allowing the soul's entrance to heaven. This explanation appeared at the same time as the emergence of the custom in the 'Ashkenazi Hassidim' community of the German Rhineland. A second explanation appeared later, in accordance with the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the AR"l. The AR"l's explanation includes the possibility of further elevating the soul of a parent in heaven from one level to the next. In other words, *Kaddish Yatom* is not only recited in order to save one's parent from punishment; it could improve the late parent's spiritual status. Each of these ideological explanations influenced what was perceived as the proper way to carry out the custom.

When the custom of reciting *Kadish Yatom* first began, it was recited for twelve months on the Sabbath as well as on Saturday night upon the Sabbath's departure. Afterwards, in Ashkenaz, the custom was extended, and the Kadish recited on weekdays as well. However, since only the completely wicked are condemned to an entire year of Gehenna including on the Sabbath, for fear of harming their parent's honor, many Jews, both Ashkenazic and Sephardic, shortened the period in which *Kaddish Yatom* was recited to eleven months, and soon afterward, Sephardic Jews also refrained from reciting *Kaddish Yatom* on the Sabbath. However, the explanation of further elevating the parent's soul in heaven led to the understanding that the recitation of *Kaddish Yatom* was beneficial to a righteous parent as well. As a result, there was a return to the original custom – the recitation of *Kaddish Yatom* for almost twelve months including on the Sabbath. Both of these changes appeared in the Sephardic custom, somewhat replicating the original ancient custom. The process described occurred gradually and with the encouragement and mediation of rabbinic authorities who believed in the ways of Kabbalah (Jewish Mysticism), and is an example of the influence of Kabbalistic ideas on the development of Jewish customs.