

The Sinai Temple Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence

When Death Occurs: Immediate Steps

For those who have just suffered a loss, here's a quick outline of immediate steps to take, with links to relevant portions of the full Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence:

1. Call a [Jewish Funeral Director](#) to arrange for pick-up of the body. To learn the available times for the funeral contact Sinai Temple's [Mount Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuaries](#) (cemetery property must be purchased if not already arranged for pre-need). Inform the Funeral Director if you are interested in Chevra Kadisha performed by the [Sinai Temple Chevra Kadisha](#).
2. [Call the Sinai Temple office](#) (310-474-1518) to inform the clergy and staff, and to learn the availability of the Rabbis to conduct the funeral. You should ask for the one of the Rabbi's assistants. If your call is after hours, one should call the Sinai Temple answering service at: (310) 301-2923. A rabbi will return your phone call.
3. Based upon these initial calls, [arrange for a time for the funeral](#).
4. Have your [Havurah](#), friends, or family or [hospice](#) volunteer [make calls to family and friends with the funeral information](#).
5. If not already arranged for pre-need, purchase the [coffin](#).
6. Have your Havurah, close friends, family or hospice volunteer [arrange for the Shiva Meals](#).
7. Please ask the Rabbis about our Shiva Committee Chairs if you need help setting up your home for shiva services.

The full Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence begins on the next page.

A Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence

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Preface

This guide was originally prepared for the members of Valley Beth Shalom Synagogue in Encino, California. We are grateful to the lay leadership and clergy at VBS for their excellent work and to Rabbi Edward Feinstein, who has graciously given Sinai Temple permission to use their material. We have modified parts of the guide and added details and writings that we hope will be helpful to our congregants.

I particularly want to thank Rabbinic Intern Nicole Guzik for working with me on this meaningful project. Her talent, organization, and enthusiasm for the project have greatly enriched our work. Thank you to Rabbi David Wolpe for his insightful advice and review of this guide; to Rabbi Ahud Sela for reviewing and editing the organ donation section; to Howard Lesner, the executive director of Sinai Temple, for his very helpful comments and advice; and to Len Lawrence, general manager of Mt. Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuaries, for his valuable input. I so appreciate Rabbi Brian Schuldenfrei and Susan Weisbarth for their careful review of and revisions to the hospice section of the guide. I wish to give a special thank you to Penny Dain for her attention to detail and beautiful website work and to Rebecca Begin, Judy Begin and Ellen Pierson for their kindness and constant availability. I very much appreciate Rachel Feldman, Laura Dobbs, and all of the administrative staff at Sinai Temple, where assistance has been invaluable. Our thanks, too, to the families that have shared their thoughts and feelings with us.

I owe an enormous thank you to Cantor Joseph Gole, who encouraged me to help start our Sinai Temple Chevra Kadisha. My work with our Chevra has deepened my understanding of the wisdom of our tradition as it relates to death and mourning and has been my inspiration to help develop this guide for Sinai Temple. Our goal is to encourage families to plan ahead; to talk to each other and support each other in advance of need. We are hopeful that this guide will enhance dialogue amongst family members, friends, clergy and congregants about death and grieving.

Inevitably, we are all faced with death. In the introduction to *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Maurice Lamm writes: "How a person handles death indicates a great deal about how he approaches life." Our tradition teaches that in dealing with death two great mitzvot should always inform our actions: respect for the deceased and comfort for the mourners. It is our desire that this guide will help to advance these mitzvot.

Terry Wohlberg
April 2009

Clergy Forward

At Sinai Temple, we have the ability to recognize divinity in all life cycle events. We gather as a community for the naming of our children and express joy when a person comes before the Torah as a *b'nai mitzvah*. Likewise, our synagogue finds power and strength in expressing reverence for God when someone reaches the end of life. The Talmud explains that Shekhinah (God's presence) stands at the head of a dying person. We are fortunate to be God's partners in treating the deceased with respect and honor, and to participate in the holy work of comforting the mourner. While the conversations surrounding death and dying are often difficult and confusing, it is our hope that as a community, we will mark the end of someone's life with as much blessing and sanctity as we do for one entering this world.

The Sinai Temple Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence helps us navigate through these conversations. Sinai Temple is indebted to Terry Wohlberg for her commitment and dedication to this guide, as well as to the Sinai Temple Chevra Kadisha and Sinai Temple family. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi taught that a virtuous person follows a path in which they bring honor to God, as well as continuous respect and glory to humanity. Terry is a leader of this path, teaching this community how to honor God through the learning and observing of God's commandments as well as enabling us to understand how a community becomes more united in reaching out to one another during difficult moments. *Todah Rabbah*, Terry. Thank you for being one of our valued leaders, teachers, and guides.

Through the compilation of guide, Terry and I realized how much we learned about our own relationships to the Jewish perspectives surrounding mourning and condolence. In essence, spiritual learning and clarity is the real goal of this guide. It is our hope that through the guide, you will have the opportunity to learn more about your own relationship with God, this part of the cycle of life, and how Sinai Temple can be a supportive and integral piece of your religious community.

It says in Isaiah, "God gives strength to the weary, fresh vigor to the spent." With this guide and our community, Sinai Temple strives to be one of your strengths. Through our learning and exploration of the end of life, may we grow with God and sustain one another.

Sinai Temple Rabbinic Intern Nicole Guzik
April 2009

EVERYTHING THAT IS BORN DIES. We acknowledge our mortality, but should we give it much thought? The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno notes that “Socrates is a man; all men are mortal; therefore Socrates is mortal”—a syllogism that used to be taught in logic classes—sounds very different when rendered “I am a man; all men are mortal; therefore, I will die.”

Judaism demands that we pay attention to this world yet reminds us of our eventual fate. We are continually reminded that our lives are fleeting, like the wind that blows, like the flower that fades. Judaism asks us to grasp both ends in a paradoxical affirmation of faith: We know we will die, but that realization should not govern our lives. Rather, the knowledge of our mortality, always in the background, gives vividness and urgency to our days.

Rabbi David Wolpe

Part 1 - Introduction

A. Goals Of This Booklet

1. Multi-disciplinary Approach

This guide will attempt to approach these complex issues on a multi-disciplinary basis. We try to provide basic answers to some legal questions that arise in death and mourning. Some of the important financial information about funeral arrangements is also discussed. We try to be sensitive to the psychological aspects of mourning and condolence, from the point of view of both the bereaved family and the friends and community. Most importantly, we attempt to describe authentic traditional Jewish standards, while also exploring some possible adaptations to contemporary circumstances.

This booklet will fulfill its most important goal if these discussions help lead to the development of contemporary standards for mourning and condolence which are appropriate and meaningful for family, friends, Havurot, and our synagogue community in general.

2. Necessary Advice

It is important to understand that this booklet is neither intended as, nor constitutes, an official, authoritative statement of Conservative Judaism or of policies adopted or approved by Sinai Temple or its Rabbis. Sinai Temple members are urged to consult with the appropriate authorities available to them through the synagogue when questions arise. Religious questions can only receive authentic and authoritative responses with the help of the Sinai Temple Clergy. Psychological issues can be extremely important, and the professional assistance of a psychiatrist, psychologist, or family doctor can be an important step in the mourning and condolence process. Legal issues and specific legal questions should be referred to an attorney. One way in which Sinai Temple serves its members in time of need is to provide referrals to an appropriate source of advice for any of these matters. See the [“Who To Call”](#) list in the [“Further Resources Section”](#) below for direct Sinai Temple telephone numbers.

B. Our Attitudes About Death

Traditional Jewish attitudes about death are an integral part of overall Jewish attitudes and philosophy about life. Death has always been seen as a part of the natural process of life. For traditional Jews, the practices surrounding death, funeral, and mourning are governed, as are all features of daily life, by an intricate set of detailed rules, each of which has something significant to say about the underlying philosophy of life and relationship to God and fellow human beings.

1. Contemporary American Issues

In contemporary America, many Jews have lost connection with our tradition and are often unaware of the form or meaning of many of the ritual procedures. Moreover,

Jews in America have been strongly influenced by the secular and Christian doctrines and attitudes of our mass culture, as often shown in movies and on TV. Especially because so little is generally discussed in the home about traditional Jewish beliefs related to death, we and our children have grown to believe that certain secular or Christian practices are Jewish because they all seem “traditional.” Indeed, many Jews are shocked to learn that Judaism does not follow practices such as viewing the corpse at the funeral, flowers and floral wreaths, and the wake or celebration of the deceased. (Our reasons for not following these practices are discussed below.)

2. Development of Our Tradition

Of course, we must keep in mind that defining the authentic Jewish tradition is not a simple task. Judaism has gone through thousands of years of challenge, response, and adaptation to threats and influences of the majority cultures in which it has existed. Judaism has responded to the exigencies of the times by developing various traditions that did not have their source in biblical Judaism. Many Conservative Jews believe that it is the obligation of contemporary Jews to continue the process of adapting our authentic Jewish traditions and reinvesting them with new meaning so that they fulfill their functional role of helping mourners and the community respond to the death of one of our members.

3. Psychological Needs

As a result of modern psychological and sociological research, we know a great deal about the psychological aspects of bereavement and mourning. We understand now that the bereaved generally have certain common needs in response to certain common pressures, and that the mourning, funeral, and condolence practices of the community cannot be considered appropriate if they ignore these psychological needs. Indeed, one of the most fascinating insights derived from a study of traditional Jewish mourning practices is just how remarkably fitting, in terms of modern-day psychological understanding, the traditional Jewish practices are. Rabbis of several thousand years ago were able, simply on the basis of their general observations of human nature, to develop practices whose timing and content closely track the most recent studies of sound psychological practice in this area.

4. Changing Our Attitudes

We hope that this guide will affect our attitudes about death. First, we think it important that we and our children come to accept death as a part of life, and to see the transition from life to death as an inevitable part of the process of life. Second, traditional Jewish mourning practices speak to us movingly and meaningfully about the Jewish philosophy of life. We can study and learn these lessons and integrate them into our own views of life. Finally, this guide is about both mourning and condolence. The death of a member of our community calls forth action, response, and obligation, not merely from the immediate family, but also from the friends, *Havurah*, and community at large, all of whom have vitally important roles to play in the process of

supporting the bereaved. It is hoped that this guide will furnish all of us with sufficient knowledge to feel confident and comfortable in carrying out our condolence *mitzvot*.

Part 2 - Lifetime Considerations

A. **Bikiur Cholim: Visiting the Sick**

A discussion of Jewish condolence practices can appropriately begin with the closely related traditions concerning relationships with the sick.

1. **Visiting the Sick**

In traditional Judaism, the visiting of the sick (*bikur cholim*) has always been regarded as a very important community obligation. This obligation relates not only to visiting close friends or family members who are ill, but is a general community obligation regardless of the existence or degree of prior personal relationship.

Visitors should remember not to stand over the sick bed. That posture emphasizes the difference between the healthy, upright visitor and the sick, debilitated patient. The patient could also interpret the visitor's standing as a sign of impatience and eagerness to leave.

Sinai Temple is currently forming a Bikur Cholim committee. In the meantime, if you are interested in visiting someone who is ill or lonely, or if you yourself need a visit, please contact Rebecca Begin, assistant to Rabbi Wolpe, in our front office. She can be reached at 310-481-3242 or contact our Hospice Community at (310) 481-3369.

2. ***How to Treat the Sick* By Rabbi David Wolpe (from Off The Pulpit)**

Now that I am halfway through five months of chemotherapy for lymphoma, a few words of advice:

1. Do not greet one who is sick morosely. If he is feeling well, he must now accommodate your level of sadness. The sick person does not spend all day thinking, "I am sick." He may be thinking about lunch. Greet normally, and allow the one who is ill to guide the emotional tone.
2. Losing hair is visible and dramatic, but not catastrophic. After all, Rabbi Akiba was bald.
3. Offers to help should be specific. "Let me know if there is anything I can do," though well meant, places the burden on the sick person. "Can I bring you dinner tomorrow night?" is far better.
4. If help is refused, or offers and well wishes are met with silence, do not be hurt. Sometimes coordinating help, checking on it, thanking, is more trouble and fatigue-inducing than refusal. Responding to even the most gracious message requires energy the person may need elsewhere.

5. The Jewish tradition esteems the art of medicine. Anyone tended to by good doctors and nurses understands why.
6. Strength and weakness both are good, and each has its place.
7. In every sickness one can find mission and meaning. That does not make the sickness welcome, but it can give it a new and powerful dimension.
8. No matter what your theology, there is great power, comfort and beauty in prayer. "We thank you God, for the miracles which are daily with us."

B. Terminal Illness and Hospice Care

1. Hospice Care

Hospice is a program of care and support for those facing a life threatening illness, when a cure is no longer possible. It consists of a team approach designed to provide comfort and care to patients and their families. The team is comprised of the patient's physician, a medical director, a registered nurse, a clinical social worker, a home health aide, a Rabbi, and a trained volunteer. Most insurance plans, including Medicare, cover licensed hospice treatment, whether at home, a hospital or other care facility.

2. Issues of Terminal Illness

When a patient is terminally ill, the difficulties for everyone involved are intensified. The patient himself is in a unique state. The family is greatly affected by the distress of the impending loss. Moreover, the visitor is burdened with the knowledge of the forthcoming loss, and the concern that comes from not knowing how to act or what to say.

While there are no firm rules, our general experience can provide guides for conduct in these situations. The seriously ill patient is generally more able to control the course of conversation than we commonly believe. Patients typically know the gravity of their illnesses, either because they have been told, or because they can surmise the facts from the actions and statements of those around them. However, patients differ in their readiness to discuss these matters openly. It is best to let the patient take the lead. The visitor should be ready to discuss or ignore the situation as the patient seems to call for. However, such respect for the patient's own right to deal with the situation on the patient's terms should not be twisted into a conspiracy of lying to the patient. The patient's last days have a special meaning and value that is incompatible with surrounding him with a facade of deception.

3. Conversations with the Terminally Ill

One good way to initiate conversations with the patient is simply to ask, "How are you feeling today?" Or where your personal relationship with the patient is close, you could ask, "What does the doctor say?" These questions offer the patient the opportunity to discuss his health in any manner he wishes, and the visitor can readily follow that lead.

Many visitors shy away from making visits to terminally ill patients because of fear of accidentally saying something that will suddenly upset the patient or make the patient realize the gravity of his situation. However, psychological defense mechanisms tend to insulate the patient from any such shock. Patients who are not capable of dealing openly with the fact of their impending death will very likely block out even straightforward attempts to give them that information. Most health practitioners agree that terminally ill patients are a good deal stronger psychologically than many of us assume. On the whole it is far crueler to deprive the patient of important human contact at this time than to risk the rare instance in which a visitor's well-meaning comment might result in some disturbance to the patient.

When the patient does not wish to discuss health further, the visitor should discuss matters that are normally of interest to the particular patient. Such conversations emphasize that there is more to the patient than just his medical condition.

4. Helping the Family

One contemporary aspect of terminal illness, which perhaps calls for a change in traditional focus, is the fact that nowadays terminally ill patients are often subject to powerful medication and around-the-clock medical attention. This often puts the patient in a state where he is almost beyond the ability to be helped or affected by even the most well meaning of visitors. At the same time, the patient's family is often sidelined and ignored, although they frequently feel great distress. If the patient is under hospice care, the hospice volunteer can help alleviate some of this discomfort through its support network.

We should see our obligation of visiting the sick as extended also to visiting the family of the terminally ill. When visiting, bear in mind the psychological reactions that the family of a terminally ill patient may be experiencing. Family members are not only grief-stricken but are often burdened by (and at the same time horrified by the fact that they have) various feelings of guilt or anger about the terminally ill patient. The family often feels some ambivalence about the period of terminal illness, with its attendant and seemingly meaningless pain, suffering, and expense. While the visitor is not expected to be a therapist, the visitor's awareness of these common psychological pressures and a willingness to give an understanding ear to the concerns that may be expressed by the family can be important to the family in helping them understand that their feelings are normal and natural, and not inappropriate or disloyal.

C. Advance Funeral and Burial Arrangements and Medical Directives

One area of lifetime consideration that is best not be left until the stage of terminal illness is purchasing, in advance of need, a burial plot, and perhaps also funeral services. Such [advance arrangements](#) provide several advantages. Most important, perhaps, is to free the surviving family from the distressing burdens of making decisions at their time of grief. Making one's own advance arrangements allows each individual to exercise his or her own judgments about these matters, rather than forcing the family later to guess what would have been desired. Advance arrangements also permit a family to make a collective decision, perhaps securing a group of family burial plots. Finally, there may be significant economic advantages to making advance arrangements. Burial plots or funeral services can be obtained at present prices, often at a substantial discount over prices in effect in later years. An installment payment plan may be available which permits easy budgeting for the purchase. The family will also be freed from the economic burden of providing funds at the time of death.

[Advance Medical Directives](#) tell your doctor and family what care you would like to have if you become unable to make medical decisions. The directive should describe the kind of treatment you want depending on how sick you are. For example, advance directives tell your doctor and family the treatments that you don't want if you have an illness that you are unlikely to recover from or if you are permanently unconscious. They can also let your doctor and family know the kinds of treatments that you do want no matter how ill you are. Please be sure to discuss your medical directive with your attorney to make sure you are in compliance with California laws. In addition, if you wish to be certain that your health care directive will be honored when you are no longer able to make decisions, it is essential that you discuss your end of life wishes with your family to avoid any misunderstanding during a time of crisis.

Part 3 - Mourning and Condolence

A. Who Are the “Mourners” Under Jewish Law?

Turning now to the questions of actual mourning and condolence, the first issue is to distinguish between the small family group of mourners and the larger community whose task it is to console and support them.

In Jewish tradition, the obligation of formal mourning is restricted to seven relationships: spouse, father, mother, son, daughter, brother or sister. For the death of these relatives, one observes the formal [Shivah](#) mourning period, says [Kaddish](#), observes the [Yahrzeit](#) (link to: [Birthdays and Yarzheits](#) by Rabbi David Wolpe) anniversary, and attends [Yizkor](#) memorial services in later years. As used in this booklet, the term “mourners” or “family” will generally refer to these seven mourning relationships.

Even this clear classification has undergone some changes and development in our history. Initially, only children had the obligation of formal mourning, and the Kaddish memorial prayer was known as the “*Kaddish Yatom*”—the Orphan’s Kaddish. Subsequently, the class of mourners was broadened to include the currently recognized seven relationships. Even today, however, mourning for parents is still regarded as a special situation: formal mourning observance for all mourners proceeds through defined stages, but the practices observed for other relationships for a 30-day *Sheloshim* period are observed for one year (actually, eleven months) in the case of the death of a parent. Placing parents in a special category comes from historical differences in practice, and the Fifth Commandment to honor one’s parents, and is not meant to imply a difference in the duration or intensity of the grief feelings for the other mourning relationships.

Many others also wish to join in expressing their loss upon a death. Where the quality of lifetime relationships with a decedent warrants it, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law or grandchildren sometimes formally mourn the death of an in-law or a grandparent. Certainly, a major theme of this guide is the recognition that the extended family, Havurah, friends and congregation at large have a very significant role to play in the mourning process.

B. The Immediate Decisions Required Upon a Death

Immediately after the death, a mourner becomes an *Onen*, a person with unique status in the Jewish community. Jewish tradition recognizes that such mourners are in a condition of great emotional distress and shock—so much so that they are temporarily excused from all personal, religious, and community obligations. Their sole duty during the period between the death and the funeral is to make the burial and funeral arrangements.

The important questions that the [Onen](#) and surviving family must deal with immediately following the death include notifying the community, care of the body until

the funeral, autopsy, donation of body organs, selection of the coffin, arrangements for the burial, the time of the funeral, and the content of the funeral services. These are all discussed in detail below.

1. Notifications

One of the first matters to be taken care of is to begin the process of notifying the community. This is mandated by our tradition's insistence that both the mourners and the community at large have important roles to play in connection with the death.

(a) The Synagogue

A single call to the Sinai Temple office (310) 474-1518 will serve many functions. The Clergy will be notified so that they can be available to help. The synagogue office will thereby be able to serve as a community information source. The synagogue office will share the funeral details with the Sinai Temple online community, and also will respond to synagogue members who often call the synagogue office to verify information about reported deaths. If your loved one was under hospice care, your volunteer can make this call for you.

(i) **Sinai Temple Clergy.** The initial call to the Sinai Temple office is important because the Clergy will be immediately notified so that they can be available to the family. Scheduling of the funeral depends in part upon Clergy availability, so it is important to explore the scheduling availability without delay. The Clergy will also be available to speak with the family during the difficult time immediately after the death, as well as to answer any questions about specific Jewish customs. If possible, please be prepared to answer the following questions when Sinai Temple:

- (1) Your Name
- (2) English and Hebrew name (if known) of deceased and your relationship to that person
- (3) Date of death and if the time was before or after sunset
- (4) Date and place of the funeral
- (5) Are you interested in Tahara by our [Sinai Temple Chevra Kadisha](#), which ritually prepares the body for burial? *
- (6) Are you accepting condolence calls? If so, what is your best contact number?
- (7) Are you sitting [Shivah](#)? If so, where is Shivah taking place and when? Would you like help setting up your home by our Shiva Committee?

(8) Which rabbi would you like to officiate at the funeral of your loved one? Although we will try to accommodate your first choice, please let us know whom else you might prefer if your first choice is unavailable.

(9) Would you like one of our cantors to participate in the funeral service?

(10) What is the phone number you can be reached at (this is for the Clergy)?

(ii) *[Our Sinai Temple Chevra Kadisha](#) is a volunteer group of dedicated congregants and clergy. Our Chevra works in cooperation with the mortuary and is available to perform Tahara with respect and confidentiality for the members of Sinai Temple at no charge. Please contact Ralph Resnick at 310-481-3201. For an explanation of [Tahara](#), please click on the link or proceed to the next page.

(b) The Funeral Director

As detailed below, engaging a [Jewish funeral director](#) is another important first step, which will lead to much helpful information and assistance. In this connection, many families have found that it is very important before reaching decisions about the funeral to have the independent counsel and assistance of someone knowledgeable about Jewish tradition and contemporary funeral practices. Sinai Temple offers its members the coordinated assistance of our Clergy for this purpose.

(c) Friends and Relatives

Notifying friends or relatives can often be a burdensome task. The Havurah, hospice volunteer, or close friends often help to make these calls. It is better if the time and place of the funeral arrangements have been worked out with the rabbis and cantors first, so that all of the information can be given to friends and relatives at one time. Especially where there is no prior personal relationship between the caller and the party being notified, these calls should be kept brief and simple, and extensive discussion about the deceased's medical history and the emotional or financial state of the family should be avoided. The basic information could be given as follows:

"I'm afraid I have some sad information about the _____ family.
_____ died on _____ (day). The cause of death was _____.
The funeral will be held on _____ at _____."

Depending on the nature of the response, it may also be appropriate for the caller to indicate that the family is being cared for by close friends or relatives so that general visiting at the house before the funeral would not be appropriate; or what, if any, foods would be welcome at the house after the funeral; or the telephone number where additional information can be obtained later.

(d) Attorney

The decedent's attorney should also be contacted promptly. The attorney may have information about pre-need arrangements, burial instructions or other will provisions, and can answer any initial questions about probate procedures or other legal matters.

2. Care of the Body Until the Funeral

(a) The Funeral Director

The funeral director will arrange to call for the body at the home or the hospital and to care for the body until the funeral. The Jewish funeral director is also an important source of help and information concerning state and local legal requirements and the available choices regarding coffins and cemeteries. For immediate assistance please contact [Mount Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuaries](#) at (800) 600-0076. Funeral directors should not, however, be relied upon to determine questions of religious law or tradition; such questions should be referred to the synagogue's rabbis and cantors.

(b) Making the Decisions

It is important to recognize that the family of the deceased is often in a state of shock and confusion immediately after the death. Besides the shock, common immediate psychological reactions to the death of a loved one often include strong feelings of denial, guilt, and anger that are often suppressed and denied. This is obviously not a good time to be making substantial economic decisions regarding the funeral. Thus, one of the most important services which a close friend or relative can render is to accompany and counsel the family regarding the purchase of mortuary and cemetery services if these have not already been arranged for on a pre-need basis.

3. Preparation of the Body: Sinai Temple Chevra Kadisha

(a) The Preparation of the Body - Tahara

Through Tahara, the ritual washing of the deceased, the body is purified for its return to the Eternal. Prayers are recited for the soul's eternal peace. The rituals are dictated by the concept of k'vod hamet, respect for the deceased. In keeping with standards of modesty, these rituals are performed by men for men, and women for women.

(b) Tachrichim - The Shroud

During the Tahara ritual, the body is clothed in a linen burial shroud (Tachrichim) and a Tallit (but with one of the Tzitzit—corner fringes—cut off to signify that the deceased is no longer subject to mitzvot obligations). Women are buried in a Tallit if it had been their practice to wear one while praying. The purpose of dressing the deceased in the traditional burial shroud is to recognize that finally all distinctions between rich and poor, fortunate and unfortunate, are obliterated in the common end of

mankind and to symbolize our equality before G-d. While in contemporary life, many families choose burial in formal or favorite clothing belonging to their loved one, we encourage families to continue the tradition and custom of tachrichim. Cosmetics are also discouraged. Instead, attention and concern is reserved for the spirit and soul of the deceased, which is the essence of the deceased's humanity—and divinity.

The preparation of the body is considered to be a Chesed Shel Emet, an act of loving kindness that traditionally has been performed by a Chevra Kadisha (holy society). The Sinai Temple Chevra Kadisha is a volunteer group of dedicated congregants and clergy. Our Chevra is available to perform Tahara with respect and confidentiality for the members of Sinai Temple at no charge. Please contact Ralph Resnick at 310-481-3201.

(c) Shmirah – The Guardianship

According to tradition, the body should be attended at all times, as a mark of respect for the deceased and in recognition of the deceased's utterly helpless state. A Shomer (guardian) may be a friend, member of the family (but not a parent, spouse, child or sibling), fellow congregant, or an individual provided by the mortuary. The Shomrim recite Tehillim (Psalms).

4. Autopsy

Conservative Judaism does not generally approve of autopsies, or of providing cadavers for general medical teaching or experimentation. These actions are incompatible with Judaism's insistence upon reverence for the human body as having been the receptacle of the divine soul. Of course, Jewish law permits a medical autopsy when absolutely required by applicable civil law. (In California, the County Coroner's Office has the authority to order an autopsy when necessary to determine the cause of death.) A voluntary autopsy may also be appropriate if it could be medically significant—for example, to learn about health conditions that could have implications for the rest of the family or for persons suffering from similar conditions. Judaism judges such matters under the standard of the general overriding obligation to save lives. However, it should be emphasized that the family or medical authorities alone should not resolve questions regarding autopsy. The rabbis should be consulted on all such issues.

5. Donation of Body Organs

It is important to recognize that many of the Jewish traditions about burial arose during the post-biblical period in connection with the belief in the physical resurrection of the dead. This belief generated great concern for accounting for all body parts and organs. This concern has been carried down to us today in the mistaken belief that Jewish law requires that Jews be buried whole and intact so that their bodies can be resurrected whole and intact. Already in the 9th century, though, Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon remarked that if one believes in a God who created the world, surely God has the power to resurrect people in whatever form He chooses. And as Rabbi Elliot Dorff points out,

“all of us die of some bodily malfunction, and so God would certainly have to replace some of our parts, for in the end they did not serve us very well!”

Today, many Conservative Jews instead focus their concerns in this area upon respect for the deceased as being a helpless and dependent member of society, and for the human body as having been the receptacle of the divine soul. It is codified in Jewish law that we are to give respect and honor to a dead body for these reasons and to ensure that the body is not desecrated before burial. However, Jewish values give precedence to the saving of lives. Therefore, in the case where a person has died in such a way that their organs can be donated to save someone's life the donation of body tissues or organs for the purpose of saving the lives or health of others takes precedence over the obligation to not desecrate a body before burial. In fact, the Conservative Movement has ruled that it is not merely an act of chesed, an act of great kindness, to donate the organs of a deceased loved one, but it is in fact an obligation to do so based upon the mitzvah to save lives whenever possible. However, it is still important to insist that the body be treated with the utmost respect, and that all unused tissue, blood and organs be returned for burial with the body.

California has laws (Uniform Anatomical Gift Act, Health & S.C. Sections 7150 - 7157) governing donation of body parts. For both legal and practical purposes, individuals desiring to make such donations should make advance lifetime arrangements, both by means of signing the legal donation form (a symbol of for which can be affixed to a driver's license) and under special circumstances by arranging with a hospital or other health organization for receipt of the donation. A person must also make their wishes known to their relatives because after death has occurred one's closest living relative has the final say as to whether one's organs can be taken for donation, even if one has already signed the necessary documents while alive.

6. Coffin

The traditional Jewish coffin is a simple, plain wooden coffin made of pine or other readily available wood. Wood is used because it permits the coffin to decompose at generally the same rate as the body and its linen shroud, permitting all to return to the earth.

Exotic, elaborate or decorative woods, metal caskets or vaults, and fine linings or hardware should be avoided, as these tend to convert respect for the deceased into unseemly ostentation. We should also remember that well-to-do families in our community have an obligation to embrace uniform burial arrangements so as not to embarrass less fortunate families who cannot afford more elaborate materials. Arranging to purchase the coffin in advance of need will avoid emotional pressures on the family that might otherwise result in the purchase of an excessively elaborate and expensive coffin.

Where local regulations due to ground conditions require, cement vaults or grave covers or liners may be used. However, the clergy's advice about such matters should be obtained.

7. Burial or Cremation

The Jewish way is burial in the ground. This tradition expresses thousands of years of deeply felt opposition to unhealthy and unnatural worship of the dead. It is a solemn recognition that without the spark of divine soul and human intelligence, the body is simply a part of nature, which must be allowed to be subject to the universal natural processes of decay and return to the dust of the earth. Although entombment above the ground is not uncommon in recent years, it is generally agreed that burial in the ground remains truer to the tradition. Moreover, embalming processes are permitted only if necessary to preserve the body until the burial.

Cremation is unquestionably unacceptable to Conservative Judaism. The process of cremation substitutes an artificial and “instant” destruction for the natural process of decay and leave the disposition of the remains subject to manipulation by the survivors rather than the universal processes of nature.

Burial should be in a Jewish cemetery (one operated under Jewish auspices and reserved for burial of Jews). Indeed, it is one of the first obligations of any Jewish community to establish a Jewish cemetery. (One of the first acts of the Los Angeles Jewish community was the establishment of the Chavez Ravine Jewish Cemetery in 1855.)

Two thousand years ago, at the time of the Temple, contact with a dead body by a Kohen (priest) would render him ritually impure and unfit to serve in the Temple. Some present-day Kohanim still avoid entering a cemetery in commemoration of this custom. Others enter the cemetery but stay at the back of the funeral party and avoid approaching the grave. Many others no longer regard the special restrictions upon Kohanim as applicable today. If this issue is of concern, the Rabbis should be consulted.

8. Funeral Services

(a) Time of Funeral

As a mark of honor to the deceased and perhaps also as an appropriate response to the psychological needs of the family, the funeral is traditionally held as soon as possible. Although in earliest times the funeral was held on the day of the death, it is now appropriate to allow a one or two day delay in order to permit distant family and friends to attend. The funeral must be scheduled with some care. Funerals are not permissible on Shabbat or certain holidays. Moreover, the clergy may have conflicting obligations and are not available at all times. Thus, it is not sufficient to arrange for a time that is available with the funeral director and mortuary. The scheduling of the funeral must always be confirmed in advance with the Sinai Temple Clergy.

(b) Viewing

Traditional Jewish funeral services follow the dual principles of respect for the deceased and avoidance of any improper worship of the body. The coffin is not open at any time. There should be no public viewing of the deceased, as the dead can no longer participate in social interaction. The deceased is nireh v'eyno roeh, one who can be seen but who cannot see. Additionally, it is better to remember the deceased as he or she was in life. However, a private viewing requested by the family is permitted and may be discussed with the Clergy.

(c) Flowers

The use of flowers is discouraged, because the funeral is not a time for decoration or physical beauty. Friends who would otherwise send flowers should be encouraged instead to make a donation to a charity in which the deceased or the mourning family have been interested. The family may wish to designate a particular memorial fund for this purpose. Please reference Rabbi Wolpe's teaching, [*Why Stones, Instead of Flowers?*](#) which can be found at the end of this guide.

Arrangements regarding the content and format of the funeral service should be worked out with the Clergy. The funeral service itself is discussed below in greater detail.

C. The Roles of the Mourners and the Community Between the Death and the Funeral

The time between the death and the funeral is the time for making the immediate arrangements discussed above. This time period is to be kept as short as practicable, consistent with permitting the family and friends to attend the funeral.

During this time period, mourning by the family or condolence by the community is suspended. According to the wisdom of our tradition, it is meaningless to attempt to comfort a mourner until the deceased has been buried. Psychologically, this is a very sound outlook, as the mourners are generally in a condition of shock, denial, numbness, and confusion during the period immediately after the death. Much of the funeral service marks the beginning of "letting go" (acceptance of the reality of death), and effective mourning cannot begin before that. Thus, the general community should not pay condolence visits at the home or the funeral parlor before the funeral. Of course, close family or friends and the hospice volunteer should be available to the mourners throughout this time to offer their presence, comfort and assistance. The Havurah or close friends can also help during this time by contacting relatives and friends to notify them of the funeral arrangements.

Often it is very helpful if one or two persons act as coordinators and as contact persons for the community, to ensure that appropriate arrangements for food or other assistance are made with a minimum of confusion. Also one person, generally a close friend or relative, should be available to accompany the family for the difficult task of

selecting a coffin, burial location and other funeral arrangements if pre-need arrangements have not already been made.

D. The Basic Elements Of The Funeral Service

1. Who Attends

The funeral service has the double function of honoring the deceased and comforting the bereaved. Thus, friends of either the deceased or the mourning family should attend the funeral. Children should not be shielded from this experience and from their own grief. The funeral service is an important commentary on the Jewish view of life, as well as death, and children should not be kept ignorant of this part of their tradition. If there are any questions about the role for any particular child, the officiating Rabbi should be consulted. For more information on how to educate children about death, please reference [*The Bridge of Life: Explaining Death to Children*](#) by Rabbi David Wolpe.

2. Funeral Service

At the funeral service, under the direction of the officiating Rabbi, it is customary to recite a Psalm, read a passage from the Scriptures, and chant the memorial prayer, El Moleh Rachamim. Although this service is typically held at the chapel adjacent to the burial grounds, this is not required, and the prayer service can be held at the gravesite.

3. Seating

In some localities a custom has arisen to have the family separated from those attending the service by seating the family in a curtained-off alcove. This practice is probably intended to permit family members to cry or otherwise express their grief out of the view of the congregation. The practice of segregating the mourners is not a traditional Jewish one, and it is preferable to simply seat the family in the first pews of the chapel during the service. It is not, however, appropriate for those attending to use this occasion to attempt to greet or comfort the mourners until after the funeral and burial.

4. Coffin

The prayer service is held in the presence of the coffin, although the coffin should be closed at all times, and unadorned by flowers or other decoration.

5. Eulogy

In earlier times, the giving of a eulogy (a short speech extolling the virtues or community contributions of the deceased) was reserved only for great scholars or other outstanding members of the Jewish community. This practice gradually became generalized, and it is currently customary in all cases to have some words stated in praise of the positive qualities or accomplishments of the deceased. The eulogy should be kept within reasonable bounds of time and extent of praise, and the omission of any

eulogy is certainly preferable to one that is embarrassingly immodest, effusive, or untrue. In advance of the funeral service the officiating rabbi will meet with the family to discuss themes and ideas to incorporate into the Rabbi's eulogy.

A relatively recent practice has developed of having close family members and friends share in the delivery of a eulogy. Because this is an emotional time, it is advised to write out your eulogy in advance of the service. Sometimes reminiscences about the deceased's life and declarations of the deceased's influence on the speaker (for example, an adult grandchild) can provide a unique and moving testimony at the funeral. For help in this, see Rabbi Ed Feinstein's article, "[How to Prepare A Eulogy](#)", in the "[Further Resources](#)" section below.

In no event should any mourner feel pressured to speak at the funeral. It may be more comfortable to reserve remembrances by family and friends for minyan services held at home during the *Shivah* week following the funeral.

6. Music

Having the Cantor sing the traditional memorial prayer, *El Moleh Rachamim*, often enhances the funeral service. Other possible cantonal selections could be arranged with the Cantor and Rabbi. Organ, piano or violin accompaniment is not traditionally used.

7. Pallbearing

It is traditional to name six or eight men (not the immediate mourners)(in more recent times, women have been pallbearers as well) who were close to the decedent to serve as the actual pallbearers, to help carry the coffin from the services to the gravesite. In some cases, physical strength is necessary for some portions of this duty. Honorary pallbearers may also be announced if there are more than six or eight who should share the honor of being named, or for those too young, old or physically infirm to assist.

8. Gravesite Service

After the prayer service at the chapel, those attending file out and proceed to the gravesite. The coffin is taken there by hearse or cart, with the family accompanying. The pallbearers then carry the coffin to the gravesite. At the gravesite, the Rabbi leads the balance of the prayer service, which generally includes *Keriah* (tearing clothing) and the mourners' recitation of the Kaddish.

(a) Keriah (Tearing Clothing)

The ceremony of *Keriah* — the rending (tearing) of clothing by the mourners— symbolizes their grief, loss, and the painful breaking of the physical bonds with their loved one. It is probably an institutionalized substitute for the primitive custom of physical self-mutilation of skin, hair, or clothing. Originally, the *Keriah* practice took the form of tearing an article of clothing (on the left side for a parent or on the right side for

others). More recently, a practice has developed of cutting a small black ribbon, which can then be worn attached to the clothing. In either event, the Rabbi officiates at the tearing or cutting. The mourners stand during *Keriah* to symbolize the understanding that, in the future, they will heal and once again stand upright.

The Talmud (Bavli Moed Katan 25a) explains that anyone who witnesses a death must rend his or her garment, but the current law requires mourners to engage in the ritual. Biblically, this ritual is reminiscent of Jacob tearing his clothing upon hearing about the death of his son, Joseph (Genesis 37:34) and of David tearing his clothing upon hearing about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (II Samuel 1:11).

(b) Kaddish

It has often been commented upon that the mourners' *Kaddish* prayer contains no reference to death; it is a prayer of praise and sanctification of God. The spirit of the prayer is one of almost defiant declaration of faith—that despite the tragedy of the loss, the mourners still publicly declare their steadfast belief in the Kingdom of God and a world of peace and goodness. Some have seen the *Kaddish* as our attempt to console God for the diminution of God's universe resulting from the death. Click on the link for the [Kaddish](#) prayer text.

(c) Filling the Grave

At the conclusion of the service the coffin is physically lowered into the grave. It is important that this be done in the presence of the mourners. The sight of the actual interment is important for the “letting go,” and acceptance of the fact of death without fantasy or illusion.

The family and persons attending the funeral each place some dirt into the grave, onto the coffin. This is usually done with a shovel. In order to show the difference between this holy act and other secular uses of a shovel, attendees are asked to first shovel dirt into the grave using the (convex) side of the shovel. Attendees are asked not to hand the shovel one to another. The shovel is placed back into the mound of dirt after each use so that we do not hand death off to one another; we are committed to the continuity of life.

Each of us personally fulfills the obligation to bury the dead. The finality of this act also assists us in the acceptance of the reality of the loss of the body and the termination of the prior life-relationship with the deceased.

(d) Leaving the Cemetery

At the close of the services, the mourners return to the car, to be taken to the home at which *Shivah* will be observed. Those attending form two lines and the mourners pass between them on their way out of the cemetery. Now that the burial has been concluded, the process of consoling the mourners can begin, so for the first time the persons attending speak to the mourners, saying as they pass, “*Ha'makom*

yenachem et'chem b'toch shear avelei tziyon vi'Yerushalayim" (May God comfort you together with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem).

E. The First Meal After The Funeral

The "Seudat Havra'ah"—the Meal of Consolation, marks the end of the funeral service and the beginning of the formal Shivah period of mourning. The family and those attending the funeral service return to the home (preferably the home of the deceased or else the closest related family member).

A pitcher of water, a basin and paper towels should be located outside the entrance so that before entering the home, all returning from the funeral can wash their hands, by pouring water from the pitcher. The washing may signify the transition from the funeral, with its focus upon the deceased, to the mourning period, with its focus upon consolation for the family.

The first act of that consolation is the Meal of Consolation, shared by all who return from the funeral service. This meal should not be prepared, or even procured, by the mourners. Instead, under our tradition, neighbors and friends should furnish this meal (and all other meals of the *Shivah* period).

The purpose of the first meal is to ritualize the obligation for the living survivors to carry on with their lives, however deep the loss. Unlike a "wake" or other practices of some other religions, the meal is not a celebration. There is no host or hostess, and it is not a party. It is not intended to celebrate the deceased or to cheer up the mourners, but rather to bring the gentle pressure of the community to encourage the mourners to begin their long and difficult re-entry into normal society. There are no special prayers said as part of this meal. Hard-boiled eggs are traditionally part of the food, probably to symbolize life, wholeness, and continuity. The balance of the meal today typically consists of baked goods and other foods, served buffet style. Some families follow the tradition of serving a dairy meal. The *Kashrut* (observance of Kosher foods restrictions) practices of the family and visitors should be respected.

F. The Shivah

The initial portion of the formal mourning period is called *Shivah* (Hebrew: seven), and is essentially a period of time, approximately seven days from the day of the funeral, which is set aside for intensive mourning by the family. It is also the period that marks the beginnings of the mourners' gradual return to society.

1. Roles of the Mourners and Visitors

People observe *Shivah* ("sit" *Shivah*) at a designated house (usually the house of the decedent, or otherwise the closest related mourner). The mourners stay there (except for leaving at night to sleep at their own homes, where necessary), and the community pays condolence visits and also attends morning and evening prayer services there.

Unlike the funeral, the essence of the *Shivah* is not to pay honor to the deceased, but to give comfort and assistance to the mourners. The mourners are required by the situation to receive visits from caring and loving friends and acquaintances, whose presence helps to strengthen the mourners and to re-establish their connection with society.

The visitor is not supposed to take the initiative in conversing with the mourners, but to let the mere fact of the visitor's presence provide the comfort of human companionship and compassion. Instead of the typical greetings, the visitor need not initiate any greeting whatsoever. This was the early tradition, especially during the first three days of the *Shivah* period. However, if the relationship warrants it, the visitor can approach the mourners to express by a hug or a few words the visitor's feelings of sorrow. The visitor should follow the mourner's lead in conversation, understanding that the process does not call for attempting to "cheer up" the mourners, or distract them from their grief.

The mourners often want to talk about and hear stories about the deceased and the deceased's influence on those present. This marks the important second part of the mourning process. In the first part, "letting go," we give up the defense mechanism of denial, and accept the reality of death. In the second part, "holding on," we incorporate into our lives the memories and positive influences of the decedent.

Visitors, especially if they were close to the decedent or the mourners, or if they live conveniently near the home, may return each day of the *Shivah* to help make up the *minyán* for the morning and evening services. Again, it would be especially appropriate for the Havurah to undertake this as part of their special relationship. Books for these services will be provided by Sinai Temple. The clergy and general members of our Sinai Temple community are available to help the minyan participate in the service. For more information about the visitor's role at the *Shivah*, see Dr. Ron Wolfson's article on "[The Art of Making a Shivah Call](#)" in the "[Additional Articles](#)" section below.

2. The Psychology of *Shivah*

It is important to understand the development of the mourning process during the *Shivah* period. The period is properly one of transition. According to modern psychological studies, the few days immediately following the death (especially where the death was sudden and unexpected or the family was psychologically unprepared) are ones of shock, denial, and numbness. Psychologists note that this initial period of several days of shock is followed by a period of acute and intensive mourning that generally gradually diminishes over approximately three to six months (or longer, in some cases). Their studies further show that this is followed by a period of re-adjustment and return to normalcy, which often lasts the remainder of the first year (or longer, in some cases) following the death. It is remarkable how the ancient Jewish traditions of mourning correspond to these most modern psychological insights into grief and the mourning processes.

Progress in this transition of grieving does not occur in a straight line, however. Most people who have experienced it describe it as recurring waves of deep feelings, interspersed with ever-lengthening periods of “normal” thoughts and behavior. But just as the visitor must not expect the *Shivah* period to be a seven-day period of continuous and unremitting solemnity, so also the visitor should not trivialize the occasion by converting the condolence call into a cocktail party-type of social event at which discussions of business and current events and gossip are all allowed. The visitor at the home of the *Shivah* observance is not there to entertain or to be entertained, but to console and strengthen the mourners.

3. Time Period

The period of the *Shivah* is not exactly seven days. Although the funeral is often held in late morning or afternoon, the day of the funeral counts as a full day. The “second” day starts at sundown of the day of the funeral, and the regular *Shivah* period is completed with the morning of the seventh day (rather than waiting until the evening). For example, if the funeral were held at noon on a Monday, the regular *Shivah* period would conclude after the morning services on the following Sunday. Although public mourning practices are not observed on the *Shabbat*, it still counts as one day of the *Shivah* period.

The occurrence of certain Jewish holidays (other than Shabbat) during the regular *Shivah* period terminates the period on the theory that the public obligation to participate in the festival observance must take priority over private grief. The Rabbi should determine the timing of the *Shivah* period when the funeral is planned.

4. Mourners’ Activities

During the *Shivah* period, the mourners ignore their normal social and business activities and obligations, in order to devote themselves fully to the business of mourning. The mourners are excused from all work. (In cases of genuine economic hardship or medical or public service responsibilities, some exceptions are possible, especially after the first three days, but these should be discussed with the Rabbi.)

Because a human form has just been lost, any vanities regarding the human form are barred during *Shivah*. This is expressed by putting aside normal concerns for personal appearance: Mirrors are covered, cosmetics are not used, and in traditional observance, men do not shave and only the minimal bathing necessary for hygiene is performed.

During the *Shivah* period the mourners avoid recreation, entertainment or pleasurable activities (radio, television, music, reading for entertainment, etc.). Marital relations are abstained from. However, there is to be no mortification of the flesh or self-injury. For example, the mourners may cook for themselves, if necessary, and do light housekeeping and hygienic bathing, and may read serious works of consolation.

The mourners traditionally sit on low benches, and wear slippers rather than shoes, perhaps as a means of expressing distinction from everyday activities and luxuries.

5. Candle

Traditionally, a 7-day candle is lit upon the return from the funeral and kept burning during *Shivah*. The candle flame is thought to symbolize the everlasting influence of the soul of the deceased. The Funeral Director generally furnishes the 7-day candle as part of the service.

6. Gifts

Visitors should not bring or send flowers, candy, or liquor to the home. Instead, the appropriate way of expressing such feelings is for the visitor to make a contribution to a charity in which the deceased or the mourners have been interested. Bringing food for the mourners is appropriate, but individual efforts in this area should be coordinated so that there is no waste or excess.

7. Shabbat

Unlike other festival days, Shabbat does not shorten the *Shivah* period. However, public mourning observances are suspended on Shabbat, and there are no prayer services held at the home. The community does not pay condolence calls. On the other hand, private mourning continues. The mourners attend Shabbat services at the synagogue. Please let the clergy know if you plan on attending Shabbat services during your week of *Shivah*. The clergy would like to welcome you back into the community during Kabbalat Shabbat on Friday evening.

G. The Sheloshim Period

Following the Jewish traditional arrangement of gradual transitional periods for mourning (which closely parallel modern psychological studies of the grief process), the balance of the 30-day period from the funeral remaining after the conclusion of *Shivah* becomes a period of reduced mourning, called *Sheloshim* (Hebrew: thirty). Although the mourner returns to work at the end of the *Shivah*, the restrictions against attending celebrations, entertainment events or listening to music continue for the balance of *Sheloshim*.

H. Mourning Observances For Deceased Parents

We have already noted how the rending of garments is performed differently for parents (when it is done on the left side—closer to the heart). Traditionally, the general *Shivah* prohibition against shaving was extended into the *Sheloshim* period for parents.

In addition, the general restrictions of *Sheloshim* (the prohibitions against entertainment) are extended to twelve months (according to the Jewish calendar) when mourning for a parent. It is again interesting to note that this one-year period of

extended mourning for parents parallels the one-year period commonly stated in contemporary psychological literature as the approximate period often required for termination of the normal grief process.

Also, persons mourning a parent continue to say the Mourners' *Kaddish* prayer at every service for eleven months. Originally, the limitation of *Kaddish* to eleven, rather than twelve, months was to signify that the deceased parent, being a good person, did not need a whole year of prayer to avoid divine punishment. In contemporary times, the limitation to eleven months may be more meaningfully seen as an expression of the need to put an end to mourning. Indeed, the whole Jewish mourning system of time periods (before the funeral, the first three days of *Shivah*, the balance of *Shivah*, *Sheloshim*, and the first year for parents), each with its own level of mourning practices, can be seen as insistence upon limitations on the extent of mourning. Under Jewish law, excessive mourning is prohibited; the primary obligation is not to the dead, but always to the self, to the community, to life.

I. The Customs Of Later Remembrance

Even after the conclusion of the formal mourning periods, Judaism recognizes in many ways the reality and permanence of the mourner's loss.

1. Tombstone and Unveiling

Just as with other elements of the burial ceremonies, the tombstone should not become an instance of elaborate ostentation. It should bear a simple inscription of the name and date of death. It is appropriate to erect the stone no sooner than 30 days and up to 12 months after the death.

It is currently customary for the family to gather for an "*unveiling*" ceremony for this purpose near the first anniversary after the death. This can be an occasion for the family to share their remembrances, and does not require the presence of a rabbi or cantor. For help in this, see Rabbi Ed Feinstein's article, "[How to Do an Unveiling Ceremony](#)", in the "[Additional Articles](#)" section below.

2. Yahrzeit

Yahrzeit, a day of prayer and remembrance commemorate the anniversary of the death each year. The mourner recites the Mourners' *Kaddish* at services. A 24-hour candle is also lit in the home (beginning on the evening before the *Yahrzeit* day). The *Yahrzeit* day is determined according to the Hebrew calendar, taking into account that the Hebrew calendar day begins at sundown. Any difficulties in determining the appropriate *Yahrzeit* day should be resolved by the Rabbis. Sinai Temple or the funeral director will be able to furnish the mourners with a schedule of *Yahrzeit* days for the coming years.

3. Yizkor

A special memorial (*Yizkor*) service is held at the Synagogue on the eighth day of Pesach, the second day of Shavuot, the eighth day of Succot, and on Yom Kippur. Those who have lost a parent, sibling, child, or spouse participate in this service. At Sinai Temple, as in most Synagogues, the entire congregation likewise participates in the *Yizkor* services, which speak meaningfully about the condition of life to all of us, and not just to mourners.

4. Naming a Child

It is an *Ashkenazi* traditional to name a child after a deceased relative in order to perpetuate the memory and to express hope that the positive qualities of the deceased find expression in the child's life. The *Sephardi* practice, however, is to name a child after a living relative.

Part 4 - The Psychology and Jewish Philosophy of Mourning

A. The Psychological Stages Of Mourning

1. The Mourning Process

This guide has previously detailed the various psychological phases that the close family of the deceased must pass through as part of the mourning process. Essentially, mourning is a process of re-entry, re-identification, and re-establishment of a relationship with a world and a self greatly altered by the loss of the deceased. Although individual reactions obviously will differ in different cases, sociological and psychological studies have been able to establish certain typical stages through which people generally pass in their mourning. Initially, there is generally numbness, paralysis or shock, especially in those cases where there has been a lack of psychological preparation for the death. As the capacity to think and feel is gradually restored, the mourner often feels a whole range of sometimes shocking or embarrassing feelings, such as anger towards the deceased, guilt for real or imagined wrongs done towards the deceased, outrage, panic, despair, or self-pity. What is important for the mourner and those trying to console the mourner to realize is that these initial feelings are natural and normal. The mourner should not be made to feel that he should “snap out of it” or that it is somehow wrong to feel the guilt and anger that are so typically a part of the mourning process. (As has been pointed out, Jewish mourning customs recognize and accommodate these feelings.)

Once the funeral has occurred and the condolence process truly begun, there should be a gradual reestablishment of relationship of the mourner with the family and the community. Again, this process takes time, and does not occur in a straight line. The typical experience feels like a series of waves in which the mourner makes progress for a while in the normalization of feelings and responses, but is suddenly overwhelmed by extreme grief. The mourning process, indeed, can be seen as simply a lengthening of the period of time between those waves of overwhelming grief. The goal of the mourning process is not to forget but to re-establish working and living relationships, and to develop a consistent pattern of memories and feelings towards the deceased. The mourning process should help us integrate those memories and feelings into our lives.

2. Relationships Within the Family

One aspect of the mourning process that is very often ignored is the effect on the psychological inter-relationships among the mourning family members. Mourning is often described by surviving family members as a uniquely personal and solitary experience. After the death of a child, parents frequently state that however fine and close their marital relationship was, they were struck by how individual their mourning responses had to be, and how disappointed they were when they looked to the other spouse for substantial assistance in the mourning process. Each of the parents apparently finds that he or she must mourn for the child alone, and cannot look to the other for the kind of help they may have presumed would be there.

Likewise, it is apparently a common experience that young children in a mourning family generally feel neglected and excluded, even though the adults may believe that they are going out of their way to share the experience with the children. Again this seems to be a result of the differences between expectations and the reality of the situation. Because the mourning experience is so intensely personal, children will be disappointed if they expect that any adults can effectively share the mourning experience or help in the mourning experience by way of education or co-activity.

Clearly, to state these general experiences is not to declare invariable rules or suggest that the situation is hopeless. However, the family and supporting friends should be especially vigilant to recognize these pressures. We should all be aware that significant forces are at work and that continuity of the surviving family, whether it is the marital relationship or involving children, may require special attention and, where appropriate, referral to professional help.

3. Relationships With the Community

Once past the initial intense mourning of the *Shivah* period, the mourners often find that their relationships with outside members of the community have undergone substantial change. Very often friends or family members feel they cannot re-establish normal relationships with the mourners either because the friends themselves have intense mourning and grieving which is too disturbing, or because of a general awkwardness or feeling of fear that they will be saying the wrong thing and upset the mourner.

When there is death of a spouse, the survivor is also faced with all of the general pressures on a single adult in a society geared to a "couples" lifestyle. Where there is loss of a young child, very often many of the adult family relationships were previously based upon two families having children of the same age who were companions. Moreover, friends may feel awkward about having healthy and surviving children of their own, who may make them feel uncomfortable in continuing their relationships with the family of the deceased child.

It is important for people to understand the pressures under which not only the mourning family but also the community of friends will be operating. Armed with this knowledge, perhaps friends can be a little more willing to risk occasional tensions and problems in maintaining and re-establishing friendship relations with families who have lost members.

4. Excessive Mourning

There will, of course, be individual differences in mourning experiences and the timing and pacing of different stages and phases of mourning. However, it remains necessary for the family and supporting friends to be alert to the general danger signals of any mourning that becomes excessively intense, lasts too long, or does not go through the normal stages of gradual re-establishment of some normal relationships. In such cases, or for any other reasons where there is a question as to the psychological

appropriateness of a mourner's condition, people should not hesitate to consult or to advise consultation with professional help.

For information about bereavement support, please see the following website:

<http://www.jewishbereavement.com/>

B. The Jewish Response To The Questions Of Mourning

If there is one single universal reaction to the fact of a death, it is the question "Why?" Why did this person die? Why did this thing happen to me? Why has the decedent been punished? Why am I being punished? A full response to these questions would require a religious treatise of great depth. A guide such as this can only make a few isolated observations.

Many Jews have great difficulty in accepting as God's will the death of an innocent or good person, or the untimely death of a young adult or an innocent child. The response of some, regrettably, is to lose all faith in God and all fidelity to our religion. Many others, however, see the impossibility of adequate response to such a question not as a cause for disbelief in God, but as a basis for concluding that the question must be wrong.

The question of how could God permit such an injustice presupposes God's active decision and involvement in a particular death. Some Jews can accept the process of death as an extension of the impersonal processes of nature. Accident and circumstance, however horrid their consequences, do not disprove God; they may only suggest a different conception of God. Some Jews feel that if God were assigned a role in everyday events such as individual deaths, this could be done only at the cost of believing in a system in which God had personal responsibility for every detail of human choice. This, in turn, leads to the denial of human responsibility and free will, with the result that humans would lose their special status as creatures of intelligence and choosing, and be reduced to the level of irresponsible things. If death is seen instead as the consequence of natural processes, human actions, and circumstance, then man's role as a choosing and socially responsible being is preserved.

Other Jews respond to the challenge of the questions which death raises simply by accepting the fact that human understanding is not adequate to the task of dealing with these issues. Such Jews are able to gain comfort and strength by focusing not on the unanswerable questions, but rather upon those things that we know: We know that the deceased lived. We know that the deceased brought to the lives of others around him or her and to the world at large a certain unique personality that touched and changed all those with whom the deceased came in contact. We know that the only way to overcome or minimize the injustice of the deceased's death is to take upon ourselves the holy task of furthering those finest principles and qualities of the deceased, by incorporating them into our lives and actions. We know that to the extent the deceased had contact with us and changed us, the death of the deceased does not have the finality and inevitability of merely a cessation of biological life.

In all of this, the network of Jewish mourning and condolence customs is an extremely important matrix that satisfies the psychological, philosophical and material needs of the mourner and provides many bridges for returning the mourner to society. To understand the philosophical depth of Jewish mourning practices is to understand the dual role of the mourner and the community, mourning and consoling, receiving and giving support.

Out of the collective historical Jewish experience has come an important philosophy of death that is a part of the overall Jewish philosophy of life. Death is part of life. Death is not merely a private experience for those intimately related to the deceased, but is a community loss, with community consequences and communal obligations upon us all to come to the assistance of the deceased and the mourners.

The Jewish system of mourning and condolence customs, despite its ancient sources, parallels remarkably the scheduling of psychological needs as detailed by the latest scientific studies. The Jewish system of beliefs and practices should be seen not as some archaic and irrelevant remnant of history, but as a basic and authentic response system from which we can individually draw strength and gain real support. Judaism has never been a death culture. Many elements of ancient Judaism were formulated as a direct reaction to the death cultures of that time. Our Jewish toast is "*l'chaim*" ("to life!"); the Jewish commitment is to life. We must integrate within our view of life the acceptance of the fact of death.

Part 5 - Selected Readings

Our [Sinai Temple website](#) offers instant access to readings, poetry, and sermons related to the topic of Jewish mourning and condolence.

A. Selected Writings by Rabbi David Wolpe

1. [Birthdays and Yahrzeits](#)
2. [Why Stones Instead of Flowers?](#)
3. [Tears](#)
4. [The Bridge of Life: Explaining Death to Children](#)

B. Prayers

[Mourners Kaddish link](#)

Part 6 - Further Resources

A. Who To Call

To contact SINAI TEMPLE:

If you're not sure who at Sinai Temple is the right person to contact, simply contact the Sinai Temple Reception Desk, and you'll be put in contact with someone who can help you:

Receptionist	Keren Braude	481-3200
Executive Director	Howard Lesner	481-3219
Office Manager	Judy Begin	481-4213
Cantor's Office	Cantor Marcus Feldman	481-3235
Chevra Kadisha	Lisa Lainer/Ralph Resnick	310-936-8867 481-3201
Mt. Sinai Memorial Park	Hollywood Hills	323-469-6000
Mt. Sinai Memorial Park	Simi Valley	800-600-0076
Executive Assistant	Rebecca Begin	481-3242
Rabbi	Rabbi David Wolpe	481-3242
Administrative Assistant	Ellen Pierson	481-3234
Rabbi	Rabbi Nicole Guzik	481-3234
Rabbi	Rabbi Jason Fruithandler	481-3234
Rabbi	Rabbi Erez Sherman	481-3234
Rabbi Emeritus	Rabbi Zvi Dershowitz	481-3234
Ritual Director	Ralph Resnick	481-3201
Cantor Emeritus	Cantor Joseph Gole	481-3235

B. Bereavement Support Group Information

Local Bereavement Support Groups

About Support Groups:

Sharing feelings of pain and loss can actually have a healing effect. Support groups offer an opportunity to discuss your loss with others in similar circumstances in a safe, confidential and non-judgmental setting. We encourage you to take advantage of these wonderful programs.

Our House Grief Support Center

OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center provides the Los Angeles community with grief support services, education, resources and hope.

Our programs serve adults, teens, children and toddlers. OUR HOUSE provides essential grief support for a universal experience that is still misunderstood and taboo in our society. The OUR HOUSE model is unique in its approach to grief support.

310-473-1511 or 818-222-3344

www.ourhouse-grief.org

The HOPE Unit Foundation

The mission of HOPE Connection is to help people whose lives have been touched by the death of a loved one - by providing individual and group support, educational programs and information that helps alleviate the pain of grief and promote healing.

[\(818\) 788-HOPE \(4673\)](tel:8187884673)

<http://hopegroups.org/locations/west-los-angeles/>

The Maple Counseling Center (TMCC)

Our Mission is to provide low cost comprehensive mental health services to individuals, couples, families, and groups throughout Los Angeles County, and to provide training for interns and counselors who are working towards licensure in the mental health field.

(310) 271-9999

<http://www.tmcc.org/about-us/>

C. Books and Websites

Many helpful books and websites are available on the topic of illness, death, mourning and condolence. Here are a few:

NOTE: Clicking on a book title will take you to the Amazon.com page describing the book. Some of these books may also be borrowed from the Sinai Temple library which can be reached at: 310-481-3218.

Jewish Mourning And Condolence Information

- [Anne Brener, Mourning & Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing](#)
- [Anita Diamant, Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew](#)
- [Ari Goldman, Living a Year of Kaddish: A Memoir](#)
- [Rochel Berman, Dignity Beyond Death: The Jewish Preparation for Burial](#)
- [Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley, Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs and Communication of the Dying](#)
- [Stuart Kelman, Chesed Shel Emet: Guidelines for Taharah](#)
- [Stuart Kelman, K'vod Hamet: A Guide for the Bereaved](#)
- [Isaac Klein, A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice](#)
- [Alfred J. Kolatch, The Jewish Mourner's Book of Why](#)
- [Maurice Lamm, Consolation: The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief](#)
- [Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning](#)
- [Nechama Liss-Levinson, When a Grandparent Dies: A Kid's Own Remembering Workbook for Dealing With Shiva and the Year Beyond](#)
- [Naomi Levy, To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times](#)
- [Sherwin B. Nuland, Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning](#)
- [Kerry M. Olitzky, Grief in Our Seasons: A Mourner's Kaddish Companion](#)
- [David Techner, A Candle for Grandpa: A Guide to the Jewish Funeral for Children and Parents](#)
- [Leon Wieseltier, Kaddish](#)
- [David Wolpe, Floating Takes Faith](#)
- [David Wolpe, Teaching Your Children About God](#)

- [Ron Wolfson, A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement](#)

General Resources on Illness, Death, and Grieving

- [Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss](#)
- [Rachel Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom](#)

General Information on Estate Planning

Contact an estate-planning attorney for advice concerning Wills, Trusts, Estate Planning, and Probate matters. For some general consumer background information, the State Bar of California offers the following consumer pamphlets at http://www.calbar.ca.gov/state/calbar/calbar_generic.jsp?cid=10581

- Do I Need a Will?
- Do I Need Estate Planning?
- Do I Need a Living Trust?

Ethical Wills

- [Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer, So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them](#)
- [Israel Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills](#)
- [Ron Lever, An Ethical Will: Grandpa Teaches Values](#)
- [Barry K. Baines, M.D., Ethical Wills, Second Edition](#)

D. Advance Directives (Durable Powers of Attorney; Living Wills)

Please be sure to discuss your medical directive with your attorney to make sure that you are in compliance with California laws. In addition, if you wish to be certain that your health care directive will be honored when you are no longer able to make decisions, it is essential that you discuss your end of life wishes with your family to avoid any misunderstanding during a time of crisis.

- Caring Connections, National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (Excellent source for information and forms).
<http://www.caringinfo.org/UserFiles/File/California.pdf>
- American Academy of Family Physicians, Advance Directives and Do Not Resuscitate Orders. <http://www.familydoctor.org/003.xml>
- American Bar Association, Consumer's Tool Kit for Health Care Advance Planning. <http://www.abanet.org/aging/toolkit/home.html>
- Bet Tzedek, Advance Directives For Health Care in California.
<http://www.bettzedek.org/advancedirectives.html>
- California Attorney General's Office, Advance Health Care Directive.
http://www.ag.ca.gov/consumers/general/adv_hc_dir.htm
- California Healthcare Association, Advance Health Care Directive.
<http://www.losrobleshospital.com/cpm/AdvanceDirective.pdf>

E. Cemetery, Funeral, and Advance Need Arrangements

Mount Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuaries has two locations:

Mount Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuaries (Hollywood Hills)

5950 Forest Lawn Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90068
(800) 600-0076

<http://www.mountsinaiparks.org>

Mount Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuaries

6150 Mount Sinai Drive
Simi Valley, CA 93063
(800) 220-6776

<http://www.mountsinaiparks.org>

For a complete list of other active and historical Los Angeles area Jewish cemeteries, see The Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles list at <http://www.jewishgen.org/jgsla/cemetery.htm>

F. If Financial Assistance is Needed

Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles

Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles operates a Jewish Community Burial Program providing a traditional Jewish burial for those in financial need. http://www.jfsla.org/index.php?/programs/details/program_jewish_community_burial_program/

Bet Tzedek Legal Clinic

Bet Tzedek offers various legal services to those in financial need, including its programs for Family Caregivers and Senior Legal services. You can contact its North Hollywood office. <http://www.bettzedek.org/index.html>

Part 7 - GLOSSARY

The following is a list of some of the Hebrew terms used in this Guide, with basic translations. To return to your previous place in the text, click on the “Back Button” (the “Previous View” green arrow button) in your Acrobat Reader screen.

TERM	DEFINITION
<i>Ashkenazi</i>	Jews who originated from Europe (Ashkenaz=Germany). By and large they spoke Yiddish and shared similar customs and practices.
<i>Bikur Cholim</i>	The mitzvah of visiting and comforting the sick, including strangers.
<i>Chevra Kadisha</i>	The Committee is a dedicated group of congregants/clergy that work with the support of the clergy and in cooperation with the mortuary to ritually prepare the body for burial. The ritual preparation, Tahara, consists of ritual washing and dressing of the deceased in Tachrichim (shrouds) as well as placing the deceased in the Aron (casket). During Tahara, prayers and psalms are recited for compassion, salvation and guidance of the soul.
<i>Hospice</i>	Hospice is a program of care and support for those facing life-threatening illness when a cure is no longer possible. It consists of a team approach designed to provide comfort and care to patients and their families. The team is comprised of the patient’s physician, a medical director, a registered nurse, a clinical social worker, a home health aide, a Rabbi, and a trained volunteer. Most insurance plans, including Medicare, cover licensed hospice treatment, whether at home, in a hospital or other medical facility.
<i>Kaddish</i>	Traditional prayer in memory of the dead said at funerals and during <i>Shivah</i> by close relatives. Mourners also recite Kaddish during services throughout the formal mourning period, on the Yahrzeit anniversary of the death, and during holiday Yizkor services. Kaddish requires a minyan.
<i>Keriah</i>	The practice of mourners making a small tear in their clothing to symbolize their grief. Today this is commonly done at the funeral on a black ribbon worn by the mourners.
<i>Kohen, pl. Kohanim</i>	Any man who can trace his family roots to the Temple priesthood—most people called Cohen or any variant of

that name but can have other names. They are given the honor of the first Aliyah and if highly observant may avoid ordinary contact with dead bodies and cemeteries.

Minyan

The minimal number of ten Jews required for any communal religious service. In most Conservative and Reform synagogues today, women are counted for the Minyan.

Mitzvah, pl. Mitzvot

Technically, a commandment from the Torah, but also commonly used to refer to any good deed.

Onen

The initial status of a family member from the time of the death until the funeral. In recognition of both the practical necessity to make funeral arrangements and the psychological circumstances prior to the burial, neither the Onen nor the community is to engage in mourning or condolence rites during this period, and the Onen is excused from normal ritual obligations.

Sephardi

Jews who came from Spain (Sepharad), North Africa and the Mediterranean. They spoke Ladino and had local customs and practices. Religiously there are only minor differences from the western Ashkenazi practice.

Shabbat

(Hebrew: Sabbath, from the number seven) Jewish Shabbat observances and restrictions on some activities apply each week from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. Because of the importance of observing Shabbat, funerals and home *Shivah* services are not held on Shabbat.

Shalom

(Hebrew: "Peace", or wholeness) Since this word for peace was traditionally used in the Middle East in phrases for greeting and farewell, it is now used to say "Hello" and "Goodbye".

Sheloshim

(Hebrew: "Thirty") The thirty-day period marking the second period of Jewish mourning practices, less intense than the *Shivah* period, aimed at gradually returning the mourners to regular society.

Shivah

Traditional Jewish mourning occurs over a succession of fixed periods, each with its particular rituals and level of intensity. The *Shivah* (from the Hebrew word for "seven") is the approximately seven-day period following the funeral that marks the most intense period of formal mourning for the family and the supporting community.

<i>Talit (Tallis)</i>	The prayer shawl with its prescribed fringes (Tzitzit) used in daily prayer. The fringes are a reminder of the Mitzvot.
<i>Talmud</i>	The compilation of early rabbinic interpretation and commentary on Jewish law, custom, and thought, considered to be the authoritative Oral Torah complementing the written Torah.
<i>Tzitzit</i>	The four knotted fringes at the corners of the Talit. The knots are tied in a manner to signify 613, the number of the Mitzvot commanded in the Torah.
<i>Unveiling</i>	A ceremony to dedicate the headstone or grave marker. Typically attended only by the family, the unveiling is often scheduled close to the first anniversary of the death. Some ideas for structuring the ceremony appear in Rabbi Feinstein's article on " How to Do an Unveiling Ceremony ".
<i>Yahrzeit</i>	A Yiddish word for anniversary of the death of a family member. It calls for the recitation of the Kaddish in a Minyan.
<i>Yizkor</i>	A Hebrew word for remembrance. A synagogue service for all the community to remember their dead. It is recited on Yom Kippur and the pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot.

Part 8 - ADDITIONAL ARTICLES

A. How to Prepare a Eulogy, by Rabbi Edward Feinstein

At American funeral services, the eulogy, or memorial speech, is typically delivered by a clergyman—a rabbi, minister, priest, etc. This is not Jewish tradition. In Jewish tradition, it is the obligation of the community—the lay community—to celebrate the life of the deceased in words. Children and grandchildren, friends, neighbors bear the obligation to share memories of the deceased. This traditional practice is now returning to Jewish funerals.

What do you say? And how do you prepare a eulogy?

The purpose of a eulogy is to locate and specify what is immortal and lasting in a life. The body dies, but the person we love and respect hasn't died. The person still lives with us – in our memories, in our lives, in our values. The eulogy is a depiction of that which remains immortal after the death of the body.

Ask yourself:

- What did I learn from this life?
- What were this person's most cherished values?
- What brought this person their greatest joy?
- What moments did we share that reveal the character of the person?
- What was this person most proud of?
- What would he/she want to say to his/her children, grandchildren, and friends as a summary of the life?

Isolate two or three themes or values that most characterized the person. Describe these themes or values and add an anecdote, reminiscence, or an event that illustrates how they were part of the life. For example, "*Grandma loved family most of all. Her happiest times were holidays when we all gathered. Just last Passover...*"

There are many wonderful texts in the Jewish tradition that describe and celebrate our values. Use these texts to illustrate and celebrate the value of the deceased. If you need assistance locating a good text, ask your rabbi.

Sometimes, the easiest way to prepare a eulogy is write a letter to the deceased. In your letter, list the things you gained from this person's life: love, wisdom, kindness, etc. What are you most grateful for in this life? For example: "*Dear Grandpa, I am grateful for the honesty and integrity you taught...*"

Remember a few things as you prepare:

- Prepare your eulogy talk in advance. Write it out. Do not depend upon your ability to speak extemporaneously. The emotions of a funeral are very strong, and you might find yourself standing in front of a crowd with a blank mind.
- Keep your talk brief. You cannot capture an entire life. So share what is most important in a few minutes. Any eulogy longer than ten minutes will lose the attention of an audience.
- Your goal is to help the gathering of friends and family to remember a life that has been lost. If there were moments of humor and joy in the life, by all means include them. There is nothing wrong with laughter at a funeral service. But remember that you are not there to entertain an audience. Getting laughs is not the goal.
- Describe important moments that you shared with the deceased. But remember that the eulogy is not about you. This is not your funeral, and not the time to elevate yourself.
- At times of loss, family and friends are vulnerable and sensitive. Read over your eulogy to be sure that nothing you say can be hurtful to a member of the family or a friend. Have someone else read over your eulogy to be sure nothing could be construed as hurtful.
- Not everything you say has to be in praise of the deceased. All of us have faults and darker sides to our character. If you are careful, you can share some of this in your eulogy. But do not say anything that comes from anger. If you are angry with the deceased, it is better not to say anything in public. There are times and places for sharing these feelings. Not at a funeral.

As you deliver your eulogy:

- You may find yourself getting choked up. This is to be expected. Just stop, take a breath, and continue.
- If you can't gather your emotions, then have someone else—another member of the family, or the rabbi—stand with you and read the remainder of your remarks.

B. *How to Do an Unveiling Ceremony, by Rabbi Edward Feinstein*

Introduction

It has long been a custom of the Jewish People to place a marker on a gravesite. The marker is made of some permanent material—stone or metal—and contains the name of the deceased. It may also contain the dates of birth and death, some very brief description of the deceased, or a phrase of prayer. This marker represents our

conviction that the life of a person does not evaporate when the body dies. Some significant part of the person lives on among family, friends and community.

It has also become customary to gather some time after the death and burial to “unveil” and dedicate the marker. This ceremony is not formal tradition, but customary practice. Therefore it is not fully prescribed and is open to our own variations and inventions. A rabbi is not necessary at an unveiling. You can easily lead the ceremony yourself!

Many families wait until a year has passed before unveiling and dedicating the marker. Others do the ceremony after 11 months to signify the end of the daily recitation of Kaddish. Others do the ceremony after three or six months. Most families schedule the unveiling ceremony at a time when family and friends are available to gather at the gravesite. And most families follow the ceremony with a gathering of family and friends.

The Purpose of the Unveiling Ceremony

A year or so has passed since the death. The shock has worn off. The pain of loss is still very real, but it has changed. We have begun to learn to live without the regular presence of our loved one. We have begun to find our way back into life again.

The unveiling ceremony gathers us together at the gravesite to recall what is immortal and lasting in this life. We can talk about our loved one with a different spirit than the painful words of eulogy. We may talk of what we miss most in our loved one’s life. We may celebrate what was triumphant and unique in this life. We may laugh at their humor, feel the warmth of their love, bring close their wisdom, recall the moments we most cherish, and cry at the loss.

Preparing for the Ceremony

1. Ask members of the family and close friends to prepare a few words recalling your loved one. This is not eulogy, but a brief reflection on the person we miss.

- What one moment best reveals their character?
- What part of them will you never forget?
- In what did your loved one find greatest joy?
- What did you learn for this life?

2. Bring a bagful of stones to place on the gravesite. This is an old Jewish tradition showing that we have visited the gravesite to recollect the memory of our loved one. You can use either ordinary garden or driveway gravel, or decorative polished stones.

The Ceremony

1. Gather at the gravesite. Bring everyone gathered close together. The ceremony is brief; most people can stand through it. Begin with a few words of poetry or prayer to set the mood. We have come to a special place to recall what is eternal in our loved one's life. You will find some excellent poems and reflections on the SINAI TEMPLE website. As well, you may look in a synagogue prayer book or the booklet of prayer provided by the memorial park.

2. Ask those gathered to share their words of memory of your loved one. Be patient. Not everyone speaks with fluency and grace. Let everyone who wishes share a reflection and a memory.

3. Ask one of the gathered to remove the cover and read the marker. If there are children present, this is a good job for them to feel involved and part of the ceremony.

4. Read the prayer *El Maley Rachameem* in Hebrew (if you are able) and English, and be sure to include the name of the deceased. You'll find this prayer in any prayer book and in the booklet provided by the memorial park.

5. Read the Mourners' *Kaddish* prayer together.

6. Distribute the stones and ask the gathered family and friends to place the stones on the grave marker.

C. *The Art of Making a Shivah Call*, by Dr. Ron Wolfson

We are not alone. This is the fundamental message of Judaism about death and bereavement. Every law and every custom of Jewish mourning and comforting has, at its core, the overwhelming motivation to surround those who are dying and those who will grieve with a supportive community. While some may argue that facing death and coping with grief heighten one's feeling of aloneness, the Jewish approach places loss and grief in the communal context of family and friends.

Comforters are obligated to tend to the needs of mourners. For instance, since a family sitting *shivah* should not prepare meals, it becomes the responsibility of the community to feed them. Some people send pre-prepared foods from local caterers, and many Jewish newspapers carry ads for "*shivah* trays." With our busy, frenetic lives, it is certainly convenient to turn to these sources. Yet, personally prepared and/or delivered food is a more traditional act of comfort. Liquor, candy or flowers are not usually sent. A donation to a charity designated by the mourners would be another appropriate way to honor the deceased, while comforting those who mourn.

As a comforter, making a *shivah* call is one of the most important acts of condolence. But, all too often, those visiting a mourner's home are not sure of the appropriate behavior. David Techner, funeral director at the Ira Kaufman Chapel in Detroit and a leading expert in the field, suggests that many people do not have the

slightest idea as to why they even make the *shivah* call. “People need to ask themselves: ‘What am I trying to do?’ When people say things like, ‘at least he’s not suffering,’ who are they trying to make comfortable? Certainly not the mourner. People say things like that so that they do not have to deal with the mourner’s grief. The comment is for themselves, not the mourner.”

In my interviews with rabbis, funeral directors, psychologists, and laypeople for *A Time to Mourn—A Time to Comfort* [Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs, 1993], I discovered that the act of comforting the mourner is quickly becoming a lost art. We do not know what to do, so many people avoid making a *shivah* call altogether. We do not know what to say, so many people say things that are more hurtful than helpful. We do not know how to act, so often the atmosphere is more festive than reflective.

The problem is exacerbated by mourners and their families who do not know how to set an appropriate tone. Many observances have become like parties, with plenty of food, drink and chitchat. Of course, there are alternatives. In some *shivah* homes, the *minyán* becomes the focus. During the service, the life of the deceased is remembered through stories and anecdotes.

Whichever type of *shivah* home you encounter, there are some basic guidelines for making a *shivah* call.

DECIDE WHEN TO VISIT. Listen for an announcement at the funeral service for the times that the mourners will be receiving guests. Usually the options are immediately after the funeral, around the *minyanim* in the evenings and mornings, or during the day. Should you wish to visit during another time, you may want to call ahead. Some experienced *shivah* visitors choose to visit toward the end of the week when it is frequently more difficult to gather a *minyán*.

DRESS APPROPRIATELY. Most people dress as if attending a synagogue service. Depending on the area of the country, more informal dress might be just as appropriate.

WASH YOUR HANDS. If you are visiting immediately after the funeral, you will likely see a pitcher of water, basin and towels near the door. It is traditional to wash your hands upon returning from the cemetery. This reflects the belief that contact with the dead renders a person “impure.” There is no blessing to say for this act.

JUST WALK IN. Do not ring the doorbell. The front door of most *shivah* homes will be left open or unlocked since all are invited to comfort the mourners. This eliminates the need for the mourners to answer the door. On a practical level, it avoids the constant disruptive ringing of the bell.

TAKE FOOD TO THE KITCHEN. If you are bringing food, take it to the kitchen. Usually there will be someone there to receive it. Identify the food as meat, dairy or *pareve*. Be sure to put your name on a card or on the container so that the mourners will know you made the gift. It also helps to mark any pots or pans with your name if you want to retrieve them later.

FIND THE MOURNERS. Go to the mourners as soon as possible. What do you say? The tradition suggests being silent, allowing the mourner to open the conversation. Simply offering a hug, a kiss, a handshake, an arm around the shoulder speaks volumes. If you do want to open a conversation, start with a simple, "I'm so sorry," or "I don't know what to say. This must be really difficult for you," or "I was so sorry to hear about _____." Be sure to name the deceased. Why? Because one of the most powerful ways to comfort mourners is to encourage them to remember the deceased.

Recall something personal: "I loved _____. Remember the times we went on vacation together? She adored you so much." Do not tell people not to cry or that they will get over it. Crying is a normal part of the grieving process. And, as most people who have been bereaved will tell you, you never "get over" a loss, you only get used to it.

Spend anywhere from a few moments to ten minutes with the mourners. There will be others who also want to speak with them and you can always come back. If you are the only visitor, then, of course, spend as much time as you wish.

PARTICIPATE IN THE SERVICE. If a prayer service is conducted during your call, participate to the extent you can. If you do not know the service, sit or stand respectfully while it is in progress. If the rabbi or leader asks for stories about the deceased, do not hesitate to share one, even if it is somewhat humorous. The entire purpose of *shivah* is to focus on the life of the person who has died and his or her relationship to the family and friends in that room.

IF INVITED, EAT. Take your cue from the mourners. In some homes, no food will be offered, nor should you expect to eat anything. In others, especially after the funeral, food may be offered. Be sure that the mourners have already eaten the meal of condolence before you approach the table. When attending a morning *minyan*, you will likely be invited to partake of a small breakfast. After evening *minyan*, coffee and cake may or may not be served. In any case, should you be invited to eat, be moderate in your consumption. Normally, guests are not expected to eat meals with the family during the *shivah*.

TALK TO YOUR FRIENDS. Inevitably, you will encounter other friends and acquaintances at a house of mourning. Your natural instinct will be to ask about them, to share the latest joke, to *shmooze* about sports or politics. You may be standing with a plate of food and a drink, and if you did not know better, it would feel like a party. But the purpose of the *shivah* is to comfort the mourners. You are in the home to be a member of the communal *minyan*. The appropriate topic of conversation is the deceased. Reminisce about his or her relationship to the mourners and to you. Of course, human nature being what it is, we tend to fall into our normal modes of social communication. This is not necessarily bad; however, you should be careful to avoid raucous humor, tasteless jokes, loud talk, and gossip.

DO NOT STAY TOO LONG. A *shivah* visit should be no more than an hour. If a service is held, come a few minutes before and stay a few after. Mourners uniformly report how exhausted they are by the *shivah* experience; do not overstay your welcome.

SAY GOOD-BYE. When you are ready to leave, you may want to wish the bereaved good health and strength, long life, and other blessings. The formal farewell to a mourner is the same Hebrew phrase offered at the gravesite and in the synagogue on Friday evening:

May God comfort you *HaMakom y'nachem etkhem*

among the other *b'tokh sh'ar*

mourners *a'vaylay*

of Zion and Jerusalem. *Tzion v'Y'rushalayim*

HaMakom is a name of God that literally means “the Place,” referring to God’s omnipresent nature, including at the life-cycle events from birth to death. It is only God who can grant the mourner lasting comfort. The comforter comes to remind the mourners that the Divine powers of the universe will enable them to heal and go on with a meaningful life. Ultimate consolation comes only from the omnipresent God.

In another spelling, *B'tokh sha'ar* literally means “in the midst of the gate” and refers to the special gate for mourners within the walls of the Temple in Jerusalem. When you entered the Temple Mount through that gate, you were literally *b'tokh sh'ar*, in the midst of the gate of mourners. Personal bereavement is thus seen in the total context of the community.

The great genius of Jewish bereavement is to empower the community to be God’s partner in comforting those who mourn. In making a *shivah* call in an appropriate and traditional way, we are the medium through which God’s comfort can be invoked. In learning the art of coping with dying, we are, in fact, learning an important aspect of the art of Jewish living.

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Birthdays and Yarzheits by Rabbi David Wolpe

HISTORICALLY JEWS DID NOT PUT MUCH STOCK in birthdays. For most of our ancestors, birthdays were not a grand day to be marked and celebrated. But the date of death –that was not to be forgotten. A *yarzheit* (as the day came to be called in the Middle Ages) was a solemnly observed occasion.

In modern America we consider one's date of birth significant, but we tend to neglect the anniversary of a death. Perhaps the difference is attributable to Judaism's interest in evaluating the sum of a life, for a life cannot be assessed until its end. A birthday says only that one lives, not what one has accomplished. A *yarzheit* recalls not just the years but the content of the life.

Years ago my father told me that the saddest person in the Bible is Methuselah, because all the Bible tells us is that he lived 969 years and had children. Imagine – all those years and not one word about what he taught his children, not one accomplishment worth recording.

What matters is not when you come into this world but what you do while you are here.

Wolpe, Rabbi David. [Floating Takes Faith: Ancient Wisdom For A Modern World.](#) Springfield: Behrman House, 2004.

Why Stones Instead of Flowers?

David J. Wolpe

The final scene in the movie *Schindler's List* is puzzling. Survivors and their cinematic offspring file by the grave of Oskar Schindler. With solemn ceremony, they place stones on the grave. Why should they leave stones rather than flowers? From where does this strange custom come?

The practice of burying the dead with flowers is almost as old as humanity. Even in prehistoric caves some burial sites have been found with evidence that flowers were used in interment. But Jewish authorities have often objected to bringing flowers to the grave. There are scattered talmudic mentions of spices and twigs used burial in (Berakhot 43a, Betzah 6a). Yet the prevailing view was that bringing flowers smacks of a pagan custom.

That is why today one rarely sees flowers on the graves in traditional Jewish cemeteries. Instead there are stones, small and large, piled without pattern on the grave, as though a community were being haphazardly built. Walking in the military cemetery of Jerusalem, for example, one can see heaps of stones on the graves of fallen soldiers, like small fortresses.

For most of us, stones conjure a harsh image. It does not seem the appropriate memorial for one who has died. But stones have a special character in Judaism. In the Bible, an altar is no more than a pile of stones, but it is on an altar that one offers to God. The stone upon which Abraham takes his son to be sacrificed is called Even Hashityah, the foundation stone of the world. The most sacred shrine in Judaism, after all, is a pile of stones – the wall of the Second Temple.

In the words of the popular Israeli song, “There are men with hearts of stone, and stones with the hearts of men.”

So why place stones on the grave? The explanations vary, from the superstitious to the poignant.

The superstitious rationale for stones is that they keep the soul down. There is a belief, with roots in the Talmud, that souls continue to dwell for a while in the graves in which they are placed. The grave, called a *heit olam* (a permanent home), was thought to retain some aspect of the departed soul.

Stones are more than a marker of one's visit; they are the means by which the living help the dead to “stay put.” Even souls that were benign in life can, in the folk imagination, can take on a certain terror in death. The “barrier” on the grave prevents the kind of haunting that formed such an important part of East European Jewish lore. The stories of I.B. Singer and the plays of the Yiddish theater are rich in the mythology of East European Jewry: souls that return, for whatever reason, to the world of the living. One explanation for placing stones on the grave is to insure that souls remain where they belong.

All the explanations have one thing in common – the sense of solidity that stones give. Flowers are a good metaphor for life. Life withers; it fades like a flower. As Isaiah says, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty like the flower of the field; grass withers and flowers fade” (Isaiah 40:6-7). For that reason, flowers are an apt symbol of passing.

But the memory is supposed to be lasting. While flowers may be a good metaphor for the brevity of life, stones seem better suited to the permanence of memory. Stones do not die.

A beautiful answer takes its cue from the inscription on many gravestones. The Hebrew abbreviation *taf, nun, tsadi, bet, hey* stands for “*teheye nishmato tsurah b’tsrer ha-Chayyim*,” a phrase usually translated “May his soul be bound up in the bonds of eternal life.”

Yet *tsror* in Hebrew means a pebble. In ancient times, shepherds needed a system to keep track of their flocks. On some days, they would go out to pasture with a flock of thirty; on others, a flock of ten. Memory was an unreliable way of keeping tabs on the number of the flock. As a result, the shepherd would carry a sling over his shoulder, and in it he would keep the number of pebbles that corresponded to the number in his flock. That way he could at all times have an accurate daily count.

When we place stones on the grave and inscribe the motto above on the stone, we are asking God to keep the departed’s soul in His sling. Among all the souls whom God has to watch over, we wish to add the name – the “pebble” – of the soul of our departed.

There is something suiting the antiquity and solidity of Judaism in the symbol of a stone. In moments when we are faced with the fragility of life, Judaism reminds us that there is a permanence amidst the pain. While other things fade, stones and souls endure.

Nuland, Sherwin. [Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning](#). New York: Schocken Books, 1995.

Tears by Rabbi David Wolpe

Even when the gates of heaven are closed to prayer, they are open to tears.

RABBI ELEAZAR BEN PEDAT

So much depends upon language that words seem sometimes to represent the whole range of human meanings. Yet we know that action, gesture, ritual, and rite also embody great truths. There are moments when spoken expression simply cannot convey the passion in a soul. When words fail us, when we can neither sing nor speak, there are tears.

One of the gates of childhood through which all pass is the gate of tears. Tears prove essential in the first years of life not only to communicate before we have learned language, but also to signify that which will never yield to utterance. Tears represent another, often deeper, level of expression. "There is a palace," it is recorded in Tikkune Zohar, "that opens only for tears."

To a greater or lesser extent, many of us lose the ability to cry, that spontaneous burst of visible pain that tears represent. To be unable to cry bespeaks a tremendous loss. For expressions of both joy and sorrow, tears well up from a site words cannot reach.

Once again if we turn to the Jewish tradition we discover a stunning depiction of the place of tears in human life. The overflow of human feeling has always given way to weeping. We are hardly the first people that wept, or needed to.

It is evident that tears mattered for our ancestors; in the Bible they are crucial. In an earlier chapter we considered the terrible resentment Esau felt for his brother Jacob. After years of estrangement in which the brothers hated and feared each other, Jacob and Esau are finally reunited. Their encounter is drenched in tears. They fall on each other's neck and weep for all the wasted years twisted by hate and blackened by needless enmity. Jacob and Esau were twins. They were not identical, but they were born within moments of each other, and the total length of their lives was of one piece. Because they were of the same age when each looked into the face of his brother after such a long separation, it must have been like looking into a mirror. Seeing each other after twenty years, both Jacob and Esau must have been struck: each struck by how old the other had grown, and therefore how old he himself had grown.* The agonizing loss of decades laced with hatred was etched in each line of the brothers' faces. How many years had animosity poisoned their lives? All the wasted years found reflection in their eyes. Could any words serve to encompass such a loss? They wept.

Later on, Jacob's son Joseph is sold into slavery by his own brothers. He grows to adulthood in Egypt, far from his family, his land, and his language. Eventually the despised brother becomes the viceroy of Egypt. He encounters his older siblings for the

* I owe this beautiful insight into the Jacob and Esau story to my father. Rabbi Gerald Wolpe.

first time in years when they arrive to buy grain during a famine. Seeing them again, Joseph is overcome. He turns away and weeps. So loud was his weeping, recounts the Bible, that all of Egypt could hear the sobs that poured forth from this man whose power was second only to that of Pharaoh in all the land of Egypt.

Repeatedly in the Bible we see that figures of great strength, figures of faith, pour out their souls in tears. Eloquent though they can be, words are not always sufficient to tap the pathos that lies beneath the surface of the everyday. As God says to a repentant King Hezekiah, “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears” (Isa. 38:4). Sometimes words are the prelude; the only thing that can tell the truth is tears.

In the book of Samuel, David, soon to be king, weeps on the shoulder of his friend Jonathan when he has to flee from the wrath of Jonathan’s father, Saul. In years to come, David will cry even more bitterly at the death of his own son Absalom. David, who was a musician, a poet, a Psalmist, had not lost that bit of himself which enabled him to experience, understand, and express pain. This supremely capable man found the world at times overwhelming. David did not use the cloak of the monarch to hide from himself. Kings too can weep.

These tears are not incidental to the characters of Jacob, Esau, Joseph, and David. They express a surfeit of pain and demonstrate a readiness to pour out sufferings in a medium that can be deeper than words. Tears are a reflection of the fullness of feeling, which overflows the bounds of normal speech.

Of course, the need to weep did not end in the Bible. We learn from the Talmud that each year the High Priest, the day before he was to enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple to pray for the people, would spend the evening with the elders of Israel. They would remind him of the responsibilities he bore for all the people. The High Priest would weep, and the elders would cry with him. If he could not weep, he was not worthy.

That the High Priest is expected to cry shows how far Judaism is from the assumption that crying is unmanly, or simply inconsequential. Tears are both a release and a reflection of the essential soundness of the personality. Worry and sorrow should overflow; one of the names given for a cemetery in the Talmud is a “field of tears.” To be unable to weep is an indication of weakness, not sturdiness; evidence of fear, not of faith. The Jewish tradition well understands the wisdom of the poet Dante, who, in his *Inferno*, made the inability to cry one of the punishments of the damned.

That torture is one that many share. Crying makes us feel lost. It can be difficult, if not impossible, to crack the reserve inside that shields our tears. Something must part to leave a pathway open through which the tears can flow, and there is always the fear that when we open something inside it will remain exposed, easily wounded. Weeping seems such an admission—that we cannot handle the world, that we are children inside, that we are less than we ought to be. It seems as if the cry is a shortcoming, and if we were better, we could navigate this world with strength and

continual calm. Then we turn again to the Bible and discover that even in the character of its greatest hero, its most powerful personality, there is a cry at the center of the soul.

The Cry of Moses

In exploring problems that Moses had with words and with speech, we noted that his life begins with a cry. The Bible informs us of this in an awkward and uncharacteristic way. We read: “The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it . . . (Exod. 2:5, 6).

Curiously, the Bible speaks of Pharaoh’s daughter seeing, not hearing, Moses’ cry. The explanation for this given by some commentators is that Moses did not cry aloud. His cry was of the deepest kind—silent. It was *azur mimamaake halev*—stopped up in the depths of his heart, and all the sadness and terror he felt was reflected on his face. The expression on Moses’ face, the eloquence of his agony, the refusal to cry aloud, moved Pharaoh’s daughter so much that she adopted the child and brought him up in Pharaoh’s palace.

According to this view, the reason Moses could not cry aloud was that it was not safe. Moses could not behave normally; children were under a decree of death, and he was surrounded by danger. Had he been discovered he would, as a Hebrew child, have been killed. His cry had to be curbed, his tears restrained, his voice remain low. To survive even as an infant, Moses could not cry like a child.

This is the understanding of tears that suggests they are withheld because of a sense of danger. In expressing our feelings we are too vulnerable, not in the physical sense of a Moses, but in a spiritual and emotional sense. The admission of tears is dangerous.

That is the explanation of one commentator of this story. But there is a midrash that teaches the precise opposite. It is true that Moses was restraining his cries. How then, muses the midrash, was it that Pharaoh’s daughter spotted the basket? There must have been some sound. Surely more than pure coincidence drew her to the child. As much as Moses tried to restrain his cry, it must have been possible for Pharaoh’s daughter to hear him, or he would have remained abandoned. The midrashist imagines that an angel was sent from heaven to save Moses; he gently struck the baby so that Moses cried. Pharaoh’s daughter heard, and rescued him.

This midrash teaches something else about tears. They save as often as they endanger, and at times it is the fear of crying itself, the tight rein we put on our own heart and guts, that risks hurting us. Strange as it may sound, God sent an angel not to dry Moses’ tears, but to encourage them. Weeping was not the danger. The peril lay in being unable to weep.

Hidden in the story of Moses is one more stirring comment on the potency of tears. Surely part of the veneration accorded Moses in the Jewish tradition is because

he is seen as a figure not only of strength and resolution, but of tenderness and of love. Part of that image is formed at the very moment that he first appears, a child, crying by the riverbank. For the rest of Moses' life, tears play a part. According to the Midrash, when Moses first stepped out to see the burdens of Israel, he wept. Moses felt the pain of his people, and cried for them. Despite his years of separation, of growing up in the palace of royalty and not among the sufferers, Moses has not lost that sense of sadness which marked him from infancy.

At Moses' death the theme of tears recurs. For the Rabbis teach that following his death, not only did the children of Israel cry, but his disciple Joshua, unable to find his teacher and realizing that he was gone forever, began to cry, and then the heavens cried, and the earth cried. Finally, having taken Moses' soul away with a kiss, even God wept. A universe awash in tears is an eloquent tribute to Moses, who lived with a consciousness of the pain that was a part of the beginning of his own life.

These tears of Moses' are the reflection in one man of the core sorrow in the biblical tale. Moses weeps because of the tribulations of those whom he loves, his people. His tears, joined with those of the children of Israel, are instrumental in ending slavery. Why does God liberate the Jews from Egypt? The Bible recounts: "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from bondage rose up to God. God heard their cries . . ." (Exod. 2:23, 24). Tears were the precursor to liberation.

The Weeping God

The Jewish tradition, which has seen its share of difficulties and tragedy, has a still more eloquent and dramatic example of the power of tears. From time to time in the Midrash, the rabbinic legends, God weeps. Often God weeps for the actions of human beings. Sometimes God weeps for the actions God feels constrained to take in this world.

The tales of God's weeping are commonly clustered around the greatest tragedy in Jewish history until modern times, the destruction of the Temple. There were two Temples in Jewish history, and two destructions. The first was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., and the second by the Romans in 70 C.E. Poignantly, the tales we have concerning God's weeping relate to the first Temple, but they were written after the destruction of the second. So the midrash on the biblical book of Lamentations reflects a contemporary pain retrojected onto the past. The Rabbis of the Talmud, standing amid the rubble of their own society, their own hopes, imagine what it must have been like when that first Temple, more than five hundred years before, was razed.

And what they imagine is that when the Temple was destroyed, God cried:

At the moment that the Temple was destroyed, God began to cry, and lament "Woe is Me! What have I done! I dwelt below, on earth, for the sake of Israel and now that they have sinned I have

removed Myself. . . .” At that moment Metatron [a legendary angel] came and fell upon his face before God and said: “Master of the Universe, let me cry, but don’t you cry.”

The angel cannot tolerate seeing God’s sadness. It pains him, and he will do anything—including take the burden upon himself—to prevent God’s shedding tears. But God’s response is equally dramatic:

“If you seek to prevent Me from crying here, I will simply find another place where you cannot approach, and cry there.”

God will not be prevented from weeping. Now the midrash continues with an extraordinary journey. The prophet Jeremiah is summoned before God. Seized with grief at the destruction of the Temple and the death and dispersion of Israel, God is not satisfied that Jeremiah grasps the magnitude of the loss. God speaks as follows to the prophet:

God said to Jeremiah: “I am like a man who has an only child, who prepared a wedding canopy for his child only to have the child die beneath the canopy. Don’t you ache for me, and for my child, the people Israel? Go—summon up the souls of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses from their graves. They knew how to cry.”

God’s child is the people, and the wedding canopy is the Temple, under which the people are dying. In this tremendously graphic image, we appreciate the force of God’s anguish. Seeking the pity of human beings, God asks particularly for their tears. Jeremiah is rebuked in this passage because he does not feel enough pain for the suffering of God! Agonized, God is searching for the sympathy of human beings. In the process, God proposes an interesting criterion for a Jewish leader, a criterion distinguishing the greatest of them: a true leader must know how to cry.

The midrash continues: Jeremiah calls up the souls of the patriarchs. He pretends that he does not know why they are being summoned, for he is frightened of being reproached. After all, he was the leader of the generation. Why did he not prevent the people’s sin, which resulted in such a wrenching catastrophe? Jeremiah’s sense of failure weighs heavy on him, and he feels overshadowed by the great figures who preceded him. Finally, however, he gathers together Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the patriarchs. Then he proceeds to awaken Moses:

Upon arising and being told of the tragedy that had befallen his people, Moses wailed and cried until he reached the patriarchs. Immediately they tore their clothing [a sign of mourning], placed their hands upon their heads and began wailing and weeping as they journeyed from one end of the conquered city to the other, until they reached the gates of the destroyed Temple. Immediately upon seeing them God mourned and wept and lamented “Woe to the King who triumphs in His youth and fails in His old age.”

The patriarchs share God's pain. They march together through the streets crying and wailing for the destruction wreaked upon the land and the people. God, seeing the patriarchs and recalling the earlier days of Israel when things were better, when the people were young and devoted, mourns and cries out, "Woe to the King who triumphs in His youth and fails in His old age." God recalls the triumphs of an earlier generation, the triumphs of liberation from Egypt, and of the initial revelation at Sinai. Years have passed, God is older, and the people are destroyed and dispersed. The only possible response to that is to cry: even as an "old King," God turns to the earliest expression of grief—weeping. While it is true that the Rabbis do not intend this to be literally understood—God does not "age" and to speak of God's crying is a poetic vision, not a verity—the force of tears is so great in life that the Rabbis ascribe them even to God. A God who loves, who understands, cannot be a complete stranger to the tears with which we human beings are endowed to express our joy, our frustration, and at times our devastation.

Tears play such an important role in the Bible and the Jewish tradition in part because of historical suffering. The touchstone of catastrophe, as the midrash above demonstrates, was the destruction of the Temple and the exile. At such a time it seems that the world itself cries out: indeed, the Bible depicts the city of Jerusalem as weeping: "Sorely she weeps in the night, her cheeks wet with tears. There is none to comfort her of all her friends. All her allies have betrayed her; they have become her foes" (Lam. 1:2).

The matriarch Rachel, known in Jewish tradition for bier compassion, is recalled in a moving passage from the book of Jeremiah as she watches her children exiled from their land: "A cry is heard on the heights, wailing, and bitter tears. Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children who are no more" (Jer. 31:15).

God, hearing Rachel's cry, seeks to reassure her: "Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for . . . they shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your future—declares the Lord: Your children shall return to their country" (Jer. 31:16, 17).

Notwithstanding tragedy, our need to weep is more elemental than the vagaries and cruelties of history. Judaism reflects the truth of human life. So long as we do not deaden our souls, we each have a cry wrapped up inside of ourselves, a cry that cannot be completely erased. Our first articulation, as with Moses in the biblical tale, is a cry. The rabbinic tradition teaches that the first cry of the child is not accidental. In the journey from eternity to earth, the child has lost a world of perfection. Suddenly introduced into this temporal and difficult world, who would not cry? Indeed, in some Jewish mystical circles, weeping was seen as part of a way to communicate with the Divine. The practice of crying is tied to ascent toward God. Tears can reacquaint the yearning soul with its Maker.

The inability to cry, to pour out pain, is a grotesque result of a misshaped idea of adulthood. "The young man," wrote the philosopher Santayana, "who will not cry is a

savage; the old man who cannot laugh is a fool.” Adulthood should express the full range of human sentiment, not some narrowed parody of sensitivity. We must be able to laugh and to cry. When life is absurd, or comical, or merry, when the world flashes its brittle lightness, we laugh. When pain knots our throats, when the world presents its brutal face, the Jewish tradition counsels that we imitate God. That we weep.

There are times when tears are one step beyond words on the path to God. Commenting on a biblical passage commanding sacrifices, the Midrash imagines Israel looking up at the heavens and telling God they are too poor to offer sacrifices in expiation for sin. God responds to Israel, “I long for your words. Speak words of Torah I will pardon you.” In response, Israel proclaims that its condition is so desperate that they do not even have words of Torah. “Then pray,” says God, “and weep, and I will forgive.”

Tears are important on the path to God, but they are not the ultimate goal. Eventually tears of sadness and sacrifice should give way to something better. Each of us aspires to the day when tears of sorrow will no longer be part of life, an aspiration that is reflected in the promise of the prophet Isaiah that one day “My Lord God will wipe the tears away from all faces” (Isa. 25:8).

That notion is so strong that the Rabbis contend, based on a verse in Jeremiah, that the world will be redeemed through tears. Through the weeping and repentance of humanity, the world will be changed forever. The verse in Jeremiah reads: “They shall come with weeping, and with compassion I shall lead them” (31:9). When the final bliss of the world arrives, in this biblical reassurance, it will be bathed in tears. But they will be changed from tears of remorse to cries of celebration.

Weeping uncovers a tender part of the self, a part that seeks comfort, that hopes for healing. Repeatedly the Jewish tradition insists that tears are but the prelude to happiness. It is important to remember, because characteristically, Judaism refuses to surrender to despair. As the psalmist writes, “They who sow in tears shall reap in joy” (Ps. 126:5). Isaiah prophesies of that magic time when God will wipe the tears away from all faces, “On that day, a song shall be sung” (Isa. 26:1). All tears, one day, will turn to song.

Wolpe, David J. In Speech and in Silence: The Jewish Quest For God. New York: Henry Holt, 1992.

The Bridge of Life: Explaining Death to Children

A little boy once found a bird's nest that contained speckled eggs near his home. Fascinated, he watched it for a long time until he had to take a trip to the city. Upon his return, he rushed to the nest to see the eggs. He was shocked to find that the beautiful eggs were broken. All he saw were empty shells. He wept before his father and cried, "These beautiful eggs are spoiled and broken." "No, my son," answered his father, "they're not spoiled. All you see is the empty shell. The birds have escaped from the eggs, and soon they will be flying around the sky."

*Rabbi Earl Grollman,
in Explaining Death to Children*

WE WANT OUR children to be secure and stable. Yet we know that eventually the reality of death will touch them. When children confront death, their parents have choices to make. How do we explain this tremendous mystery? How much of the truth do we tell, and what words should we use?

Sometimes these questions are confronted first through the death of a pet or by watching death on television or in the movies. Using these opportunities to talk, we can ease the way into a discussion of death.

When death does confront a child, we should have some notion of how children grieve and how we as parents and teachers can help them. Turning to religious teachings, we can explore together with our children the eternal questions: Why did God create death, and what happens to us after we die?

One of the gifts we try to give our children is the gift of stability. Even in our mobile society, parents know how important it is for children to spend as much time as possible in one place. We try to keep our children at one school. We encourage them to make long-lasting friends. Although families will change over time, we attempt to keep our family stable for as long as we can. We want children to trust the world, and frequent change makes people uneasy, even scared.

No matter how hard we try, however, one day children find out that this world has a drastic change in store for all of us. Children discover death. Everyone they care for, everyone they know, will one day die. They will one day die. Nothing is completely stable. No parent can hide the certain end of life. "Every true story," wrote Hemingway, "ends in death."

Death is a terrific mystery to children. But the mystery begins before children are even aware of death itself. Children are fascinated by things that appear and disappear. The game peek-a-boo is the most popular baby game of all time.

Significantly, the original Old English meaning of peek-a-boo is “alive or dead.” Very soon children will learn that when things vanish, they do not always return.

Part of our task as parents is to help children understand death. We want them to know that death is real, and so is the hurt it brings. We also want them to know that the fact of death does not mean that life is not valuable. We need to teach them that adults struggle with this question, too, and we are there to help. Finally, we need to explore with our children the place of God and the possibility that death is not a final end.

HOW DO CHILDREN UNDERSTAND DEATH?

Dear God,

Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?

Jane
(*Children's Letters to God*)

Children's understanding of death varies greatly according to their stage of development. Developmental stage does not always follow chronology; maturation is a product not only of age, but of experience and natural attributes. What follows is generally accepted as the prevailing pattern.

1. *Children Between Two and Five.* At this early stage, the separation between life and death is unclear. Sometimes the dead are seen simply as “less alive” than the living. Many children are drawn to the connection between death and sleep and assume death is a longer, deeper sort of sleep. Death is, then, one more event, dramatic but not clearly final. Children of this age often ask when the deceased will return.

Studies on young children show they have a hard time coming to grips with the finality of death. It is also difficult for them to understand its inevitability. That all people will one day die is not yet an idea that a small child can grasp.

2. *Children Between Five and Nine.* At this age the finality of death is better understood. Children learn that the one who has died will not return. However, they too have a hard time understanding the *inevitability* of death. They believe people die if they get caught in a bad accident or get sick. The realization that everyone dies, no matter how strong or lucky, is incomprehensible. They know that death is the end, but many believe that it is an avoidable end.

3. *Children Ten and Up.* By this age many children can grasp the two great facts about death: that it will come to all and that it is the final end of life. Although these are

hard to fully *comprehend*, most children at this age accept that these things are true. They do not expect a dead person to return. They know that others whom they care for will also die eventually.

Children of all ages may be unclear about what causes death. Often they believe something *they* have done or thought has influenced the person's fate. They may think that the person's badness, or even goodness, caused God to want to "take them back." Like adults, when children are faced with a fact of such enormity, they seek a rational, explainable cause. They have a very hard time with "She simply had a disease, and she died."

One contribution we can make to a child's understanding of death is to make clear that the child did not cause it. Sometimes when a pet dies, children assume that something they did or did not do was responsible. (Of course, this is at times true, but children believe it even without cause.) The same thought process occurs when people die. Children harbor hostile thoughts (as we all do), and when death comes to people at whom children have been angry, they frequently believe it was their own doing. This "magical thinking" is dangerous, and we have to ground it in reality. Bad thoughts do not kill people. Death is part of the design of the world. Our thoughts are not agents of death.

Some children will accept death far more easily than others and understand it better; the tendencies we have sketched out at various developmental stages are not hard and fast. People of all ages have within them bits of these different attitudes. A great deal depends upon life experience. Small children who have been around death – such as those confined for long periods to hospital wards – may have a more developed understanding. Adults who have been shielded from dealing with death may find its inevitability extremely hard to accept.

No matter the age of the child, there are important principles that we should keep in mind when teaching about death.

HOW MUCH OF THE TRUTH DO WE TELL?

One of the great mistakes parents make when confronted with death is to offer children simple explanations that will backfire later. Death is hard – hard to come to terms with, hard to explain. In seeking to make it easier, we sabotage ourselves by setting up future problems. Some common statements we should avoid:

1. *He Is Going on a Long Sleep.* Death is not sleep. A child who is told that death is sleep will spend a lot of time waiting for the person to wake up and return. We are just delaying the inevitable realization and causing them anxious expectation in the meantime. Additionally, after hearing such an explanation, many children may become frightened of going to sleep themselves. They fear they will not wake up, just as the person who has died has not woken up. When someone is dying, or has died, we should not hesitate to use the words *death* and *dying*.

The kind of language we use makes a difference. The phrase *passed away* does not mean anything concrete to children. Children deserve to be told the truth in clear, straight-forward terms.

2. *He Was Such a Good Person That God Called Him Back.*

Dear God,

Do good people have to die young? I heard my mommy say that. I am not always good.

Yours truly,
Barbara
(Children's Letters to God)

No one truly understands why people die when they do. One thing adults do know, however, is that whether you die young or old seems to have no relationship to your goodness; villains die young and so do heroes. And both sometimes live long lives.

When we tell our children that someone died young because he was good, we are frightening them out of goodness. Who wants to strive to be good so that God can take you while you are young? We can say that the one who has died *was* a good person, and we are sure that God will cherish him—but *not* that he died *because* he was good.

3. *It's Okay – You'll Get Over It.* The grief of children is real, even if it is not always expressed. It is not okay—someone the child loves is gone forever. To tell them they will “get over it” is not helpful at the time and may not even be true. The death of a sibling or a parent can permanently mark a person's life. We should honor a child's grief by recognizing how much has changed, just as we do for adults who are mourning a loss.

The novelist George Eliot wrote that “childhood is comforted by no memories of outlived sorrow” – children are too young to know that even deep grief will lessen over time. The only way to find that out is to experience it. To demand of a child that he “get over it” will not speed the process. Indeed, it may hamper the process by alienating you from your child, as he may discover that his grief is not taken seriously.

Children often suffer in silence. To be quiet is not to be fine. At times children keep their fears to themselves because they do not feel safe. Children may be silent because they do not have the ability to express their fears. And often children are silent for vague reasons – reasons they cannot account for themselves. We should draw them out gently and not assume everything is okay because there is no evident fuss. Helping your child deal with death is an opportunity for the two of you to get to know each other in a different and deep way.

WHEN DEATH FIRST TOUCHES THE CHILD'S WORLD

Some children are introduced to death by the death of a pet. In some ways this is a great advantage. Painful though it is, the death of a pet provides parents and teachers with the opportunity to discuss issues that will be far more emotionally charged later on, when we are dealing with human mortality.

Exercise 1 – The Death of a Pet. For those children who do lose a pet, a funeral can help explore many of the issues around death. The funeral can consist of a blessing, burial (if appropriate), and discussion of the memories the child has of his pet. It is a good setting to introduce God's place in the cycle of life and death.

Be sure to ask your child before having a funeral. Some children do not take the death of their pet as hard as parents sometimes expect. If they are deeply saddened, however, be sure to wait a while before discussing replacing the pet.

The first exposure to death in most cases is not with a pet, however, or with a real human being – it is with a television image. Death is a constant in the media. The problem is that television offers death without pain, without consequences, and usually without even the depiction of grief

Seeing death in movies or on television does not necessarily prepare children for death in their own world. In fact, it may do harm, by suggesting that death is neat, artificial, and easy. Parents can, however, seek to use television just as they do the death of a pet: to open a discussion of death. When we watch television with our children and we see people die, we should not let it pass. Find out how they react to it and talk about how real death is different from how it appears on television or in the movies.

HOW DO CHILDREN GRIEVE?

Children grieve the same way adults do, which is to say in every possible way. Some children seem completely untouched by death, and others are plunged into deep depression.

I remember working in a camp with a nine-year-old child whose mother had died. One week after the funeral, the child returned to camp to complete the summer session. Her father told me that she had expressed no grief over her mother's death.

For weeks afterward, she followed the same pattern. The efforts of her counselors and the camp psychologist came to nothing. She acted as though everything was fine. Nothing would get her to talk about her mother's death.

One night, her counselor heard her sobbing. Throughout the night and most of the next day she cried. The internal dam had burst. With time and the patient help of concerned adults, the child's grief gradually emerged.

Our task as adults is to make it possible for that sadness to be released. Just because some children do not mourn does not mean they cannot. Some children do not know how to express their grief. To encourage them without forcing their pace becomes part of our job.

Children, especially younger children, show grief in very different sorts of ways. Sometimes they withdraw, at other times they daydream. Some children become nervous. There is no set behavior that all follow.

If children are unable to talk about their grief, it can be helpful to assure them that not only can they speak to you, they can also speak to God. God listens and understands. There may be feelings or ideas they would be reluctant to share with any other human being. It may feel safer to share them with God.

If they feel anger toward God, that is all right to express as well. Likewise, if you feel anger toward God for what has happened, you can express that to your children.

Children should learn early on that properly expressed anger will not destroy a healthy relationship. Parents and children cannot coexist without occasionally being angry with each other. The same is true for our attitude toward God. At times, particularly when one we love has died, we will be angry with God and perplexed over God's stewardship of the world. There is no reason children should not express that anger, together with you or alone.

The Bible provides many precedents for anger with God. Abraham yells at God when God plans to destroy the city of Sodom. Jeremiah and Job scream out to God over injustice in the world. And in the book of Judges, Gideon puts it simply: "If God is with us, why has all this happened to us?" (Judg. 6:13).

Even when children and adults feel the same things, a child's grief may take forms quite different from those of adults. Anthropologist Myra Bluebond-Langer writes: "Just as children can have the same concept of death as adults but express it differently, so too they can have the same feelings but show them differently. This problem came out quite clearly in the case of certain siblings of terminally ill children. Mothers became disturbed when the siblings responded to news of death with expressions of, 'Good, now I can have all his toys.' Later it came to be realized that this was the siblings' way of expressing anger with the deceased for leaving them (a feeling shared by the parents), of holding on to a part of the deceased (a desire of the parents as well), and also of expressing all the long-suppressed hurt at being neglected by the parent (a guilt felt by the parents)."

· "Meanings of Death to Children," in Feifel, Herman, ed. *New Meanings of Death* (McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 63.

The difference is not necessarily in the emotion, but in the expression. Sometimes we must decode our children's words.

In his writings on grief and loss in childhood, John Bowlby writes that children experience three essential stages of grief: protest, despair, and hope. Each stage takes time. The protest can be directed against God, the person who died, or other adults who remain. The despair is inevitable and perhaps the hardest for adults to confront. To see a child in depression or despair is agonizing.

The way out is to help that same child understand that life can be rebuilt. The loss will always be there, and memory is important. We do not want to teach our children forgetfulness, but we want them to have healing. We and God will remember. Hope begins when the child begins to build a life without the person who has died. Life is basically good, and we must go on.

HOW DO WE HELP OUR CHILDREN GRIEVE?

The Jewish tradition offers advice concerning the way people grieve and recover from loss. The process begins when we first hear that the person has died. A blessing is recited – *Baruch Dayan HaEmet* (“Blessed be the righteous judge”) – that affirms that although we are about to undergo a process of questioning and anger, at the deepest level we believe in the righteousness of God, whose decrees govern this bewildering world.

Judaism then proceeds to rituals of mourning and grieving that begin in intense grief and gradually help the mourner readjust to the world. At each stage we must ask what part these rituals can play in helping children.

Should children attend funerals of those close to them who have died? The consensus among child psychologists is that children from about age seven onward should be encouraged – but never forced – to attend the funeral. There they will understand how final the death is and have a chance to say good-bye. We understand how important that is for adults. It is important for children as well.

At funerals, children also begin to grasp the complex intertwining of life, faith, and death. They see the clergy presiding and have a sense that this is a realm in which religion has something to say. They see adults grieving and learn that the pain they experience is shared by others. Many children I have spoken to have had the same experience that I had in my own life – the first time I saw adults I knew cry was at a funeral. It made a profound impression on me. It showed the legitimacy of tears and the depth of their own sense of loss.

In the Jewish tradition, the funeral ends at graveside when the family and friends shovel dirt into the grave of the deceased. This is considered a great mitzvah, because it is the last service one can render. Since it is a service done for the one who has died, it is done without expectation of reward. The sound of dirt hitting a wooden coffin has a

finality that emphasizes what has truly happened. Children too can participate in this final act of service.

After the funeral, there is a week of shiva (literally, “seven”). For one week the house is filled with visitors who provide food and companionship to the bereaved. For the difficult days following death, the house will be filled with guests, family and friends who listen and reminisce.

Once again, God is present in the activities of human beings. Comfort comes through friends. Healing is the work of human hands, but it is the Divine working through human hands. When people pray together, God works through community to console the mourners. Those who grieve are supported in taking the first steps back to wholeness.

The mourning prayer, the kaddish, is recited by children who have lost their parents. The kaddish is recited in a minyan, a minimum of ten people. The child understands that God’s presence does not depart when the funeral or the week of shiva ends. God is always present in a community that strengthens those in mourning and consolation.

Children need to be included in healing, just as they are unavoidably included in feeling the pain. Indeed, there are times when the pain is primarily the child’s, and adults have to explain to children something far more difficult than death in general – why the child himself is dying.

HOW DO WE TALK ABOUT DEATH TO A CHILD WHO IS DYING?

Seeing one’s child in pain, and knowing that we are helpless, is extraordinarily difficult. Recognizing that we cannot protect children from all the perils of the world is inexpressibly painful for parents. At times it blocks our ability to give them what we can give when they are in trouble.

When children are terminally ill they are in desperate need not only of their parents’ love, but of their parents’ wisdom. Adults are the ones who have to help create some sense of meaning and purpose.

The first lesson is to try not to be afraid of what you and your child will be feeling. Do not treat them as though they are now so fragile that they have become china dolls and not living children. Be prepared to accept the power of their fears and of your own response.

When fear of death confronts a child, he is left with few resources in his own training to deal with it. Adults who face death have a lifetime of reflection to draw upon, and even then it is very difficult.

I have asked children to draw pictures of death. Sometimes the pictures are hopeful, filled with angels’ wings and welcoming clouds. Usually, as one would expect,

the images are foreboding. Almost always there is another being involved – an angel, a devil, a parent, a religious figure, or God. Sometimes the figure is there to comfort. Often the figure is there to trigger death. It seems that most children conceive of death as something *done* to people. Children who are dying often wish to know who was responsible for doing this to them.

It falls on us to seek to explain that not everything that is tragic is a cause for blame. We can weep for what is happening, but there is no one on earth to point to. We know that God has made the world in which such things happen, and surely the child's (and the parents') anger against God is to be expected and honored.

Anger is but one stage of the grieving process. Psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has divided the emotions of those who are dying into five stages: denial and isolation; anger; bargaining ("If I am good, maybe God will give me more time"); depression; and acceptance. These emotions can be part of the grieving process as well.

It is our task to guide a child past anger to acceptance and to an expression of love for what matters.

One fear that we must address is the fear of being alone and abandoned. Some children are quite literal in this fear; to be put into the ground seems a terrible fate, and they worry they will be cold and alone.

Here is where it helps to begin to draw a distinction between their body, which is dying, and the soul. To do that we must begin to bring God into the picture as more than an object of anger. God can be a partner and comforter in times of need.

But in order to help that process we must discuss with our children the most mysterious aspects of God and death:

First, why did God create death, and what becomes of us after we die?

WHY DID GOD CREATE DEATH?

God designed the world so that every living thing dies. We cannot know for sure why it is that God brought death into the world, but we can speculate together with our children.

According to the Bible, after each day of creation, God sees that the world is "good." On the sixth day, after creating human beings, God sees that the world is "very good." In the Talmud, Rabbi Meir makes a strange comment on this phrase. He says "very good refers to death."

One way of understanding Rabbi Meir's comment is to say that value in this world is a result of knowing that everything is temporary. Could we love so deeply if we had an eternity to do it? Would we cherish things with as much devotion if we could do

so next month, next year, next century – forever? Would we achieve anything if we knew we had eternity to complete any task?

One result of death is to urge us to cherish the beauty of what we have for as long as it lasts. In this sense, death makes the world “very good” by reminding us of its value.

This is a lesson that has to be taught delicately. Children should not live with the constant apprehension that what they love is about to be taken away. We need to give them the sense of stability that is the beginning of trust in the world. But the question of death does arise, and we should note that for all its pain, it can also help us appreciate what we have. To teach ourselves and our children not to take things for granted is also an important task, one that a discussion of death can help advance.

God made the world with the fall always following summer, a world in which things pass away. Death is certain, and we can only move the margins closer or farther. We are sometimes masters of when we die. We can cause or delay death. But that we die is God’s choice.

God’s place in death does not end with death itself. For the question that each person asks from childhood remains vivid throughout our lives: What becomes of us after we die? Did God create another world?

WHAT HAPPENS TO US AFTER WE DIE?

The belief that there is another world from which we come, and to which we return, is practically as old as humanity. Every religious tradition is preoccupied with the question of what happens to people when they die. As early as the Bible, the question is clear. “If a man dies, shall he live again?” (Job 14:12).

The classic Jewish summary on issues of death and the afterlife, *Gesher Hachayim* (The Bridge of Life), opens with an intriguing analogy. It asks the reader to imagine twins lying together in the womb. Everything they need is provided. One of them believes “irrationally” that there is a world beyond the womb. The other is convinced such beliefs are nonsense. The first tells of a world where people walk upright, where there are mountains and oceans, a sky filled with stars. The other can barely contain his contempt for such foolish ideas.

Suddenly, “the believer” is forced through the birth Canal. All the fetus knew is gone. Imagine, asks the author, how the fetus left behind must view this – that a great catastrophe has just happened to his companion. Outside the womb, however, the parents are rejoicing. For what the remaining brother left behind in the womb has just witnessed is not death, but birth. This is a classic view of the afterlife – it is a birth into a world that we on earth cannot begin to imagine.

That is why an old rabbinic teaching says that birth and death can be thought of like the launching of a ship. People are apprehensive when a ship leaves, for they do not know what storms and adventures may befall it. When it docks back on shore,

everyone celebrates. We do the reverse with people – we celebrate birth, although not knowing what life will hold, and we mourn over death. But death is really the return, the docking on shore.

Exercise 2 – The Miracle of Rebirth. This exercise takes a little searching but is well worth it. You are searching for a caterpillar. When you find one, take it on its original stick or branch and place it in a large glass jar with plenty of holes in the lid. Put leaves in and a few drops of water through the holes in the lid. With time and luck, you will be able to see the process of spinning a cocoon and watching a butterfly emerge. It is a dramatic demonstration of the idea of rebirth in another form.

WHAT IS IT LIKE IN THE WORLD TO COME?

Although filled with examples of belief in an afterlife, Judaism is fairly reserved about the details of life after death. It affirms an afterlife but tries not to get lost in speculation about what the afterlife is like. For Judaism asks us still to concentrate on this life. The tradition fears we will be so caught up in bliss to come, we will miss what is under our feet. Even though there is another world, this one is good, and this is where we live now.

The mitzvot are at the center of Judaism – because the most important thing is how we treat other human beings now, while we are alive, while we are certain of our world and our obligations in it. That is probably why the Bible is very sparing in mention of life after death. It is too easy to get caught up in hope for another world and neglect the distress that still exists in this world.

When children ask about an afterlife, we can affirm that eternity is real, but our task is to cherish and cling to this life. To avow life after death is an affirmation of a loving God who will not abandon us, even after we die.

When we begin to describe the afterlife, however, we run into all sorts of difficulties. In *Letters from Earth*, Mark Twain wrote that people imagine when they go to heaven they will lie on green fields and listen to harp music. They would not want to do that for five minutes here on earth, wrote Twain, yet they believe they will be eternally happy doing it in heaven!

Twain's joke points up part of the absurdity of describing the world to come. The simple truth is that another world is very hard for any of us to imagine fully. When we try to envision another world, we always make it up out of bits of this one: light, clouds, wings, comfort. We cannot really know.

Even more than uncertainty about details, we cannot know for sure if there is another world. Yet sometimes the question is urgent. Children are not always satisfied with "We simply do not know." When I have spoken with children who were facing death, either for themselves or in their families, their need is immediate. They cannot take comfort in philosophical abstractions. They need to know *now*.

What shall a parent do who has doubts or who simply does not believe? I think we must keep the door open. If God can make human beings out of nothing, why should God not be able to preserve us after our bodies have disintegrated? If God is a God of love, would God ever desert us?

Obviously to discuss this with a child is far easier if we believe in an afterlife. Then we can tell the children that we have honest faith that this world is not all there is. But whatever our private convictions, we should seek to leave the door open for the child to develop his or her own beliefs.

IS THERE A HEAVEN AND A HELL?

When children ask about the afterlife, we can expect that sooner or later the conversation will come around to heaven and hell. Graphic images of punishment capture childhood imaginations. They wonder what sort of world bad people go to and imagine equally the pleasures of good people.

Most religious traditions, Judaism included, believe that not all people share the same experience after death. In the Talmud, the most renowned of the rabbinic sages, Rabbi Akiva, says that the maximum punishment for anyone after death is twelve months. Other rabbis say that places of punishment and reward lie beside each other – that is, only one step separates one deserving of punishment from one deserving of reward – the step of repentance for wrongdoing. As always, we have to listen to what is under the child's question "Is there a heaven and hell?" can be another way to ask "Is there justice?" If the world's cruelest murderer and kindest person have the same fate after death, then truly there is no justice. Should not a murderer have a different fate from his victims?

Medieval maps prepared by the church often showed where hell was located geographically. You could literally point to hell on the map. Modern religious traditions rarely defend the actual physical existence of places of punishment. Yet the basic idea behind such religious notions – that there is ultimately justice, if not in this world, then in the next – remains.

When children ask about heaven and hell we can affirm that God, who loves, is also just. We believe that after death God weighs our lives and, in some way we do not understand, decrees that our lives influence our fate.

It is important to calm fears if the child is asking because he or she believes that some action will lead to punishment. Asking about hell can be a product of guilt over some action. This is the time to remind our children of the concepts of repentance and forgiveness. That is God's first desire on our behalf. To repair our misdeeds is better than to hide them or brood over them. Children should understand that to do wrong is inevitable; as Ecclesiastes puts it, "There is no one so righteous that he does only good and never sins" (Eccles. 7:20). The key is not to be sinless, but to repent.

Heaven and hell need to be stripped of their literal meanings and replaced with religious meaning. They are not places; they are affirmations of God's ultimate justice.

In Hebrew the terms are *Gehinnom* and *Gan Eden*. Both form part of *Olam Haba*, the world to come. The name *Gehinnom* comes from a valley in Israel where pagan religions used to practice human sacrifice. So *Gehinnom* means a place where people are unspeakably cruel to one another. *Gan Eden*, from the Adam and Eve story, is a place that God has prepared. Where God is disregarded and people are cruel is hell. Where God prevails and there is peace is Eden, and we all pray that after death we may find ourselves in such a place. One rabbinic saying teaches, "It is not that the sages are in paradise, but that paradise is in the sages." For now we seek to create a paradise here, and we trust that God's justice and God's mercy will take care of us after death.

Exercise 3 – If You Were God. How would you design the world if you were God? Would you include death? Would you give people the possibility to be evil? This is an exercise that is interesting to try at any age. As a help to stimulate discussion, you might look at Aryeh Kaplan's *If You Were God* (NCSY, New York, 1983).

THE AFFIRMATIONS OF LIFE AND DEATH

The basic affirmations that we want to teach our children are that life is good and worth living even in the face of tragedy; that God cares for our pain, even though we may not always understand God's actions; that we need to support and protect one another in times of loss; that God wishes us to be good and to seek to correct ourselves when we are not good; that God preserves the souls of those who have died.

Children learn early that nature has a cycle. Like the egg mentioned in the opening story of this chapter, life changes and renews itself. Children see the dead leaves of one season provide for the tree to grow the new leaves of another. All of death recycles in a renewed path to life.

Those who have died live on in many ways. They live on in our hearts as we remember them. The philosopher Voltaire said, "God gave us memories so that we might have roses in December." Even when the leaves have fallen, we can remember their beauty. To remind our children of those whom we have lost is a sacred duty.

Religion helps children cope with loss. It encourages memory, and gives us rituals to express grief that sometimes lies too deep for words.

"Childhood is the Kingdom where nobody dies," wrote poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. Sadly, no child can stay in that kingdom for too long. There is no way to remove the pain of death. Death haunts all of life, and we cannot shield our children from its reality. The best we can give in response is our honesty, our compassion, our love, and our faith.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR CHILDREN

1. What does it mean to die?
2. What do you believe happens to people after they die?
3. Do you remember the first time you thought about death?
4. Why do you suppose God made a world in which people die?
5. How does God help people who are sad when someone they love has died?
6. How can other people help those who are sad when someone they loved has died?

Wolpe, Rabbi David. [Teaching Your Children About God: A Modern Jewish Approach.](#)
New York: HarperPerennial, 1995.