

# **The Jewish Rites of Death and Mourning: An Overview**

## **by Rabbi Debra Orenstein**

### **In memory of Mike Hiller and Ruth Avergon**

Bio: Rabbi Debra Orenstein is editor of the award-winning book series *Lifecycles*, including *Lifecycles 1: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones* and *Lifecycles 2: Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life*. She is a senior fellow of the Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies and a spiritual leader at Makom Ohr Shalom, a synagogue in Los Angeles, California celebrating traditions of Jewish meditation and spirituality. Rabbi Orenstein has taught in the rabbinical, graduate, undergraduate, conversion, adult education, and high school programs at the University of Judaism. A member of the first class at The Jewish Theological Seminary to include women, she is a seventh generation rabbi.

When I was first asked to teach about rites of death and mourning in the Jewish tradition, it called to mind an experience I had as a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. One of the professors gave a class on the subject, “Books Every Rabbi Should Read.” In that lecture, he referred to a pair of books that are often talked about together, two books by an Orthodox rabbi, Maurice Lamm: *The Jewish Way In Love and Marriage* and *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. My professor advised: “*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* is an important book to own and master. *The Jewish Way In Love and Marriage* is a good book, but not as useful.” One of the students asked him why he made this assessment. With a sly smile and a memorable instruction about a young rabbi’s own usefulness, he replied: “Because rarely will someone run up to you and say, “Rabbi! Rabbi! I’m in love. What should I do?””

We can laugh about this in relation to marriage, but in relation to death it is not very funny. People of every faith, tradition and of every level of religious observance turn to tradition at times of death and mourning. We want to know: What do I do now? What is proper? How do I say goodbye? What is respectful? When death disturbs us, inflicting disorder and chaos, ritual helps us to (re)create order. Rites of death provide a structure for restructuring life in the face of death and in the absence of a loved one. When we are

feeling most adrift, the rituals around death, in all their detail, serve as an anchor to community and to history. A protocol directs our behavior and saves us from having to make decisions or invent a way of coping. At their best, the rites help mourners to find meaning, if not always sense, in both life and death.

This article presents an overview of many, but certainly not all, of the basic Jewish mourning practices, from the time of death through the first year of mourning. Along the way, I will offer some explanations of the history and significance of the rites. Jewish ritual around death is a kind of theology in action. Every law, every custom, every recitation sends a message, providing an opportunity for both meaning and healing in the face of death.

### **The Time of Death**

A terminal patient whose death is imminent is referred to as a *goses*. A person in such a state is to be treated with the respect accorded any other human being. The law specifically states that someone on the cusp of death may still own, inherit, and bequeath property. (In other words, don't start divvying up their estate.) Certainly, such a person can, and is encouraged to, repent. A person holds all human rights and privileges until the point of death, which is traditionally defined as cessation of respiration and heartbeat.

Jewish law strikes a balance between choosing life and alleviating suffering. We intervene to save and preserve life, but we also remove artificial supports when they do nothing but preserve suffering. One may not “close the eyes of a dying person” (this is prohibited literally and figuratively), but one may remove a stimulus (such as a rhythmic sound or salt on the tongue) which delays the soul's departure. This balance is reflected in a Talmudic story about a beloved teacher who was dying:

On the day Rabbi was dying, the rabbis announced a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy. Furthermore, they decreed that whoever said that Rabbi died would be stabbed with a sword. Rabbi's handmaid climbed to the roof and prayed, "The angels want Rabbi to join them, and the mortals want Rabbi to remain with them; may it be God's will that the mortals overpower the angels." However, when she saw how much he suffered, she prayed, "May it be the will of the Almighty that the angels overpower the mortals." As the rabbis continued their prayers for mercy, she picked up a pitcher and threw it down from the roof to the ground, where they stood. For a moment they ceased praying, and the soul of Rabbi departed to its eternal rest. –BT *Ketubbot* 104a

The maidservant intervened wisely. She had a measure of mercy and a perspective that Rabbi's students lacked in their grief.

### **Remaining With the Body**

Immediately following a death, the first imperative is to stay with the body until the time of burial. *Shomrim*, guardians, remain with the deceased. The *shomrim* may rotate, but the body should never be left alone.

This is considered very important as a sign of respect. Judaism does not conflate the body with the soul, nor do we posit a rigid Hellenistic division between the two. (Mystics imagine that the soul remains close to the body, hovering over it, as it were, until the burial.) The Rabbis hold that the ultimate self-hood of a person is in their soul, and they also treasure the vessel for that soul—i.e., the body. We do not cast it aside the moment it has outlived its usefulness. Jews therefore frown on routine autopsy, for example, as a form of mutilation. Disturbing the body becomes a requirement, however, in cases where autopsies or organ donation can help to prevent future deaths or improve the health of the living.

Respect is expressed not only by staying with and protecting the body; but also by reciting Psalms for the deceased; closing the eyes and mouth, if they are left open; and refraining from drinking, eating, or smoking in the presence of the body.

Each of these elements has its own rationale. A body that can no longer enjoy food or drink should not be subject to eating and drinking in its presence. Similarly, eyes that cannot see, should not be seen; from a Rabbinic perspective that constitutes an invasion. It's for that same reason that Jews traditionally have a closed casket. Psalms are recited on behalf of the dead, as well as the sick, and they are a prominent part of the funeral liturgy. Much of Jewish liturgy, in general, is taken from Psalms—a book which expresses the full range of human emotions, from gratitude for God's presence to despair over God's seeming absence. It has been said that the Bible generally represents God's word to us, whereas, in the book of Psalms, humans talk to God. Psalms are a proper choice for the time of *shemirah* because of their emotional range and liturgical role.

### **Purification of the Body**

Traditionally, the body is lovingly washed and prepared for burial by members of a *hevra kaddisha*, literally, “holy society.” This work can be difficult and demanding, both physically and emotionally. After death, the body feels heavy—a “dead weight.” Skin and bones are easily torn and broken. The naked, lifeless body could not be more vulnerable. Purifying the body is thus considered to be a loving and intimate act. Words from the Song of Songs are recited in praise of the body. The volunteers who help to prepare it for burial necessarily awaken to the reality of death. They understand, through their work, that death is a great leveler. We will all be this vulnerable one day, and, truth be told, we are all this vulnerable today.

Members of the *hevrah kaddisha* pray on behalf of the person they wash. They protect the dignity of the deceased by keeping the body covered, exposing only the part that is being

washed at any given time. They refrain from unnecessary speech and from turning their backs on the deceased. The body is washed from top down, right side first, and then the left side. Having cleaned the body thoroughly, including under the fingernails, the *hevra kadisha* volunteers do a ritual ablution, pouring water over the body three times and declaring the body pure.

Traditionally, they then dress the deceased in burial shrouds. This shows that we are all equal in death, as no one has a more elaborate or expensive costume than anyone else. Often, the deceased will also be wrapped in a *tallit* (prayer shawl), on which one of the fringes is cut, poignantly symbolizing that s/he is cut off from prayer and community on this plane. Finally, those who have prepared the body pray for the person by name, and, in many communities, ask forgiveness from the deceased if they have committed any offense or indignity.

Washing the body at the end of life is reminiscent of the washing that occurs at the very beginning of life, when the baby emerges from the womb. In the *Hashkiveynu* prayer of the evening liturgy, Jews ask God to “guard our comings out and the goings in for life and for peace, now and forever.” The *hevra kaddisha* acts in imitation of God, guarding our “going out” from life with as much care as the doctors, nurses, and midwives who guard our “coming in.”

### **The Mourner’s Status**

A mourner is technically defined as a sibling, spouse, parent, or child of the deceased. Others, such as grandchildren and close friends, certainly grieve, but they are not obligated to the laws mourning.

Between the time of death and the time of burial, a sibling, spouse, parent, or child is not yet considered a mourner, but rather has the intermediate status of *onen*. Much like the deceased him or herself, the *onen* is betwixt and between until the burial takes place. As a result, very little is expected of the bereaved during this period of *aninut*. If you have been in mourning, you may remember that your mind was foggy, or that

events following the death seemed to happen “in a blur.” Reality, in all likelihood, seemed surreal, and your emotions were anything but stable. For all these reasons, the *onen* is exempt from all social niceties and even from positive (“thou shalt”) commandments, including daily prayer. The *onen* is assumed to be focusing on the mitzvah of caring for the dead, and this one mitzvah can be all-consuming. Some medieval decisors go so far as to say that an *onen* is not allowed to perform positive commandments, unless the *mitzvot* are related to funeral preparations. Today, many authorities believe that exemptions are no longer needed. Funeral arrangements have often been made in advance, and there may be little for the *onen* to do but wait. The performance of positive commandments might be a welcome opportunity to find comfort and to do good in memory of the deceased. Authorities of every generation agree that the *onen* should refrain from wine, meat, and other luxuries, except on a Sabbath or holiday.

Jews bury their dead quickly because of the Biblical injunction in Deuteronomy 21:23 “not to let the body remain all night.” It is considered disrespectful to let the body linger. A speedy burial is also a gift to the *onen*. It is difficult to be in a transitional status, no longer a son in the same way, but still not officially an orphan; without a husband, but not yet a widow. For the sake of both the dead and the living, we seek the closure and finality of putting the body to rest.

### **Funeral**

The funeral service is called *levayat hamet*, or the accompaniment of the dead---a phrase which conveys the intention behind the ritual. *Kevod hamet* (the honor of the dead) demands accompanying a person all the way to the end of this earth-bound journey. While the deceased necessarily remains a central focus, the funeral is at least equally concerned with the living. The community has an obligation to attend the funeral more

for the sake of the mourners than in honor of the deceased. A key commandment is *nihum aveylim*, comforting those in mourning.

### Rending One's Garments

*Keriah* means tearing and originally this referred to rending one's garments at the moment of hearing about a death. This sign of mourning is now generally practiced immediately before the funeral service.

*Keriah* originated as a response to pagan practices in which people would mutilate themselves and tear out their hair upon hearing of the death. So *keriah* represents, by contrast, the containment of grief. At the same time, especially in our contemporary setting, *keriah* is a dramatic and sanctioned expression of anger and anguish. Ripping a shirt can be a release and relief. (In modern settings, a specially designated mourner's lapel ribbon is often torn instead. Many rabbis, myself included, find this less powerful than rending a garment that has been worn in the presence of the deceased.) Mourners tear the fabric as if to say, "My world and my heart are torn apart by this loss." Providing this release, the tradition validates the mourners' feelings, alleviating any guilt they may have about their anger at God.

Children mourning parents rip an area of clothing or a ribbon on their left side, over their hearts, to indicate a heart-felt loss. For other losses, mourners rend on the right side, and a less visible tear may be made. Parents command a greater level of mourning than other loved ones, because they gave us life. (The mourner's prayer is recited for eleven months for a parent, but thirty days for others.) With the loss of a parent, we are also deprived of the opportunity to fulfill the *mitzvah* (commandment) to "honor thy father and mother."

Neither a garment nor a mourning ribbon is torn completely. The mourners leave it attached, if only by a few threads, symbolizing that, as long as memory is alive, the connection between the deceased and the mourner is never fully severed.

### Keriah Liturgy

At the time of *keriah*, mourners recite what are among the most difficult Jewish prayers: “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, the Judge of truth.” Or, in another translation, “the true Judge.” The start of a funeral service is not a moment when most people would laud God’s judgment. Nevertheless, the blessing acknowledges the supremacy of God’s perspective. God alone knows the enormous mysteries hinted at by our awareness of nature and of the human soul. Only God’s perspective includes a Master’s plan, life before birth, and (eternal) life after death. In this sense, God is not just the true Judge, but the only possible judge.

Upon making the tear, the mourner recites words from Job 1:21: “God has given, God has taken. Blessed be the name of God.” These are the words Job uttered, when he learned that he had lost all his livestock, servants, and children on a single tragic day. Job rent his coat, shaved his head, and fell to the ground in grief. Still, he praised God. The mourner does the same. Job’s words don’t seek to comfort or justify; they simply tell a bald truth. The pain of the taking is in direct proportion to the joy bestowed by the giving. Both come from God. We miss those most whom we loved best. When people consider that the only available alternative, in the face of death, is *not* to miss them, most mourners would not want it any other way.

Job, in contrast to his friends, never rationalizes his own suffering. He never claims to like, understand, or find justice in the way the world is ordered. The tradition makes no demand on the mourner to do so, either. Job is a model of hope, comfort, and, most potently, surrender. He comes to realize that if he cannot even comprehend the

why's and wherefore's of God's physical creation ("do you know when the wild goats bring forth, or can you number the months they fulfill?"<sup>1</sup>), then he certainly cannot hope to comprehend the Divine spiritual plan and purpose. "There are things too wonderful—and too awful—for me, which I do not know."<sup>2</sup>

### Further Funeral Prayers

Psalms, as noted above, play a prominent role in the funeral liturgy. Other biblical texts—primarily from Job, Proverbs, and the prophets—are commonly recited, along with Rabbinic readings. *El Maleh Rachamim*, a prayer for the deceased, asks:

God, full of compassion, dwelling on High, grant perfect rest under the sheltering wings of Your Presence to the one who has passed.... May their soul be bound up in the bond of life. *Adonai* is their portion. May they rest in peace.

"Bound up in the bond of life" is a rich image. It refers to several Jewish beliefs: the immortality of the soul in God, the immortality of the soul in the memory of the living, the fact that "*ein hakahal met*," the community never dies. The language is taken from I Samuel 25:29, and is in keeping with the biblical idea that, in death, one is "gathered to his people."<sup>3</sup>

The *El Maleh* thus raises the issue of Jewish views of the afterlife. The funeral service does not elaborate on the nature of heaven or of life beyond the grave. Perhaps surprisingly, it barely mentions them. The focus of the funeral is on the life that was lived on this plane. It remains true that, generally speaking, "we Jews take our worlds one at a time." While Jewish theology and philosophy certainly imagine an afterlife, there is no clear agreement on the details. Resurrection of the dead, eternal life for the soul,

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<sup>1</sup> Job 39:2

<sup>2</sup> After Job 42:3.

<sup>3</sup> See Genesis 25:8, Judges 2:10, I Chronicles 17:11

judgment of each individual, and corporate Messianic salvation are all part of the picture, but each of these components and the way they fit together is the subject of much speculation and debate. Rabbi Yochanan said, “Every prophet prophesized for the days of the Messiah, but, as for the world to come, no eye has seen what God has prepared for those who wait.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, no one has yet reported back. Therefore, we remain humble about our beliefs. In the meantime, we have work to do in this world which can be as lasting and significant as anything that exists beyond the grave. In the paradoxical words of Rabbi Jacob, “Better one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than the entire life of the world to come; and better one hour of spiritual bliss in the world to come than the entire life of this world.”<sup>5</sup>

### Eulogy

The *hesped*, or eulogy, was once reserved for special teachers and other important figures in the community. Today, everyone receives this honor. The goal of the *hesped* is to praise those qualities of mind, heart, and action that the deceased bequeaths as an enduring example and inheritance. The *hesped* specifically connects a good character to Torah teachings. What aspect(s) of tradition did this person embody? What was the sacred story that they told by their life? What values do they pass on? In addition to the encomium of the *hesped*, many Jews make their own statement about these issues in an ethical will--a document delineating a moral, rather than an economic, legacy.

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<sup>4</sup> BT *Berakhot* 34b

<sup>5</sup> Mishnah *Avot* 4:22.

## Burial

Burial allows the body to decompose at a rate that nature and God set. Traditional Jewish law prohibits both embalming (to slow the process) and cremation (to speed it). We go “from dust to dust.”<sup>6</sup>

The burial of the body itself is called *chesed shel emet*, the ultimate act of lovingkindness. Human motivations are complex. Even the noblest behaviors may be tainted by seeking fame, praise, or compensation. In the back of our minds, we may wonder, “What might *they* be able to do for *me* someday?” When one buries a body, such thoughts become absurd. This body will never thank you, or even know you did it. It is a pure lovingkindness to serve it anyway.

Material aspects of burial convey the unimportance of material riches: we use a plain pine box and simple white shrouds without pockets. These elements also convey a message of economic and social justice. People need not go into debt in order to “prove” their love for the person they lost by buying expensive caskets or burial clothing. There is no difference in the burial of rich and poor, women and men, or scholars and laypeople.

At the graveside, Psalms are again recited, along with *tziduk hadin*, readings which speak of God’s justice. The *El Maleh* may be repeated. A special graveside *Kaddish* (mourner’s prayer) are the last words recited at the burial. This is the prayer that marks the end of one’s status as an *onen* and the formal beginning of being an *avel* (mourner). (The *Kaddish* will be discussed in some detail below.)

Many people who attend a Jewish funeral for the first time find it jarring to see dirt shoveled onto the coffin as part of the ritual. It is especially jarring because the task of shoveling the dirt is not delegated to laborers, but rather assigned to those closest to the deceased. Shoveling the dirt is considered a duty of loyalty and an act of love. It is as

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3:19

if the mourners are pulling a blanket up over their loved one, to cover and to protect. In traditional observance, all the dirt—not just a symbolic amount-- must be shoveled before the family will leave the cemetery. In their minds and from a Rabbinic perspective, leaving the body uncovered would be uncaring.

The shoveling is also a message to the bereaved. It breaks through the denial that is inevitably in evidence at this early stage of mourning. “It doesn’t seem real,” says the mourner. But there is no sound more grounding (pun intended) and more terrible than the sound of that first shovelful of dirt hitting the coffin. As mourners lift and release the dirt, they are brought—literally with a thud—into reality. “I am above; he is below. I must go on; she cannot.” This dramatic and stark moment allows the grieving, and therefore, the healing, to begin in earnest.

The shoveling conveys another, more comforting message about continuity in and of life. It is a tradition to plant a tree in honor of the birth of a baby—cedar for a boy and cyprus for a girl.<sup>7</sup> So at the beginning of life we shovel dirt, and at the end of life we shovel dirt again. We live out the instruction of Genesis 3:19: “Dust you are and to dust you shall return.” Soil symbolizes the joy of birth, the sorrow of death, and the conviction that in death we will be born again onto life. “The dust returns to earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”<sup>8</sup>

The community’s departure from the grave is carefully choreographed. Guests form two rows, facing one another, and the mourners walk between them. In this way, the community says: “we are your support, your pillars.” Those in attendance may offer their condolences as the family walks past them. The traditional language of blessing is: “May the All-present One comfort you, among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” The

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<sup>7</sup> BT *Gittin* 57a. In many communities, a marriage canopy would be constructed out of cypress from the bride’s side/tree and cedar from the groom’s side/tree.

<sup>8</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:7

message is clear: you are not alone. God is with you always, and others, too, know the kind of pain you are suffering.

It is traditional to wash one's hands upon leaving a cemetery, upon arriving at the house of mourning, or both. The washing symbolizes purification following a close contact with death. Some commentators believe that washing the hands is also a symbolic way of declaring that "our hands are clean" with respect to the deceased. We did all we could to sustain life and ease distress.

### **The House of Mourning**

Many rules and customs obtain in a house of mourning, both for those who mourn and for the visitors who come to comfort them.

#### Covering the Mirrors

Mirrors are covered in the homes of all official mourners—any child, spouse, parent, or sibling of the deceased. Most people who have been to a Jewish house of mourning have observed this widespread custom, and there are many reasons for it. First, it maintains the dignity of deceased. Beauty and ornamentation are considered to be an insult to a dead and decomposing body. But covering the mirrors is a lesson for the living, as well as a show of respect for the dead.

On a practical level, covering household mirrors gives the mourners permission to feel and look miserable, to greet guests with tear-stained faces. Beyond that, it gives expression to what many of us have professed as clichéd observations: time flies; life is finite; beauty is fleeting. The shock of losing a loved one forces us to connect with those truisms on a personal and profound level. Suddenly, it doesn't really matter how we look to the neighbors. Vanity, the covered mirrors tell us, makes our lives vain. Unmistakably,

we realize that there is no time to waste. Appearances are not important. Life is uncertain, and the time to “get one’s priorities straight” is now. (This is the import behind Rabbi Eliezer’s ironic dictum in Mishnah *Avot*: “Repent one day before your death.”)

Finally, there is also a mystical reason for the covering of mirrors. If, as Genesis teaches, every human being is created in the image of God, then, looking into a mirror, we see an embodied image of God reflected back to us. (Looking into the eyes of another human being, we see the same. This is one understanding of the Psalmist’s words, “I have placed God across from me at all times.”<sup>9</sup>) When a human being dies and a soul goes to its eternal home, less of the image of God is left here on earth. We cover the mirrors, so that this “diminishment” of the image of God not be recorded. Thus, covering the mirrors has a purpose from the perspective of the deceased, of the mourner, and of the cosmos itself.

### The First Meal

Upon returning from the cemetery, mourners and guests partake in a *seudat havra'ah*, or condolence meal. This meal is provided by neighbors and friends as a form of nurturance and support to the mourners. The community will gather at the home where the mourners are grieving (preferably, from a traditional viewpoint, the home of the deceased), and it would be unthinkable to assign the bereaved hosting duties. The friends, relatives, and community members who prepare this meal often simultaneously set up the special mourning candle which burns for seven days. Throughout the seven-day mourning period, visitors continue to bring food (a gift preferred in a Jewish setting over flowers), thus sparing the family from food preparation and freeing them to deal with their grief.

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<sup>9</sup> Psalms 16:8

Beyond caring for the physical and logistical needs of the mourners and their visitors, the *seudat havra'ah* also feeds the soul. Some of the medieval rabbis imagine that the mourners may have a death wish. The thought may enter their minds: “How can I eat at a time like this? Maybe I should be in the ground, too.” Before such thoughts can even take hold, family and friends come to the house of mourning, with food in hand. Specifically, they come with round foods, like eggs and lentils, which symbolize the cycle and continuity of life.

### *Shivah: The First Seven Days After the Burial*

*Shivah* simply means “seven” and it refers to the intensive seven-day mourning period, which begins immediately following the burial. As traditionally observed, *shivah* is austere. One doesn’t leave one’s house during *shivah*, except to go to Sabbath services. Weekday services are held in the house of mourning, and community members gather there daily to help make a *minyan* (prayer quorum). During *shivah*, mourners do not conduct work or business. They avoid listening to music and other forms of entertainment. In a strict observance, they refrain from sex, adornment, shaving (for men), haircuts, make-up, and anointing (perfumes and oils). There are restrictions even on bathing (do it for hygiene, not pleasure) and on changing one’s clothes (nothing freshly laundered may be worn). Mourners do not wear leather shoes, which are considered luxurious, but rather socks or cloth slippers. Mourners also avoid sitting as usual, and instead sit low to the ground, as if to demonstrate that they are feeling “low” and wish to remain close to the person who now lies in the earth. Of course, any of these restrictions is suspended for someone who is ill or weak.

Torah study is considered too great a pleasure for this sorrowful time. Mourners may not engage biblical or Rabbinic texts, with two exceptions: (1) a mourner may teach

these texts, if the community is in need of a teacher and (2) any mourner may study texts that specifically relate to bereavement—i.e., Job, Lamentations, the sad parts of Jeremiah, the Rabbinic laws of mourning.

These many restrictions serve several complex purposes. First, they connect the mourner to tradition. Each of these practices has its roots not just in what one's parents may have done, but in ancestral history. We tear our clothes and sit on low stools because King David and Job did the same when they lost their children.<sup>10</sup> We do not anoint or launder clothing, based in part on the behavior of the wise woman of Teqo'a.<sup>11</sup> With every mourning behavior and restriction, the bereaved is, in a very different sense than the deceased, “gathered to his ancestors.” This protective gathering into the bosom of one's people operates not just in relation to the past, but also in relation to the present. The nature of *shivah* “forces” those who are in mourning to spend time with other close relatives, to connect intimately with family at exactly the moment that an important connection to family has been severed.

As much as *shivah* offers the comfort of family and community, it also points up the solitary journey that each of us must face in our death and in our grief. Viewed from a certain angle, the laws of *shivah* ask mourners to behave as if they, too, were dead. Don't attend to your body. Don't go out among people. Don't engage in work or study. Take a break from life and, just for a while, don't inhabit your normal existence. Losing a loved one is, among other things, a close brush with death. *Shivah* refuses to let the mourner shrug that off. We must face our own mortality, in order to rejoin the world as better people. We must face our own mortality if we are to realize the full potential of the traditional phrase *zikhronam livrakhah*, may the remembrance of the dead be for a

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<sup>10</sup> II Samuel 13:31 and Job 2:13.

<sup>11</sup> II Samuel 14:2 and BT *Mo'ed Katan* 15a.

blessing. Memories are a blessing when they inspire us to lead more blessed lives.

*Shivah* holds us to this task and standard.

*Shivah* also pierces through denial. All our normal avenues of escape—work, study, sex, grooming—are closed. Mourners might want to retreat into “busy-ness,” but there is nothing to do. They cannot even occupy themselves with the mundane question, “What shall we make for lunch?” Visitors paying condolence calls will bring the food. Every distraction is thus removed. The only avenue left is to face the loss. For seven days, dwell with it, deal with it. This will entail periods of boredom, of numbness, of exhaustion. It will also allow for periods of remembering, of tears, of release, of healing. The healing is not separate from the grief; it is the fruition of the grieving process, which includes all the “negatives” --despair, anger, boredom, et al.

One of the simplest explanations of *shivah* is also among the most meaningful. Why restrict behavior for seven days? Because God created the world in seven days, and every human being is a world unto him or herself.

#### How to Pay a *Shivah* Call

During *shivah*, when so many visitors come to pay a condolence call, the door to the house of mourning is customarily left open. Guests should not ring the doorbell, or expect to be greeted.

The comforters should not speak until the mourner initiates the conversation. When the mourner nods his head, indicating that he dismisses the comforters, they should not remain with him any longer.<sup>12</sup>

*Shivah* calls are not an occasion for idle socializing or small talk. Simply being present with the bereaved is a valuable gift. The tradition asks the guests to let the mourner set

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<sup>12</sup> Shulhan Arukh, 376.

the tone. If the mourner wishes to sit in silence, then visitors sit in supportive silence. To “sigh in silence” is an appropriate sign of grief.<sup>13</sup>

When conversing, it is not only acceptable, but laudable to discuss the deceased. Sometimes, people imagine that they need to “protect” the feelings of the mourners by not bringing up memories that might cause them sadness. The mourners are already sad. It is a kindness to help them remember the deceased. Mourners particularly appreciate hearing details and insights about their loved one that they may not know. Often, in a house of mourning, laughter and tears closely follow one another as memories flow of joyous occasions, illnesses, quirky habits, periods of estrangement, and lessons learned.

Visitors who wish to bring a gift should bring food or beverages. It is also appropriate to make charitable donations in memory of the deceased.

### **Gradually Letting Go: The Cycle of Mourning**

The mourning process diminishes in intensity over time. Jewish law urges a sense of balance. Lack of mourning is considered callous, but excessive mourning is deemed unhealthy, even self-indulgent. It is said, “whoever grieves excessively is really grieving for someone else.”<sup>14</sup> If, after completing a year of mourning, one feels the same pain as when the death first occurred, it is as if two people have died.

*Shivah* itself is actually divided into two periods: the first three days, called days of weeping, and the latter four, called days of lamentation. During the first three days, mourners are expected to be their most distraught and to cry often. Therefore, traditionally, only the closest relatives and friends visited during the first three days. The extended community would turn out during the days of lamentation, the last four days of

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<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel 24:17

<sup>14</sup> Shulhan Arukh 394.

shivah. Otherwise, the differences between the first three days and the latter four days are slight. A person who is dependent on charity, or who will otherwise suffer enormous financial hardship, is permitted to work during the days of lamentation, though not before. (Doctors may also work in service of health and life.)

Today, the distinction between days of weeping and of lamentation is scarcely observed. In fact, sadly, many liberal Jews sit “seven” for only a single day. Obviously, the structure and work of *shivah* cannot be squeezed into a single gathering.

The final day of *shivah* lasts less than a full day. Mourners rise from the shivah just after the *shaharit* (morning) services. By custom, their first act is to take a short walk, as a way of rejoining the world. Seeing cars, pedestrians, children at play, the mourner realizes that the world can and must go on. More than that: it has.

#### *Shelosim*: The First Thirty Days

*Sheloshim* is the period of thirty days from the time of the burial. (The term is also used to refer to the thirtieth and final day, on which study sessions are sometimes held in memory of the deceased.)

After *shivah* and during *sheloshim*, mourners get “back to normal” to a significant degree. They sit on regular chairs and resume Torah study, as well as sexual relations. They return to most normal habits of physical self-care. Nevertheless, they continue to refrain from getting haircuts and from listening to or playing music.<sup>15</sup> They do not attend weddings, dances, or parties.

*Sheloshim* constitutes the complete mourning period for all deaths, except those of one’s father and mother. When mourning the death of a parent, all the restrictions of *sheloshim* obtain for twelve Hebrew months.

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<sup>15</sup> Professional musicians are exempt from the latter restrictions.

### Continuing to Remember

The Jewish calendar is peppered with occasions for remembrance, beyond the mourning period. Jews honor a *yahrzeit* (anniversary of a death) by lighting a special candle which burns for twenty-four hours. They also recite the *Kaddish* (mourner's prayer, discussed below) each year on that date. It is customary for someone observing a *yahrzeit* to lead services.

Visits to the cemetery are considered a proper sign of respect, and are often undertaken before major Jewish holidays and on *yahrzeits*.

*Yizkor*, a communal memorial service, is recited on Yom Kippur, Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. It includes the *El Maleh*, recitations from Psalms, a private prayer in which people mention their deceased relatives by name, silent meditation, and the *Kaddish*. A *yahrzeit* candle is lit on these holidays, and law and custom encourage the giving of charity in memory of the dead.

### What Is Being Mended, and What Is Being Severed?

Death interrupts normalcy. The laws of mourning reflect that reality by initially eliminating regular routines and habits. Then, the law reintroduces them. Gradually, it brings the mourner back to "normal" and, more than that, back to celebration. Once again, music and weddings and theater become part of life.

In essence, all of Jewish mourning ritual, from the time of *aninut* through the first *yahrzeit* (anniversary of the death), implicitly presses the mourner to make a decision to choose life. And the painful truth is that the more clearly and definitively one chooses life, the more clearly and definitively s/he is separated from the deceased. As Rabbi Margaret Holub writes:

Love blurs the boundaries between one's soul and another. In fact, love might be defined as that very erosion, absorption, co-mingling....The breath of God within everyone who is bound up with [the deceased] wishes, as it were, to leave the bodies of its temporary residence and to flee to the one great Source. And so it is that a survivor must mourn to heal and repair the bond between his or her own body and soul--literally, in some measure, to stay alive....

Outside us the web of life has been torn. Within us, body and soul are wrestling apart. Our tradition recognizes that while body and soul may have been severed almost instantaneously for the loved one who died, the re-weaving of body and soul in the survivors--the agenda of mourning--happens in stages over weeks, months, years, and generations. No wonder then that the reuniting of bodies and souls of all people for the great Messianic resurrection is imagined to require millennia of preparation."<sup>16</sup>

### Kaddish

*Kaddish*, our most popular prayer, is recited thirteen times daily in Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of the Rabbinic period. There are five different versions and uses of this prayer, one of which is the mourner's *Kaddish*.

The mourner's *Kaddish* (commonly but misleadingly called "*the*" *Kaddish*) is traditionally recited at every prayer service through *sheloshim* for most mourners and for eleven months by Jews who lose a parent.<sup>17</sup> One might expect such a mourner's prayer to ask: "Bless my father in the next world" or "Ask my beloved to bless me from the next world." But *Kaddish* never mentions death, mourning, or family. Rather, the *Kaddish* praises God and God's name.

There are many explanations for why *Kaddish* holds such power. It can be recited only in a *minyan*, thus providing—even imposing—communal support. *Kaddish* essentially facilitates children taking their parents' place in synagogue. I recite *Kaddish*

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<sup>16</sup> From Margaret Holub, "A Cosmology of Mourning." in Debra Orenstein, ed. *Lifecycles vol. 1: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994, page 344. Reprinted by permission of Jewish Lights Publishing, 800-962-4544.

<sup>17</sup> It is also recited by all mourners during the funeral service and on *yahrzeits*, as noted above.

for my parents, just as my parents recited it for theirs. The prayer goes back, literally, for generations.

According to mystical tradition, *Kaddish* aids the dead in their ascension to the next world. Each *Kaddish* recited on their behalf is a credit to them, and aids them in completing any unfinished spiritual work. The period designated for repentance in the next world is understood to last one year. Jews recite *Kaddish* for eleven months as if to say, “Parents as righteous as mine didn’t need the entire time available.” Everyone’s parents are especially righteous.

*Kaddish* shares the sensibility of the blessings recited for *keriah*. It affirms God, but provides no easy answers to the question of suffering. The *Kaddish* declares: “God is above and beyond all blessings, hymns, praises, and consolations which are uttered in the world.” This is a highly ambiguous and open text. It could mean: “God is supreme, beloved, and ineffable.” It could also mean: “God is beyond my understanding. I don’t get it, and I don’t like it!” The *Kaddish* does not demand that mourners affirm any particular belief about the purpose of death or even about God’s justice. It does not ask mourners to have a particular feeling. It only demands that mourners attend synagogue, and remain in relationship with both God and community. That is asking enough, and it also gives mourners a great gift.

### **Death Is; Death is Bad; Death is Very Good**

#### Death Is

In many ways, death is treated matter-of-factly in the Jewish tradition. Death is normal. More than that, it is universal. Judaism is a faith that embraces life, and death is part of life. The laws and traditions around mourning help mourners to accept the reality

of death. That step must be accomplished before grief can be overcome or trauma, healed.

### Death Is Bad

Death is unwelcome. According to Rabbinic lore, even Moses and David dreaded death. Death takes those we love, often too early and in pain. In Hasidic literature, the Angel of Death is portrayed as an unwanted and uncouth visitor:

When the Baal Shem Tov fell ill shortly before his death..., [his students] heard him talking to someone. They inquired with whom he was speaking. He replied, “Do you not see the Angel of Death? He always flees from me, but now he has been given permission to come and flaps his wings and is full of joy.”<sup>18</sup>

A faith that so consistently urges its adherents to choose life, save life, guard life is sure to cast the Angel of Death as a villain.

### Death is Very Good

At the end of Genesis chapter 1, following the description of creation, we are told: “And God saw everything that God had made and, behold, it was very good.” This formulation differs from previous statements of approbation. What is distinctive about saying, “And behold it was very good?” According to Rabbinic lore, this phrase refers to the Angel of Death.<sup>19</sup> *The Angel of Death is very good.*

The Rabbis play on words to make a similar point. *Tov me’od* (it is very good) sounds a lot like *tov mot* (death is good).<sup>20</sup> According to the classic work of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar:

Death is a joy both for the good and the wicked. For the good, it marks leaving the corridor behind and entering the palace—the shedding of the spiritual and the donning of the spiritual clothing.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Samuel H. Dresner, “The Deaths of the Hasidic Masters.” in Jack Riemer, ed. *Jewish Reflections on Death*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974, page 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Bereishit Rabbah* 9:10. See also Aharon Ya’akov Greenberg, ed. *Iturei Torah* (in Hebrew) vol. 1. Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1987, page 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Bereishit Rabbah* 9:5.

For the wicked, [death] marks rescue from descending further... If not for death, the evildoer would never stop doing his evil.<sup>21</sup>

What is good about death? Death is an impetus to better living. The finitude of life makes demands on us to be productive, to express love, to act now. Death motivates us to prepare for God's judgment. Upon death, earthly injustices are rectified. Death can be a release from suffering. It brings us to a good place. Death gives us the opportunity to care for the dying, to help the elder generation make its transition. Death appoints us as historians and storytellers to the next generation. Death can serve as an atonement for sins committed in life. In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "if life is a journey, death is a homecoming."

I will conclude in the way that Jews traditionally conclude a life: with the *Vidui* (confessional before dying). Confession is not a solitary act. A fellow Jew recites the *Vidui* with the ailing party. This helper is enjoined to lift the patient's spirits, and never to undermine hope for recovery. Traditionally, a caveat is recited before the confessional:

Many have confessed and did not die, while many who did not confess died anyway. Having confessed, you may live. But everyone who confesses has a share in the world to come.

Rabbi Vicki Hollander offers the following modern translation of the confessional before dying:

My source, God of those who came before me: I know that my cure and my death are in your hands. You may heal me completely, move me to wholeness but, if death is nearing, I am ready to receive it from Your hand.

May all the wrongdoings I have done in my life—those things I have done unwittingly, those things I have done knowingly; acts I have done to myself, to others, to You--may they all be forgiven.

Allow the hidden goodness stored for the righteous to flow over me. Help me to understand the path of life. Gift me continuing life in the hidden world yet to come. Let my death be an atonement.

As I come close to You now, Your face bathes me with light. Being at Your right hand fills me deeply.

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<sup>21</sup> Zohar , Vayehi.

One who watches over the vulnerable and needy, take care of my  
close ones, those precious ones, with whom my soul is intertwined.  
*Shema yisra'el adonai eloheinu adonai ehad.*  
Listen, Israel, our God, our Source, is One.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> From Vicki Hollander, "A Modern Version of the Confessional Before Dying." in Debra Orenstein, ed. *Lifecycles vol. 1: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994, page 355. Reprinted by permission of Jewish Lights Publishing, 800-962-4544.