DEATH
VOCABULARY

GEHINOM

KEVOD HAMET

TAHARAH

TACHRICHIM

CHEVRAH KADISHA

EL MALEI RACHAMIM

KERIAH

SHIVAH

SHELOSHIM

UNVEILING

YAHRZEIT

KADDISH

YIZKOR

SEUDAT HAVRA'AH

MITZVAH

MINYAN

TZEDAKAH

SHEOL

GAN EDEN

Jewish Rituals

JEWISH FUNERAL TRADITIONS:

Honoring the Dead While Helping the Living

by Mark Weissman

The pain of death often does not heal quickly among the living and burial rituals often address problems related to recovering from the loss. Psychologists have noted people go through phases following the death of someone to whom they have been close, such as: denial, anger, guilt, depression and physical illness. Only by recognizing and expressing these feelings can true healing begin.

There are daily examples of people who cannot make this transition: the widow whose depression keeps her isolated in her home, the parent who keeps a child's room just as if he or she was expecting the child to return, the guilt of the bereaved who blame themselves for the death, the anger directed at God for permitting the death. Religious and cultural rituals help people accept the death and get on with their lives.

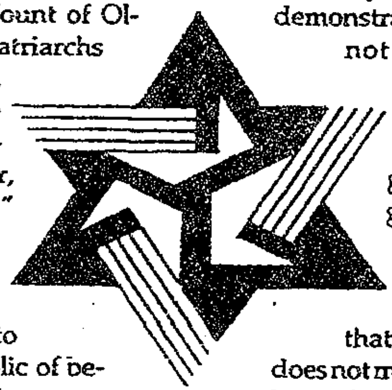
This is especially true in the Jewish funeral traditions which respond to the profound effect that death has upon the living.

These timeless observances proscribe not only how to honor and respect the dead; but how to help the living heal and find peace.

Faith may not take away our heartache, but following the traditions honoring and remembering the dead can help people to manage this anguish better.

With an estimated 60% of American Jews unaffiliated with a synagogue or temple, many Jews may not know or understand the Jewish traditions for honoring the dead. People find, as they get on in years, that they have a need for Jewish traditions. Even in some instances where families don't understand the traditions, they find them very helpful.

These traditions place the focus on the living, while still honoring the dead. The Jewish funeral practice is to bury the body as quickly as possible and have the initial period of mourning-shivah-after burial so there is greater opportunity to recover mourners come to terms with the reality of the death. It brings finality and closure. Burial keeps with the Biblical teaching, *"dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return."* In accordance with this theme, earth from the Mount of Olives, where the patriarchs are buried in Israel, is often put in the casket. The important Jewish prayer, *"Sh'ma Yisrael,"* says Jews are one with God and one with Israel. Placing Israeli earth next to the body is symbolic of being one with Israel.



Burial usually takes place as soon as possible so that the family does not linger over the death but continues with the healing process. When all of a person's family and friends lived in the same community, burial was in a day. Today, burial can take place within two or three days to permit mourners to assemble from other cities or countries.

Seudat Hovraah (meal of condolence) — After burial, mourners leave the grave site and perform a ritual washing of the hands before entering the house to be clean hygienically and spiritually. The bereaved join in meal to symbolize that life must go on.

Shiva (the initial period of mourning) — Following the burial, seven days of mourning is often observed. It is a key step in the transition from mourning to resuming individual lives. During this period friends and neighbors visit the family in their home to demonstrate that they are not alone in their mourning. Shiva recognizes the basic tenet that grief shared is grief diminished. This tradition helps the mourners understand that the end of life does not mean the end of the relationship, and that solace is found in the community. Families that do not observe a full shiva period, occasionally observe a period of mourning for three days following the burial.

Finding peace and moving forward does not mean that the dead are forgotten. The Jewish tradition of remembering the dead through *Yizkor* services (said four times a year), *Yahrzeit* observance — lighting a candle of remembrance on the anniversary of death, and naming a newborn after someone who has died — ensures that the deceased live on through their loved ones, and their loved ones find peace and harmony in their lives. ✡

Mark Weissman is president of the Jewish Funeral Directors of America

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from the loss before resuming the daily duties of life. This contrasts with Christian funeral practice where there is a longer period of mourning before burial. Public viewing of the deceased is not a Jewish custom; tradition teaches that it is disrespectful to look at a person who cannot look back.

Following these observances gives the living a certain sense of closure-the satisfaction of knowing that they have done everything they could possibly do to honor the dead. A chapel service is also considered important in the process of bereavement. Jewish funeral traditions, while honoring the dead, are designed to help the living recover from their loss. The chapel service provides the necessary environment to help mourners express grief, accept the reality of death and pick up the threads of their lives.

Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements within Judaism may take different approaches to the Jewish funeral traditions and there are also regional differences in practice. The realities of modern living are often taken into consideration. Jewish funeral directors that have been certified by the Jewish Funeral Directors of America can guide a family through the traditions and help them make the choice that is best for them.

Jewish funeral traditions include:

Shmeerah (watching) — A pious Jewish person watches over the dead as they pass from one phase to the other, "the night between days." The tradition indicates that even in death a person is not alone, but loved and respected. It is considered an honor for family members to be *"shomrim,"* although in many cases, if requested, the funeral director will provide a watcher, often a retired rabbi.

Taharah (purification) — The washing of the body is an act of spiritual cleansing to prepare the body for the next life. This observance recognizes that we are all equal before God. The use of hard-boiled eggs during the bereavement symbolizes that life is a circle and that for all bereavement there shall be happiness.

K'riah (tearing of garments) - Prior to, or after the services, mourners tear their outer garments as a symbol of their anguish and grief, and the "tear" that's in the mourner's heart. An alternative for some branches of Judaism to tearing a garment is to wear a torn piece of cloth. A special prayer, *"Dayan Ha'emet* (Blessed is the Judge of Truth)," acknowledges that mortals cannot understand God's decrees but recognize that God controls a good portion of life.

K'Vurah (burial) — Witnessing the burial is designed to help the

The Mourner's Path

Death

Aninut (No more than 72 hours)

Burial

SHIVA

7 DAYS

SHLOSHIM

30 DAYS

PERIOD OF KADDISH

UP TO
11 MONTHS

YARTZEIT **1 YEAR from death**

YIZKOR - Yom Kippur, Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot

Stepping Back to Move Forward

Kaddish isn't – as so many name it – the prayer for the dead.

Kaddish is for those who survive after the loss of a loved one. It's a script that we recite, proclaiming our faith, which we may not have at that moment.

But the hope is, by the end of our year of Kaddish, we will have regained our faith and reasserted our place in the community. That year is a training regimen, building our belief until we're ready to relinquish our mourner's status and rejoin the populace — scarred, but surviving.

My first Kaddish minyan was in my childhood home in New Jersey during shiva — no excuse not to go. Then, during the shloshim — the first thirty days of the mourning process — I continued, first in Los Angeles at Temple Beth Am, where I counted in the daily minyan and conveniently located between my home and my work, then in Jerusalem, finding a small Orthodox synagogue that was tolerant of women saying Kaddish (as long as men were also present and reciting it). Once, I remembered sitting alone in the women's section at an Orthodox synagogue – it felt as if I were going blind. I took dark delight in the metaphor before realizing that they hadn't bothered to turn on the lights in the women's section.

My mother would have been simultaneously appalled and proud of the fact that I made it through a year of saying Kaddish, sometimes twice a day. I kept hearing her in my head, asking why I was spending so much time in shul. "Don't do it on my account," the voice said. "It's not doing ME any good. Why don't you go to the gym instead? That at least may do some good for someone."

I wish I could have explained to her that going to minyan did do some good for someone. At a time in my life when I had to remind myself to move forward, it was a responsibility that got me out of bed in the morning, not just eventually, but early. I went not because it was always meaningful but because it was there.

Sometimes, I could get through Kaddish, even the long one, without crying. Other times, the simplest of phrases would send me spiraling into sorrow. Sometimes, I was struck by the communal devotion of those who attended daily, even if they had not recently suffered a loss. Other times, I noted congregants muttering with little passion or projection.

At the center of every minyan is the Amidah, the standing prayer, which begins with three steps back and then forward again. For me, that moment began to symbolize the back-and-forth of grief, starting as a setback before finding the path, paved by Jewish tradition and community, for moving forward again in small, tentative steps.

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But by surrounding myself with friends, family and community, online and off, I found a grounding counterweight to life's definitional instability. Minyan provided an anchor, contextualizing personal loss and pain within the universal human experience.

Not every service resonated. Not every Kaddish helped me feel better. But the structure gave me a template for living and provided a connection to others whose hearts had at some point been cracked open by grief. They had grieved and survived; they once wept from the depths of their souls, but now show us all how to rediscover meaning and laughter after loss.

When we are low on strength, we can borrow against the collective, each withdrawal its own promise that, when our reserves are replenished, we will give back to those who support us — sharing embraces, tears, experiences and words. This privilege, this community covenant, is a miracle that I know my mother would have understood. Especially now that I've rejoined the gym.

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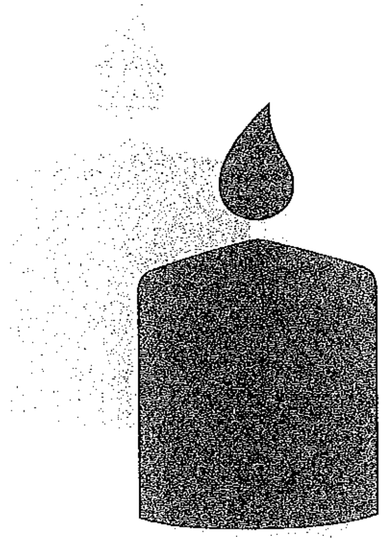

Immortality through Goodness and Activism

RABBI HAROLD M. SCHULWEIS

Jews Rarely Speak of Life After Death

You ask me what I believe about the afterlife, and I in turn am struck by the fact that yours is a question rarely asked by Jews. It is different with Christian audiences, where inquiries about the Jewish view of life after death are almost invariably the first questions posed. How is it that as a rabbi called upon to officiate at funerals, deliver eulogies, comfort the bereaved, I am rarely questioned about the disposition of the soul after death or the place of heaven or hell, or the belief in the physical resurrection of the dead? How is it that in the discussions about the meaning of the Holocaust and the destruction of one-third of our people, the Jewish position on the hereafter plays no part?

How do we account for this neglect despite the prevalence of the ideas of *Gan Eden* and *Gehinnom* (heaven and hell), *olam haba* (the world to come) in the rabbinic literature of the Talmud, in Jewish mysticism, and in medieval Jewish philosophy? Despite the praises of God's "calling the dead to eternal life" in the daily prayer book and the references to paradise (*Gan Eden*) in the *El Male* prayer recited at the funeral and during *Yizkor* services, the afterlife does not function as a major Jewish belief among modern Jews.

Judaism Stresses This World

The this-worldliness in modern Judaism is not devoid of traditional Jewish roots. For one thing, the Five Books of Moses make no explicit references to another world beyond the grave. The Bible refers to the death of each of the patriarchs as his being "gathered to his kin" (Gen. 25:8; 35:29; 49:29, 33). One of the psalms recited in the festival *Hallel* prayers declares: "The dead cannot praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence. But we [the living] will bless the Lord, now and forever. Hallelujah" (Psalm 115). Carrying out this theme, traditionalist Jews at the funeral cut the fringes of the prayer shawl that is placed around the shoulders of the deceased. That custom is explained as symbolizing the belief that the deceased have no *mitzvot,* no deeds to be fulfilled. To be alive is to have deeds to perform and imperatives to be followed.

Our Task Is to Fix This World

The emphasis in Judaism is on the exercise of human free will to mend the universe. The ambivalence toward otherworldly reward and punishment lies in the fear that it may be used to excuse lack of individual and social activism here and now. A story is told about a pious Jew who boasts to his rabbi that he had saved another Jew's soul. A beggar had asked him for a meal, and he agreed but insisted that first they must pray the afternoon *Minchah* prayers. And before serving him the meal, he ordered the beggar to wash his hands and recite the appropriate blessing and thereafter to recite the *Motzi* prayer over the bread. The rabbi showed his annoyance with his pious disciple. "There are times, my son, when you must act as if there were no God." The disciple, taken aback by this counsel, protested "How should I, a man of faith, act as if no God existed?" The rabbi replied, "When someone comes to you in need as this beggar came, act as if there were no God in the universe, as if you alone are in the world and that there is no one to help him except you yourself." The disciple asked aloud, "And have I no responsibility for his soul?" The rabbi replied, "Take care of your soul and his body, not vice versa."

The story expresses the apprehension that an exaggerated emphasis on spirituality, on God as provider and rewarder may paralyze the human spirit and rationalize passivity. So Moshe Leib of Sasov said that God created skepticism so that we "may not let the poor starve, putting them off with the joys of the next world or simply telling them to trust in God who will help them instead of supplying them with food."

Belief in a Hereafter Causes Great Dilemmas

There are other factors that may account for the modernist distancing of otherworldliness. Jewish philosophers such as Saadia, for example, deal with the hereafter of persons in a literal and materialistic manner. Coping with the belief in the physical resurrection of the body, Saadia wonders what happens to the injured or amputated body, or to the person's body devoured by a beast or cremated. How will the resurrection take place? Will the injury to the body be healed? Will the people resurrected be able to exercise free will and sin? If so, will they be punished, and, if not, then are they without free will?

This sort of materialistic literalism led to strange and unappealing speculation. In this connection, modern Judaism favors a more symbolic and poetic interpretation of the hereafter. Heaven and hell are not geographic places but states of mind, ways of living rather than spaces beyond the earth. The attention shifts from place to time, from "where" to "when." Not "where" is heaven or hell but "when" is it experienced.

When Is Heaven?

Consider the legend of a good man who after his death enters heaven and is disappointed that there are no "saints" there. He is informed that he is mistaken. The "saints" are not in heaven. Heaven is in the saints.

In a complementary story, a chasidic rabbi is asked, "Where is God?" He answers, "Wherever you let Him in."

So, in discussing—in a moment—the meaning of the immortality of the soul, we shall refer not to "where" the soul is but "when" the soul exists, not to the biology of the soul but to its morality.

Life Is Our Responsibility

In Judaism the extraordinary emphasis on life in this world makes a second life elsewhere appear as pale compensation. Death is regarded by some Jewish thinkers as an insult, a contradiction to the purpose of religious life. The mourner's act of tearing a part of his clothing, they suggest, expresses anger at this assault upon life and its promises. We recall that in the *"Chad Gadya"* hymn sung at the Passover Seder, the Angel of Death is slaughtered by the God of life, an echo of Isaiah's prophecy. "He will destroy death forever; the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces" (Isaiah 25:8).

The Nobel literary prize winner S. Y. Agnon suggested that the *Kaddish* the mourner recites to magnify God's name is meant to console God, for the loss of a human being diminishes the strength and glory of the Creator. The mourner's *Kaddish* itself speaks not of death or of another world but of life in this world and in our time. The ritual of the *Kaddish* calls for a *minyan,* a living community of at least ten Jews, to honor the deceased. So the memory of the deceased depends on the presence of life.

In matters of faith such as that of the afterlife there are no scientific or logical proofs. If "seeing is believing," what is it we are looking for in speaking about God, soul, immortality, resurrection?

Science measures and weighs what is, faith is concerned with what ought to be.

Following that distinction, we may find a clue to the beliefs about the afterlife. What fears and what yearnings of the spirit in this life go into the belief in the continuation of life after death?

The hope for life after death may be related to our discontent with the status quo. The world in which there is so much poverty, war, illness, a world in which innocence suffers and wickedness prospers cannot be the last word of God. Seen in this light, *olam haba* (the world to come) expresses a protest against the injustices and imperfections of this world. In Judaism this world and everything in it is far from perfect. As the Talmud puts it, the grain needs to be ground, the bitter herbs need to be sweetened, the soil must be plowed, "everything requires mending."

There is a huge gap between the world as is and the world that ought to be. That vacuum is filled by belief in another world in which to live. For some, then, belief in another world is driven by the conscience to compensate the victims of this world. Yet, for others, otherworldliness is suspect lest it be exploited by those who seek to delay forever the tasks of this people, this day, in this world.

The rabbinic tradition tries to hold on to both worlds, to counter both the seduction of passivity and the submission to the status quo. Consider the surface paradox taught in the *Ethics of the Fathers* (*Pirke Avot,* or *Avot*):

> Better is one hour of repentance and good works in this world than the whole life of the world to come; and better is one hour of bliss in the world to come than the whole life of this world. (4:17)

On a more personal level, let me relate the interactions of traditional Jewish wisdom and my own experience. My grandmother died three days before the festival of Sukot. The funeral was held, the mourning period, normally seven days in duration, began, but in accordance with Jewish ritual law, once the festival began, the mourning ended. The tradition is clear: *Haregel mevatel gezerat shivah*—the festival annuls the mourning period. I was at first somewhat resentful that the personal mourning of the family was subordinated to the public celebration of Sukot. But as I thought about the ritual rule I sensed the wisdom of the tradition. My grandmother was a devoted Jew, and she would not wish to disturb her people's joy. (In Yiddish she would say: *"nisht farshteren die simchah."*) The consolation came from the shared conviction that her immortality was bound to the eternity of our people. Individuals die, but *ein hatzibur mait*—the community does not die. Eleven months after her death that faith was inscribed on my grandmother's headstone. It read, in the traditional expression, *tehei nishmatah tzerurah bitzror hachayim*—may her soul be bound up in eternal life.

What Is the Soul?

But what is her "soul"? I do not understand soul as a material object but as an expression of her life. She was a woman of kindness, gentle in speech and manner, a woman of charity who baked and cooked for sick and poor, who blessed her household as she closed her eyes and raised her hands before the lit Shabbat candles. I still call to mind her counsel, her embrace, her charity. She created memories that inform my life and helped shape my values. In that sense, my grandmother enjoys an immortality of influence. In speaking of her soul I mean those godly qualities in her personality that transcend her bodily existence and affect the character of those she touched.

There is a parallel here to what we learned in physics as the principle of the conservation of matter. That principle maintains that the sum total of the energy of the universe neither diminishes nor increases though it may assume different forms successively. Analogously the spiritual energy expressed during our lives—the wisdom, goodness, and truth of our lives—does not evaporate into thin air but is transformed into different forms of thought, feeling, and behavior and is transmitted through our memory: the conservation of spiritual energy.

In thinking back on the deaths in my family and among my friends, I sense in the belief system and ritual practices of our tradition two important gestures, two complementary ways of looking at death and beyond it. The two require the art of holding on and letting go.

Hold on and let go
On the surface of things contradictory counsel.
But one does not negate the other.
The two are complementary,
  two sides of one coin.

Hold on—for death is not the final word
The grave is not oblivion.
Hold on—*Kaddish, yahrzeit, yizkor*.
No gesture, no kindness, no smile evaporates—
Every embrace
has an afterlife
  in our minds, our hearts, our hands.

Hold on—and let go.
Sever the fringes of the *talit* and
the knots that bind us to the past.
Free the enslaving memory that sells the future
  to the past
Free the fetters of memory that turn us passive,
listless, resigned.
Release us for new life.
Lower the casket, the closure meant
to open again the world
of new possibilities.

Return the dust to the earth
not to bury hope
but to resurrect the will to live.

We who remember are artists, aerialists
on a swinging trapeze
  letting go one ring to catch another.
Hold on and let go
  a subtle duality
  that endows our life
  with meaning—
Neither denying the past
  nor foreclosing the future.
We are part of the flow of life
  the divine process,
  which gives and takes

creates and retains.
We, too, must give and take, seize hold and release.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh
Blessed be the Name of His Sovereign Glory.

(Poem by author)

Personal Epilogue

To ponder what I believe will be the essence of my immortality is an invitation to write my own obituary. The challenges are twofold: to filter out my conceits and to try to remember the future. I invite the reader to attempt the same exercise.

A celebrated comedian concluded his monologue on the afterlife with the roguish punch line: "I believe in my immortality, but I want it while I'm still alive." There are indeed intimations of immortality I have experienced while yet alive. Whenever I see my granddaughter cover her eyes before the Sabbath lights and hear her sing-song the benedictions in Hebrew, I sense a transcendent joy quite different from that derived from her recitation of a nursery rhyme. It is not the curtsy "cuteness" of her lisped recitation or her precociousness that touches me, but in her benediction lies a shock of recognition. This benediction I heard chanted by my grandmother and mother. It is intimately associated with my family and the warmth and festivity of the Sabbath table. This blessing is a nexus, a sacred connection between my ancestors' world and that of my grandchildren. Hearing it from my grandchild, I know that I am not alone in my future. My Jewishness is validated not only by the origins of my past but by the continuities resonating in my grandchildren. I am not only descendant but ancestor of my tradition.

Additionally I have been blessed with a vocation that brings me into the lives of others. People come to me sharing their most intimate concerns. They come with fears, ambitions, disappointments, and I am privileged to think with them, to cull insights from the wisdom of our tradition, and to disentangle the knotted skein of their anxiety. Years later I hear from some of them sentiments acknowledging my help. Therein abound hints of something personal that lives beyond the grave.

One particular project I was privileged to institute ties me with both my people and the future. In 1987, I founded the Jewish Foundation for Christian Resources, devoted to searching out, identifying, and helping those non-Jews who risked their lives rescuing persecuted Jews during the dark years of the Holocaust. History occurs, but not everything is automatically inscribed in its books. Not history but human beings record events. Unreported, the most important episodes in life are as if they never happened. Unrecorded, the good are robbed of their just immortality. The rescue behavior of non-Jews who reached outside the circle of their own faith to rescue Jews hunted by the Nazis has regrettably not been systematically researched. If that situation is not remedied now, humanity will be denied important evidence of goodness lived and practiced even in the hell of Auschwitz. The past has to be properly remembered so that the future may be properly changed. I believe there are sparks buried in unrecorded history that must be freed from the caverns of amnesia. Moral archaeology, digging out the nuggets of supreme value from the past, helps shape a more balanced and wiser theology for the future. Discovering and understanding the flesh-and-blood heroes of our tragic past may provide models and motivations for the generations after the Holocaust.

Immortality, mine, my people's, and others,refers to something indefeasible, something sacred that will not be trampled underfoot. I hope—don't we all?—to leave a shadow on this earth to offer testimony that I have lived. For all his humor the comedian may have been right in his desire to have immortality here and now. It's a question of knowing where to look for it. A legend tells of the angels who were jealous that God was to create the human being in God's own image. That image is immortal. God and his human creations would share immortality. Why, then, were Adam and Eve so anxious to eat from the tree of life—the tree of immortality—after they ate from the tree of knowledge? Because they learned that the angels plotted to hide it from them. One angel proposed that immortality be hidden from them in the mountains or the seas far beyond the reach of man or woman. But others argued that human beings would climb the mountains and plumb the oceans to find it. Then the shrewdest angel of all suggested that immortality be hidden within and between human beings. That angel surmised that within and between would be the last place on earth people would search to discover eternal life, now that we know the secret. Immortality is within and between us, and its intimations are here and now.