
JEWISH PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH, BURIAL & MOURNING

Death, it is often said, is a part of life. For those who remain alive and experience the death of a relative or close friend, this is certainly true. Indeed, the tragedy of death provides a deep challenge for the surviving loved ones to confront; this is a challenge that is often hard to meet.

Like all aspects of life, the Torah and its commentators relate to the death experience from all angles – from the perspective of the dying as well as that of the living. Rather than a hopeless “end,” Judaism provides us with a framework sensitive to the needs of both the deceased and the mourners. There are mitzvot to bury the dead, for immediate family to mourn, and for the community to comfort the mourners. We seek consolation from the fact that all of God’s deeds are perfect, He brought the person into the world to strive to reach his mission in life, and finally God took back the soul for an eternal existence in the World to Come.

In this class we seek to discuss the Jewish approach to death, burial and mourning by addressing the following questions:

- What is Judaism’s attitude toward death?
- What is the purpose of death? Why must a person die?
- Are the dead aware of what happens to their bodies after they die?
- What is the purpose of mourning over the dead? Isn’t this morbid?
- Why do we show honor to the deceased? What can we do for someone who is already dead?

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SECTION I. LIFE AND DEATH

It is the eternal question: what happens to us when we die? Judaism is a religion of life, but it recognizes the need to confront the reality of death. Somehow every person has a sense that the “real me” is more than just the sum of my body parts. This feeling becomes even more poignant when we suffer the loss of a loved one. We sense that the death of their body is not the end of the story. Judaism teaches that we have an eternal soul that continues to exist after physical death. The eternality of the soul, above all else, is what guides the Jewish approach to this shiur.

PART A. A RELIGION OF LIFE

From the outset, it must be stated that Judaism is a religion of life. Although the concept of death is elucidated and imbued with meaning, the thrust of Judaism and its most fundamental tenets are related to life. There is virtually nothing more important in Judaism than preserving life and averting death; God's most basic desire is life, and the Torah itself is called a “living Torah.” It is true that death is a part of life, but that is not the emphasis; life in this world is the focus.

1. Tehillim/Psalms 30:6 – God's desire is for us to live.

...Life is His will.

... חיים ברצונו.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 37a – Each life is considered to be a whole world!**

One who causes a Jewish life to be lost is considered as if he has destroyed the entire world; and one who sustains a life among Israel is considered as though he has sustained the entire world.

כל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Yoma 85a-85b – Live by the mitzvot, and do not die by them.**

How do we know that saving a life overrides the laws of Shabbat? For the verse states (Vayikra/Leviticus 18), “And live by them,” [i.e. the mitzvot] and not to die by them.

מוניין לפיקוח נפש שדוחה את השבת... [שנאמר] “והי בהם” ולא שימותו בהם.

4. **Maimonides, Laws of Shabbat 2:3 – The mitzvot epitomize compassion, kindness and peace.**

It is forbidden to delay in a matter of transgressing the Shabbat for the sake of one whose life is endangered, as it is written (Vayikra 18:5), “That a person will do them, and live by them” – and not to die by them. Thus you see that the laws of the Torah do not bring vengeance upon the world, but rather compassion, kindness and peace in the world.

ואסור להתמהמה בחילול שבת לחולה שיש בו סכנה שנאמר (ויקרא י"ח) “אשר יעשה אותם האדם וחי בהם” ולא שימותו בהם הא למדת שאין משפטי התורה נקמה בעולם אלא רחמים וחסד ושלוש בעולם.

It is told that the students of the Vilna Gaon, in the last hours of his life, gathered around his bed, eager to hear their great master’s last words. They expected to see him joyous at the prospect of his reward in the World to Come, but were surprised to see him with tears on his face. He held up his tzitzit and said, “How beautiful this world is! For just a few coins one can buy threads and tie tzitzit, and so come close to the Shechinah (Divine Presence). But in the World to Come it is impossible to do any of this.” (Rabbi Aharon Pollack, The Laws of Tzitzit, p. 6)

PART B. THE NEED TO FACE DEATH

Judaism recognizes that it is not possible to live in constant awareness of death, as this would lead to a morbid attitude in which little would be achieved. Nonetheless, recalling the inevitability of death can be employed in a positive way as well, as a source of inspiration for bettering one’s deeds. As such, death is not presented as something to be feared, but as something to be recognized and dealt with responsibly.

1. **Mishnah, Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 3:1 – Contemplating the final destiny helps us avoid transgression.**

Akavyah the son of Mehalalel said: Contemplate three things and you will not come to transgression. Know from where you have come, to where you are going and in front of Whom you will have to give an accounting.

עקביא בן מהללאל אומר, הסתכל בשלשה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עברה. דע, מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Berachot 5a – Remembering the day of death is a last resort for bettering one’s deeds.**

A person should always incite the good impulse to fight against the evil impulse. For it is written: “Tremble and sin not.” If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him study the Torah. For it is written: “Commune with your own heart.” If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him recite the Shema. For it is written: “Upon your bed.” If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him remind himself of the day of death. For it is written: “And be utterly silent, Selah.”

לעולם ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע שנאמר רגזו ואל תחטאו אם נצחו מוטב ואם לאו יעסוק בתורה שנאמר אמרו בלבבכם אם נצחו מוטב ואם לאו יקרא קריאת שמע שנאמר על משכבכם אם נצחו מוטב ואם לאו יזכור לו יום המיתה שנאמר ודומו סלה.

3. **Midrash Tanchumah, Kedoshim 8 – The psychological need to hide death from human thought.**

Had God not hidden the concept of death from the heart of man, man would not construct nor plant, for he would say, “Tomorrow I will die, so why should I toil for the sake of others?” Therefore God hid death from the hearts of men, so that they will build and plant...

אילולי שהקב"ה העלים מלבו של אדם את המיתה לא היה אדם בונה ולא נוטע שהיה אומר למחר אני מת למה אני עומד ומתיגע לאחרים לפיכך העלים הקב"ה מלבבות של בני אדם את יום המיתה שיהא אדם בונה ונוטע.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ∞ One of the most fundamental concepts in Judaism is the precious value of life. Human life, defined as the revelation of an elevated soul in the vessel of a physical body, fulfills the purpose of the world’s creation. Life is thus the most hallowed essence in the Jewish tradition, deferring almost all religious duties. Indeed, God Himself is called “Waters of life” (Jeremiah 2:13).
- ∞ Thus, unlike the culture of ancient Egypt, and other cultures in which death and the dead play a prominent role, Judaism emphasizes life and living.
- ∞ Jewish thought by no means promotes a theological fear of death. Nevertheless, the natural desire for life, and apprehension of death, is utilized in Jewish tradition as a means of inspiring one to improve his or her deeds and ways. At the same time, the Sages realize that thoughts of death can only be relied on as a last resort; thinking too much about death is not conducive to productive human function and to psychological health.

SECTION II. BODY AND SOUL – TILL DEATH DO US PART

Death is defined as a parting. The soul returns to its Maker, and the body returns to the earth from which it was formed. This separation only became necessary when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Mankind in its original state was immortal, the bond between body and soul being

complete and absolute. But when Adam and Eve transgressed, things changed, and now death has become a mandatory stage on the path toward achieving the ultimate perfection God created us for.

PART A. DEPARTURE OF THE SOUL

1. **Sfat Emet, Tazria 5640 – The human combination of soul and body.**

This is the wonder of the human being, in which a Divine soul is present in a physical body, as the *Rema* writes (Orach Chaim 6) in explaining the words “who performs wonders” – He binds the spiritual soul with the physical body.

הוא הפלא באדם שכולל נשמת אלקי בגשמיות הגוף,
כמ"ש הרמ"א בא"ח סי' ו' פ"י "ומפליא לעשות"
שקשר הנשמה הרוחנית במעשה גשמי.

2. **Nusach HaTefillah, Morning Blessing – We thank God for our soul, knowing that He will take it away and restore it to us in the World to Come.**

My God, the soul which You have placed within me is pure. You created it...and You preserve it within me. You will eventually take it from me and restore it to me in the future. As long as the soul is within me, I offer thanks to You...Master of all works, Lord of all souls. Blessed are You, God, Who restores souls to dead bodies.

אלוקי, נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא, אתה בראת...
ואתה משמרה בקירבי, ואתה עתיד ליטלה ממני,
ולהחזירה בי לעתיד לבא, כל זמן שהנשמה בקירבי
מודה אני לפניך... רבון כל המעשים אדון כל הנשמות
ברוך אתה ה', המחזיר נשמות לפגרים מתים.

3. **Tehillim (Psalms) 146:4 – The spirit departs.**

His spirit departs, and he returns to his soil; on that day he loses his faculties.

תצא רוחו וישב לאדמתו ביום ההוא אבדו עשתנתיו.

4. **Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 12:7 – The spirit and the body each goes its own way.**

The dust returns to the land, as it was; and the spirit returns to God, Who gave it.

וישב העפר על הארץ כשהיה והרוח תשוב אל האלקים
אשר נתנה.

5. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Handbook of Jewish Thought, Vol. II, pp. 355-356 – The soul is the Godly element in each person that returns to God after death.**

In addition to his material self, however, man possesses a soul which is unique among all of God's creations. In describing the creation of Adam, the Torah says, “God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils a soul-breath of life (*Nishmat Chaim*). Man [thus] became a living creature (*Nefesh Chaya*)” (Genesis 2:7).

The Torah is teaching us that the human soul came directly from God's innermost Essence in the same way that a breath issues forth from a person's lungs and chest cavity...

All souls were created at the beginning of time, and are stored in a celestial treasury until the time of birth. The soul has its first attachment to the body from the moment of conception, and remains with it until the moment of death. Death is thus often referred to in Hebrew as “departure of the soul” (*Yetziat HaNeshama*).

PART B. THE ORIGIN AND PURPOSE OF DEATH

In an ideal world, the body-soul connection that defines life would be perfect, and man would live forever. This was the original state that God created for Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. After man transgressed, however, the physical body became contaminated with the impurity of sin, and the body-soul connection was flawed, doomed to be separated. This is the origin of death; only in times to come, when evil in all its manifestations will pass from the world, will the original state of eternal life be restored.

1. Berieshit/Genesis 2:17 – God warns that death will be the consequence of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

But from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, do not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you will definitely die.

ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל ממנו כי ביום אכלך
ממנו מות תמות:

Many Biblical commentators are bothered by the fact that Adam did not in fact die on the day he ate from the tree. Why not? In fact, he went on to live for another 930 years! Why didn't God follow through on the punishment that He had promised?

Many answers have been put forth. One posits, based on Tehillim 90:4 that a "day" in God's eyes is 1000 years. Others say that Adam repented. But there is another view put forward by several prominent commentators that "you will definitely die" is not meant to mean death on the spot, but rather the notion of mortality in general.

2. Ramban (Nachmanides), Commentary to Bereishit 2:17 – Eating of the tree will make man mortal.

...for on the day you eat from it, you will definitely die – from the moment you eat of it you will become mortal.

ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות - בעת שתאכל ממנו תהיה
בן מות.

Adam and Eve decided to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The effects of doing so changed the very nature of the purpose of our existence.

3. Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Derech Hashem (The Way of God) 1:3:9-10, translated by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Feldheim Publishers, pg. 51 – The consequence of Adam's transgression was that he made evil a part of himself.

At first it was very easy for man to overcome his natural faults and attain perfection. The Highest Wisdom had arranged things in the best and fairest manner. The only reason that evil and deficiency existed in man was that it was made part of his nature when he was created, and therefore, as soon as he would abandon evil and choose good, he would immediately disassociate himself from his faults and earn perfection.

When Adam sinned, however, he himself caused the further concealment of perfection and increase of evil. Man himself thus became the cause of the evil that existed in him, and it

בתחלה היה נקל לו לצאת מן החסרון המטבע בו
ולקנות השלמות; שכך סידרה החכמה העליונה את
הדברים – על פי מדת הטוב והיושר, כי יען לא היה
סיבה לרע ולחסרון שבו, אלא שכך הטבע ביצירתו,
הנה, במה שיסיר עצמו מן הרע ויפנה אל הטוב, ישיג
מיד צאתו מן החסרון וקנותו השלמות.

אמנם בחטאו, כיון שעל ידו נסתרה השלמות יותר
משהיתה, ונתרבו החסרונות, והיה הוא הגורם רע
לעצמו, הנה, לא יהיה עוד כל כך קל לו לשוב לצאת מן
החסרון ולקנות השלמות, כמו שהיה בעת

therefore became much more difficult for him to abandon it. He could no longer earn perfection as easily as when he himself bore no responsibility for his own faults.

The effort required to earn perfection was therefore doubled. Man must first bring both himself and the world back to the state in which they existed before the first sin. Only then can he raise himself from that state to his destined level of perfection.

שלא היה הוא גרמת חסרונו אלא שכך נוצר מעקרו.

וכל שכן, שבהכרח – השתדלותו המצטרף עתה להגיע לשלמות הנה הוא כפול, כי יצטרך תחילה שישוב האדם והעולם אל המצב שהיה בראשונה קדם החטא, ואחר כך שיתעלו מן המצב ההוא אל מצב השלמות שהיה ראוי לאדם שיעלה.

Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler explains Adam and Eve's logic in choosing to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (see Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Vol. II, pp. 137-145). Until this point they did not “know” good and evil. All they knew was truth and falsehood. That is, they had no internal desire for evil because they saw it clearly as something illusory. So the desire to sin had to come from the outside, in the form of a snake (see Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner, Nefesh HaChaim 1:6). The snake's ploy was to lead Adam to think that he could achieve a greater spiritual height if he were to internalize evil and then, in such a state, overcome it. In fact, it was true. Adam had been given a relatively small and easy role to play in the perfection of creation. Now was his chance to do something more, to glorify God and His creation to a much greater extent. The only problem was that it just was not what God had “intended.”

So they ate from the tree and internalized the desire for evil, leaving mankind in a state of internalized confusion ever since. We no longer experience the *external* enticements of the snake. The urge for evil presents itself to us as our very own desire (*I want to eat the chocolate cake – me, I want to – even though I know my doctor said I need to diet*).

What is striking is that the Midrash relates that had Adam HaRishon (the first man) faced the choice again – he would have chosen again to eat from that Tree!

4. Bereishit Raba 19:22 – If Adam had the opportunity, he would eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil again.

Rav Abba Bar Kahana said: When Adam confessed to God that he had eaten from the tree, he said, “And I *eat* from the tree” (Bereishit 3:13). The Torah does not write that “Adam *ate* from the Tree.” This comes to teach that Adam ate from the tree and (if he faced the choice in the future), he would do so again.

א"ר אבא בר כהנא ואכלתי אין כתיב כאן אלא ואוכל, אכלתי ואוכל.

By choosing *not* to eat from that Tree, he could have lived forever in the utopian Gan Eden (Garden of Eden) without all the challenges and hardships of living in this world, including death! How can that be?

5. Rabbi Yosef Kaufman, Yeshiva Machon Yaakov, Jerusalem – Adam desired a world based on total *bechira*, free choice.

Based on Rav Dessler (above), the Midrash is teaching us that ultimately living more “independently” of God with the full reign to exercise free will to decide to come closer to God is a higher ideal for man, rather than living an eternal, intrinsically lofty existence in Gan Eden!

When the Midrash relates that Adam HaRishon said that he'd eat from the Tree again, what he was in essence doing was choosing an approach to serving God based on *bechira*, free choice. If he hadn't eaten from the tree, then his way of serving God would have been based on something other than *bechira*. Once he ate from the tree, though, and unlimited *bechira* was then the tool – the only tool – to approach God, then that tool had to be highlighted. It had to remain effective. And to keep that unlimited *bechira* effective, as the sharp tool needed to approach God, then other environmental changes had to be effected. For example, if you can know the future or live forever or can know the full consequences of your choices or be able to perceive God sensorially, then that would be too impactful on one's *bechira*, and one's *bechira* would become a limited, blunt tool, and not the effective approach to God. Hence, *bechira* demands that we live in an uncertain, challenging world, even with death, to earn our reward in the Next World and be able to become close to God.

Finally, according to the Zohar, each person chooses to be born in this world. Before each soul is brought into this world, God shows the soul what his life will be like and only after the soul says "Amen" and chooses that life, is he born. This means that each of us really did choose our life. (See Sefer Beit Yaakov, Yaakov ben Mordechai Yosef Leiner.)

Consequently, our lifetime mission is to use our free will to strive for spiritual growth so we may build a relationship with God.

6. Ramchal, Derech Hashem 1:3:2, p. 45 and p. 47. – Our task is to cultivate our spiritual side.

...The Highest Wisdom decreed that man should consist of two opposites. These are his pure spiritual soul and his unenlightened physical body. Each one is drawn toward its nature, so that the body inclines toward the material, while the soul leans toward the spiritual.

The two are then in a constant state of battle. If the soul prevails, it not only elevates itself, but elevates the body as well, and the individual thereby attains his destined perfection. If he allows the physical to prevail, on the other hand, then besides lowering his body, he also debases his soul. Such an individual makes himself unworthy of perfection, and thus divorces himself from God. He still has the ability, however, to subjugate the physical to his soul and intellect, and thereby achieve perfection.

... גזרה החכמה העליונה שיהיה האדם מורכב משני הפכים, דהיינו מנשמה שכלית וזכה, וגוף ארצי ועכור, שכל אחד מהם יטה בטבע לצדו, דהיינו הגוף לחומריות והנשמה לשכליות.

ותמצא ביניהם מלחמה, באופן שאם תגבר הנשמה, תתעלה היא ותעלה הגוף עמה, ויהיה אותו האדם המשתלם בשלימות המעותה, ואם יגבר האדם שינצח בו החומר, הנה ישפל הגוף ותשפל נשמתו עמו, ויהיה אותו האדם בלתי הגון לשלימות, ונדחה ממנו ח"ו, ולאדם הזה יכולת להשפיל חומריו לפני שכלו ונשמתו, ולקנות שלימותו כמו שזכרנו:

Nevertheless, by Adam admitting evil into his psyche, expunging it 100% would be impossible to accomplish of his own accord. Even though death – the parting of the soul from the body – was never part of the original plan of Creation, it became a necessary ingredient in man's perfection after Adam's transgression in the Garden of Eden.

7. Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner, Nefesh HaChaim, Shaar 1, Ch. 6 – Death is for the good of mankind because it alone can facilitate our perfection.

That which God said to Adam, "for on the day you eat from it, you will definitely die,"

וזה שאמר הוא ית' לאדם הראשון (בראשית ב, יז) "כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות", לא שהיה ענין קללה

was not a curse or punishment, for such things “do not issue from the Most High” (Eichah/ Lamentations 3:38). Rather, the explanation is that eating from the Tree caused the poison of evil to enter man, and the only way to separate it from a person for his ultimate good will be through death...

This is also what is meant when God says afterward (when banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden), “Man has now become (like one of us in knowing good and evil). Now he must be prevented from putting forth his hand and also taking from the Tree of Life. [If] he eats it, he will live forever!” (Bereishit 3:22). Surely God wants to do what is best for his creation, so why would it bother Him if he were to live forever? However, the reason is that were [Adam] to eat from the Tree of Life, he would remain, God forbid, without rectification, for the evil would never separate from him, and he would not see light or goodness for his days. For that reason, for his own good, was he banished from the Garden of Eden, in order that he would be able to achieve complete rectification, when evil is detached from him by way of death...

ועונשו כי מפי עליון לא תצא כו' (איכה ג, לח) אלא פירושו, שעל ידי אכלך ממנו תתערב בכ הזוהמא של הרע, ולא יהיה תקון אחר להפרידה ממך כדי להטיבך באחריתך אם לא על ידי המיתה ...

וזהו גם כן הענין מה שאמר הוא ית' אחר כך (שם ג, כב) "הן האדם היה כו' ועתה פן ישלח ידו ולקח גם מעץ החיים ואכל וחי לעולם", והלא חפצו ית' להטיב לברואיו, ומה אכפת ליה אם יחיה לעולם. אמנם ר"ל שכאשר יאכל מעץ החיים וחי לעולם ישאר ח"ו בלא תקון, שלא יתפרד הרע ממנו עד עולם ח"ו ולא יראה מאורות וטובה מימיו, לזאת לטובתו גירשו מן עדין כדי שיוכל לבא לידי תיקון גמור, כשתפרד הרע ממנו על ידי המיתה...

8. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Meshivat Nafesh, p. 35 – Death is the state in which good and evil are separated from one another.

In order to rectify man from the admixture of evil, there must be a complete separation of evil from him. Death is the state of such separation in which every element of man returns to its source. It is the separation of body from soul and the severance of evil from good.

כדי לתקן את האדם מתערובת הרע נדרשת הפרדה גמורה של הרע מן האדם. מיתה היא מציאות של פירוד והשבה של כל חלקי האדם לשרשם. היא פירוד נפש מגוף, והיא ג"כ פירוד הרע מן הטוב.

Death is the process by which the soul and body are temporarily separated and return to their sources. The soul returns to the World of the Souls, and the body returns to the ground. This is so that a new, purified structure can be built at the time of the Resurrection, when the soul will re-inhabit the body, free from the deficiencies caused by Adam's transgression.

9. Ramchal, Derech Hashem 1:3:9-10, pp. 51-53 – Since Adam's transgression, man is in a non-perfect state. To re-attain the perfection for which man was destined, his body and soul each undergo a purification process.

[After Adam's mistake] Divine justice decreed that neither man nor the world will ever be able to rise to perfection while still in their current fallen state. Because they remain in this spoiled,

ואולם מלבד כל זה גזרה מידת דינו יתברך, שלא יוכלו, לא האדם ולא העולם מעתה, הגיע אל השלמות - עודם בצורה שנתקלקלה, דהיינו הצורה שיש להם עכשיו שבה נתרבה הרע. אלא יצטרך להם בהכרח

non-ideal condition, and evil in the meantime has increased, both man and the world must go through a stage of destruction before either can arrive at perfection.

Man must therefore die, and everything else that was corrupted with him also must perish. The soul cannot purify the body until the body dies and deteriorates and a new structure is composed, that the soul can enter and purify...

It was therefore decreed that man should die and then be brought back to life. This is the concept known as the Resurrection of the Dead...

The true time and place of reward will therefore be after the Resurrection in this renewed world. Man will then enjoy his reward with both body and soul. The body will be purified by the soul, and will therefore also be in a proper state to enjoy that good.

עבור מעבר ההפסד, דהיינו המיתה לאדם, וההפסד לכל שאר ההווים שנתקלקלו עמו.

ולא תוכל הנשמה לזכך הגוף, אלא אחר שתצא ממנו תחילה, וימות הגוף ויפסד, ואז יחזור ויבנה בנין חדש ותכנס בו הנשמה ותזככהו...

ועל כן נגזר על האדם שימות ויחזור ויחיה, והוא עניין תחיית המתים...

והנה לפי שורש זה, זמן הגמול האמיתי, דהיינו זמן קיבול השכר... ומקומו הוא אחר התחייה בעולם שיתחדש, והאדם יינה בו בגופו ובנשמתו, בהיות גופו מזוכך על ידי נשמתו, ומוכן על ידה להיות נהנה בטוב ההוא.

10. Av Harachamim - Prayer for the Righteous – The soul never departs from God.

Father of compassion, Who dwells on high, in His powerful compassion may He recall with compassion the devout, the upright, and the perfect ones; the holy congregations who gave their lives for the Sanctification of the Name – who were beloved and pleasant in their lifetime, and in their death were not parted (from God)...

אב הרחמים, שוכן מרומים, ברחמי העצומים הוא יפקוד ברחמים, החסידים והישרים והתמימים, קהילות הקודש שמסרו נפשם על קדושת השם, הנאהבים והנעימים בחייהם, ובמותם לא נפרדו...

For more on the Resurrection of the Dead, see the Morasha Class entitled, “The World To Come III: The New You! Resurrection of the Dead.”

PART C. WHAT'S NEXT?

What happens to the body and soul once they separate upon death?

1. Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshitz, Yaarot Devash, Vol. 2 Derush 7 – An infusion of holiness causes the spirit to cling to its source.

The soul of man is a Divine part from Above; so too is the life-force and the spirit [parts of the soul] of man – and all of them are infused within the physical body. When a person dies, in order to separate what was attached his whole life, God shines a great light from above, to which the soul clings, as the nature of every spiritual essence is

נשמת אדם הוא חלק ממועל, וכן הרוח ונפש של אדם וכולם מתדבקים בגוף הגשמי, ובעת מיתה להפרידן מה שהיו דבקים ביחד כל ימי חייו, הקב"ה מאציל על אדם אור מלמעלה ומתדבקת בו הנשמה כטבע רוחני להתדבק ברוחני, וכן הרוח בנשמה ונפש ברוח, ומתפרדים מגוף.

to attach to that which is spiritual – so too the life-force and the spirit, all of which leave the body.

Of this it is written (Tehillim 104:29), “their spirit is increased and they die,” for this is how death takes place – the soul clings with a Divine spirituality. Thus the Sages teach that “the Shechina (Divine Presence) rests above the head of the ill” (Talmud, Nedarim 40a), for the abode of the soul is the head, and the Shechinah is above, and hence the soul is in close proximity to the Divine Presence.

Therefore, we find that the Sages of Israel would prophesize before their death, which emerged from the added spirit of holiness [that is infused before death], as we have explained.

וזהו “תוסף רוחם יגועון” (תהלים ק”ד כ”ט), כי על ידי כך נעשית הגויעה, כי מתדבקים ברוחני למעלה, וזהו אמרם (גדרים מ ע”א) כי השכינה למעלה מראשו של חולה, כי נשמה משכנה בראש והשכינה למעלה, לכך היא מתדבקת בשכינה.

ולכך מצינו חכמי ישראל שהיו מתנבאים קודם מותם, כי הוא התוספת הארת רוח קדושה כמ”ש.

2. **Ibid. – Death is what you make of it.**

The righteous ones, who were not drawn after physical enticements...their connection of the physical to the soul is therefore weak, for their genuine desire is always to cling to the spiritual. When the opportunity comes, they cling to it quickly... and the Sages teach us [of this mode of death] “as a hair that is plucked out of milk,” because [the soul] clings to its source easily.

However, someone who is drawn to transitory temptations...to the point that his spirit drowns in physicality, the separation of the two is difficult. The soul clings to the spiritual, yet a battle ensues with each element pulling in a different direction, making the death a long and difficult process [which the Talmud compares to pulling an entangled branch out of wool].

והנה הצדיקים שכל ימיהם לא נטו אחרי תאות החומר... א”כ דביקות החומר אין כ”כ בנשמה, ואדרבה, זה חפצם וישעם כל הימים להתדבק ברוחני, וכשיבא לידם, מהר נתדבק אצלם... ואמרו חז”ל (ברכות ח ע”א) כמושחל בניתא מחלבא, כי הוא מתדבק אל שורשו בקל.

אמנם מי שנטה אחרי תאות הזמן... עד שנשקע ונטבע רוחו ונפשו בדיבוק הגוף בדברים כאלה, קשה פרידתו, ואם ידבק ברוחני מלמעלה, זה מושך לכאן וזה מושך לכאן, וקשה מיתתו [כחזירא בגבבא דעמרא].

3. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Handbook of Jewish Thought, Vol. II, pp. 355-359 – after death, the soul experiences the pain of separation from the body and undergoes the cleansing process of Gehinnom (Netherworld).**

We are taught that immediately after death the soul is in a state of great confusion. It is therefore customary to stay near a dying person, so that he not die alone. The disembodied soul is intensely aware of the physical surroundings of its body. This is especially true before the body is buried. The soul then literally mourns for its body for seven days. This is alluded to in the verse, “His soul mourns for him” (Job 14:22).

For the first 12 months after death, until the body decomposes, the soul has no permanent resting

place and thus experiences acute disorientation. It therefore hovers over the body. During this time, the soul is aware of and identifies with the decomposition of the body. The Talmud thus teaches us that “Worms are as painful to the dead as needles in the flesh of the living, as it is written (Job 14:22), ‘His flesh grieves for him.’” Most commentaries write that this refers to the psychological anguish of the soul in seeing its earthly habitation in a state of decay. The Kabbalists call this *Chibut HaKever*, “punishment of the grave.”

We are taught that what happens to the body in the grave can be even more painful than *Gehinnom*. This experience is not nearly as difficult for the righteous, however, since they never consider their worldly body overly important.

This is part of the judgment of the soul which occurs during the first year after death. Aside from this, the souls of the wicked are judged for 12 months after death, while others are judged for a lesser time.

The main judgment after death is in *Gehinnom*, where the soul is cleansed in a spiritual fire, and purified so that it can receive its eternal reward.

The souls of the righteous are able to progress higher and higher in the spiritual dimension. Regarding this, the prophet was told, “If you go in My ways...then I will give you a place to move among [the angels] standing here” (Zechariah/Zachary 3:7). God was showing the prophet a vision of stationary angels, and telling him that he would be able to move among them. While angels are bound to their particular plane, man can move and progress from level to level. This is also alluded to in the verse, “The dust returns to the dust as it was, but the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Kohelet/Ecclesiastes 12:7).

For more on the nature and ultimate fate of the body and soul, see the Morasha classes: *Caring for the Jewish Soul* and *The World to Come*.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ∞ Human life is defined by the wondrous amalgam of an elevated Godly soul within a physical body. Following this principle, death is the separation of the soul from the body. The soul returns to its Maker, and the body returns to the earth.
- ∞ The origin of death is Adam’s transgression in the Garden of Eden. Had sin not been brought into the world, the body-soul connection would have been complete, and death would never have plagued humanity.
- ∞ After Adam ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it became inherently impossible for man to achieve perfection in his current state without first passing through the gate of death.
- ∞ The more attached a person is to this world, the more difficult death is.
- ∞ After death, the soul experiences the pain of separation from the body and goes through a process of spiritual cleansing.

SECTION III. DEALING WITH THE DECEASED

So far we have discussed the Jewish outlook on death. With this perspective in mind, we now turn our attention to Judaism's prescription for handling the death of a loved one and how to treat their remains, the physical as well as the spiritual.

PART A. THE MITZVAH OF BURIAL

Judaism teaches that mankind was created in the image of God. For that reason a human body must be treated with the utmost respect even after the soul has departed it.

1. Bereishit 1:27 – Mankind is created in the image of God.

God [thus] created man with His image. In the image of God, He created him, male and female He created them.

ויברא אלהים את האדם בצלמו בצלם אלהים ברא
אתו זכר ונקבה ברא אתם:

Respect for the Divine image within mankind is at the heart of the mitzvah to bury the dead.

2. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 21:22-23 with commentary of Rashi – Disgracing the body of the deceased is an insult to God.

When a man is legally sentenced to death and executed, you must then hang him on a gallows. However, you may not allow his body to remain on the gallows overnight, but you must bury it on the same day. Since a person who has been hanged is a curse to God, you must not [let it] defile the land that God your Lord is giving you as a heritage.

Rashi: It is an affront to the King, for man is fashioned in His image, and the Israelites are His children. This is compared to identical twin brothers. One became king, and one was apprehended as a thief and hanged. Everyone who saw him exclaimed, "The king has been hanged!" [The king issued a command, and the deceased brother was brought down.] Whenever the word "curse" is used throughout Scripture, it connotes slighting and insult, as in, "He insulted me explicitly" (Melachim/Kings I 2:8).

וכי יהיה באיש חטא משפט מות והומת ותלית אתו
על עץ: לא תלין נבלתו על העץ כי קבור תקברנו ביום
ההוא כי קללת אלהים תלוי ולא תטמא את אדמתך
אשר יקוק אלהיך נתן לך נחלה:

רש"י: זלזולו של מלך הוא, שאדם עשוי בדמות דיוקנו
וישראל הם בניו. משל לשני אחים תאומים שהיו דומין
זה לזה, אחד נעשה מלך, ואחד נתפס ללסטיות ונתלה,
כל הרואה אותו אומר המלך תלוי. כל קללה שבמקרא
לשון הקל וזלזול, כמו (מלכים א' ב, ח) והוא קללני
קללה נמרצת:

One might think that the body is the part of us that is *not* in the image of God. After all, the soul is what we call "the piece of God from above." But the truth is that a human being in toto – both body and soul – is in the image of God (see Morasha class on Free Will for an understanding of this concept). The body as part of the human whole deserves to be respected.

PART B. RESPECTING THE DECEASED'S FEELINGS

There is another very important reason to respect the body of the deceased. Even after a person departs from the world, the soul continues to linger around the body until the funeral is over, and to a lesser degree until the end of the seven days of mourning. During this period we are instructed to accord special honor to the dead.

As we mentioned above, while the soul has left the body it still continues to exist. It is important to realize that a consequence of the eternality of the soul is that we must continue to show respect to the body of the deceased; for though it may seem to us that once the soul departs, the body is just “dead,” Judaism teaches us that the process of separation is not always so quick and easy.

1. Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 152a – Death is hard to handle, even for the deceased.

Rabbi Chisda said: A person's soul mourns for him all seven days of *Shiva* (the seven days of mourning).

אמר רב חסדא: נפשו של אדם מתאבלת עליו כל שבעה.

What this source shows us is that the soul is aware of its departure from the body and feels pain at this separation. This state continues for some time after the actual act of death. This knowledge must guide how we treat the body after death.

2. Rabbi Yaakov Astor, Soul Searching, pp. 58-59 – Jewish law requires that the body be handled with dignity after death.

The departing soul is keenly cognizant of any act of abandonment. It may be out of its body, but it is very much present.

For this reason, it is a fundamental principle in Jewish law that the living show respect to a dead body. Thus, upon expiration, the eyes and mouth of the deceased must be closed, and the body must be covered and then buried as quickly as possible – all along handled with the greatest of dignity.

Traditionally, the task of handling the body has been reserved for a highly esteemed and select group of nonprofit volunteers called the “*chevrah kaddisha*,” or the “the holy society.” Upon the holy society falls the responsibility of *taharah*, to thoroughly wash the dead body, to clothe it in funeral shrouds, to make sure that someone is stationed over the body literally every minute until burial – in general, to put the family at ease, knowing that the body is being handled with the highest degree of dignity and sanctity.

3. Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning, p. 28 – Burial laws respect the deceased.

Judaism regards burial procedures, for the most part, as *yekara d'shichva*, devoted to the respect, honor, and endearment of the deceased...

The Sages wisely noted that one cannot and should not comfort the mourners while their dead lie before them. Comfort and relief come later, after funeral and burial arrangements have been completed and the dead have been interred. Until that time, the deceased remains the center of concern. His honor and his integrity are of primary importance.

PART C. EULOGY

Since the soul is aware of what is going on at the burial, it is very important to deliver a respectful eulogy.

1. Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 152b – The soul remains aware of what is happening to its body for some time after death.

Rabbi Abahu said: Everything said in front of the deceased is known, until the grave is sealed. Rabbi Chiya and Rabbi Shimon bar Rebbe had a disagreement. One maintained (that the deceased is aware) until the grave is sealed, and one said until the flesh decomposes.

אמר רבי אבהו: כל שאומרים בפני המת יודע, עד שיסתם הגולל. פליגי בה רבי חייה ורבי שמעון ברבי; חד אמר: עד שיסתם הגולל, וחד אמר: עד שיתעכל הבשר.

2. Talmud, Shabbat 153b – The deceased is present at the eulogy.

Rav said to Rav Shmuel the son of Shilat: Make the crowd emotional during your eulogy for me, for there I will be standing.

אמר ליה רב לרב שמואל בר שילת אחים בהספידא דהתם קאימנא.

3. Rabbi Yaakov Sliki, Torat Ha-Minchah, Derush 11 – Weeping at the eulogy is a way of honoring the spirit that clings to the body.

A person is obligated to honor the deceased with weeping and eulogy. If you should ask, what feeling does the deceased have for the honor we afford him, for surely he is as an inanimate stone?

The answer is as the Sages teach, “Everything that is said before the dead is known to him, until the grave is sealed” (Shabbat 152b). The reason for this is that the soul cannot be entirely severed from the body so quickly, but rather it separates slowly, and hovers over the body – the place in which it was accustomed to dwell.

In the Jerusalem Talmud we thus learn that for three days the spirit hovers over the body...and only after three days, it leaves it and departs.

חייב אדם לכבד את המת בבכי ובהספד. ואם תאמר ומה הרגש יש למת בכבוד שעושין לו, והרי הוא כאבן דומה.

זה אינו, שהרי אמרו רז"ל (שבת קנב ע"ב) כל מה שאומרים לפני המת יודע עד שיסתם הגולל. והטעם בזה מפני הרגל דבקות הנפש בגוף אינה יכולה להפרד מן הגוף כל כך במהרה, אלא הולכת ובאה מחופפת ומרחפת על הגוף במקום שהיתה רגילה לדור...

ובירושלמי (מו"ק ג ה) כל תלתא יומין נפשא טייסא על גופא... בתר תלתא יומין... שבקא ליה ואזלא לה.

PART D. WHAT'S WRONG WITH CREMATION?

Based on all that has been said so far, it should be clear why Judaism rejects cremation as an alternative to burial.

1. Rabbi Shraga Simmons, “Cremation” from www.aish.com – Cremation is destructive and denigrating to the deceased.

With today's high cost of burial – casket, tombstone, plot of land – many are opting for cremation. What is the Jewish position?

Judaism permits only burial. The source for this comes from the Torah, where God tells Adam: “You will return to the ground, for it was from the ground that you were taken.” (Genesis 3:19) This is reiterated in Deuteronomy 21:23 which insists on burial directly into the ground. By preventing a burial from taking place, one negates this mitzvah.

The body is to be treated with great respect because it is through the vessel of the physical body that we have fulfilled our mission in life. The body is thus more than just a physical shell; it is a holy instrument.

A Jewish burial honors the body and treats it with respect. The body is watched over and lovingly cleaned. It is placed in simple white shrouds, and then in a coffin of wood.

Cremation, on the other hand, is destructive and denigrating. In the same way we don't burn holy books, so too the body was a vehicle for the soul and should be treated with gentle respect.

Upon death, the soul goes through a painful separation from the body, which until now had housed the soul. This process of disengagement occurs as the body decays. Burial allows the soul the time to slowly depart the body and to become accustomed to its new heavenly abode.

This decay is crucial, which is why Jewish law forbids embalming or burial in a mausoleum, which would delay the decaying process. Jewish law dictates that burial take place as soon as possible after death. (In Israel, funerals often take place on the same day as the death.) Also, Jews are buried in a wooden casket, which decays more rapidly. All this is for the benefit of the soul.

One reason that Judaism prohibits cremation is that the soul would suffer great shock due to an unnaturally sudden disengagement from the body. As the Talmud says, “Burial is not for the sake of the living, but rather for the dead” (Sanhedrin 47a). Biblical examples of death by burning are considered examples of disgrace or tragedy. (See Genesis 38:34; Leviticus 20:14, 21:9; Joshua 7:15, 25)

People think that cremation is antiseptic and wholesome. “One moment a body, the next moment a sealed urn of fine ashes.” The reality of cremation is more accurately described as a carcass roasting in fire. (Think of the smell when you leave something too long in the oven.) It takes about two hours to roast a human body at 1700 degrees Fahrenheit. And then comes the grinder to make sure that the bones which were not reduced to ashes will fit into the urn. Brooms are then used to sweep out the ashes. (These brooms are not always cleaned well, so different people's ashes are sometimes mixed together. Crematoriums actually have a disclaimer to this fact.)

These are very deep spiritual matters, and it is unwise to get swept away in trends. Although some may not believe in these Jewish traditions, burial is an insurance policy against mistaken belief. This is one decision which can have eternal consequences.

2. **Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, pp. 56-57 – The consequences of cremation can be dire (when opted for intentionally).**

Cremation is never permitted. The deceased must be interred, bodily, in the earth. It is forbidden – in every and any circumstance – to reduce the dead to ash in a crematorium. It is an offensive act, for it does violence to the spirit and letter of Jewish law, which never, in the long past, sanctioned the ancient pagan practice of burning on the pyre. The Jewish abhorrence of cremation has already been noted by Tacitus, the ancient historian, who remarked (upon what appeared to be a distinguished characteristic) that Jews bury, rather than burn their dead.

1. Even if the deceased willed cremation, his wishes must be ignored in order to observe the will of our Father in Heaven. Biblical law takes precedence over the instructions of the deceased.

2. Cremated ashes may not be buried in a Jewish cemetery. There is no burial of ashes, and no communal responsibility to care, in any way, for the burned remains. The only exception is when the government decrees that the ashes be buried in the ground, and there is no other burial plot available to the family. For such unusual cases a portion of the Jewish cemetery must be marked off and set aside.

3. Jewish law requires no mourning for the cremated. *Shiva* is not [obligatory] and Kaddish [need not be] recited for them [although situations may vary; therefore a competent Halachic authority should be consulted]. Those who are [purposely] cremated are considered by tradition to have abandoned, unalterably, all of Jewish law and, therefore, to have surrendered their rights to posthumous honor.

Aside from the halachic imperative of burial, there are also important existential and sociological reasons why burial is essential for a healthy outlook on life, family, and society.

3. **Doron Kornbluth, *Cremation or Burial – A Jewish View*, Mosaica Press, pp. 43-44 – Burial shows the importance of the individual.**

Each and every human being is created in the image of God, possessing intrinsic holiness. Individuals cannot be sacrificed for the greater good of society. Our individual lives matter. And our actions matter. We are not simply “dust in the wind.” Our lives are not meaningless. Far from it, our souls are immortal, and our good choices and positive actions affect eternity – and are never forgotten.

When individuals realize their own worth, they make better choices. They rise beyond their fears and frustration and act nobly. They care for others. They give. They contribute, because they know that their contributions are important. They act well, because they feel, deep down, that in some way their actions will be remembered.

We need to be reminded that our lives are important. That we will be remembered. That the world will take note, in some way, that we lived. That we died. That our lives had meaning. Throughout history, graves and tombstones have provided a unique and powerful message that our lives mattered.

A burial plot provides this witness. The person lived, loved, tried his best – and returned to his Maker.

4. **Ibid. pp. 44-45 – Cremation denigrates the value of a human being.**

When people’s remains are burned, ground up, and then put in an urn in a columbarium, or scattered in the ocean, the subtle societal message is, “You left no mark on the world. You were only dust in the wind.”

Perhaps this is why recent media articles have begun to notice a disturbing cremation trend – remains that are forgotten or abandoned. The Seattle Times reported “...hundreds of families have ‘forgotten’ to pick up the cremated remains of their deceased relatives. As more and more people turn to cremation, such dilemmas are playing out in funeral homes across the state and nationwide. Thousands of unclaimed remains have been stacking up in cabinets and storage rooms... ‘It’s a problem that almost every funeral home deals with’ said Christine Anthony, spokeswoman for the [Oregon] State Department of Licensing, which oversees the mortuary business.”

Simply put, people intuitively realize that ashes do not have the same importance or inherent holiness as a dead body, and therefore don’t afford them much respect – unlike bodies, which are almost always taken care of properly. When individuals are given a proper burial in a small but respectful burial plot where only one individual is buried, we and the world declare: “This person lived, he mattered. He left his mark on the world. He existed. And in some way, he still does.”

5. **Ibid. pp. 62 - 64 – A cemetery is the bridge to the past, present and future.**

A new generation should not see itself as detached from the past. Society is not reborn every generation, creating its identity and political and social system from scratch. Rather, we are intimately connected to the past and the future. Those not yet born have an interest in how we lead our lives and what we do, for our decisions deeply affect them. And those already gone, too, have a stake in the present: they built the world we inherited and handed it over as a trust. Our entire lives are built on the foundation of theirs. Connecting to the past – and to those who have passed on – is crucial to who we are and who we become.

Imagine a society cut off from its past, where the living felt no responsibility to remember or carry on the legacy of preceding generations. What would happen?

When people build a society that is disconnected from the past, they know that the society they build will also be disconnected from the future. If I ignore those that preceded me, those that come next will ignore me as well – the cycle repeats itself. If I forget about my grandparents, will my grandchildren forget about me?

The bridges that we build to the past also connect us to each other in the present. The bridges that I maintain to the dead also connect me to myself – to the deeper, more giving, and more connected part of who I am and who I want to be. For society to function well, people need to feel and know that they are part of something bigger than themselves, and that their lives and contribution matter. The living need to know and be reminded of the lives and contributions of those who have passed on. Without those reminders, we are adrift, cut off from the community of history, secretly knowing and fearing that we too will be forgotten. On the other hand, with the knowledge and reminders of generations past, we bind ourselves to the future. We acknowledge our place in history and value our achievements as everlasting contributions to the general good.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ≈ There is an obligation to escort the dead on his final journey to the grave. Similarly, it is proper to eulogize the dead, allowing his memory to inspire attendees. These are expressions of honor for the dead, a manifestation of human dignity that is basic to Jewish tradition.
- ≈ In addition, the Kabbalistic tradition tells us that the human soul remains close to the body for a period of time after a person's death. The eulogy and escort is therefore of direct significance to the deceased; now that the departed will be judged in the heavenly court, having his loved ones escort him on his final journey serves him in good stead.
- ≈ Cremation is not allowed; the body must be interred in the ground. Because God created Man “in His image,” the body cannot be disposed of disgracefully. It must be returned in its human form to the ground from which it was created.

SECTION IV: HOW TO MOURN, AND HOW NOT TO

As the following story shows, if Shiva did not exist, it would have to be invented:

I have found myself in a season of loss. Every few weeks for the last six months, friends in the prime of life have

suffered the death of a close family member. These deaths included a mother, a father, a sister, a brother, a spouse and, in one particularly painful case, a teenage child who died on Christmas morning. The convergence of these passings brought home an awkward truth: I had little idea how to respond.

Particularly when the surviving friend was young, the funeral was far away and the grieving party did not belong to a religious institution, those of us around that friend had no clear blueprint for how to handle the days following the burial.

In several of these cases, a group of us organized a small gathering. E-mails were sent around, a few pizzas and a fruit salad were rounded up, someone baked a cake. And suddenly we found ourselves in what felt like the birth pangs of a new tradition.

“It’s a secular Shiva,” the hostess announced. (Bruce Feiler “Mourning in a Digital Age” from www.nytimes.com, January 13, 2012)

The traditional Jewish custom of Shiva is much more than a convenient social gathering. It is a profound ritual that allows the mourners to express full and necessary manifestations of their grief while at the same time placing their loss in its proper perspective, thus giving them the emotional energy to carry on with their lives.

PART A. THE STAGES OF MOURNING

The Jewish concept of mourning serves a dual function for those mourning. On the one hand, it gives the mourner an opportunity to express his grief. After the burial, he sits *Shiva* (lit. “seven”) for seven days, during which he may perform no acts that bring about joy and happiness.

1. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, pp. 78-79 – The five stages of mourning accompany the mourner through his grief.

The first period is that between death and burial (*aninut*), during which time despair is most intense. At this time, not only the social amenities, but even major positive religious requirements, are canceled in recognition of the mourner’s troubled mind.

The second stage consists of the first three days following burial, days devoted to weeping and lamentation. During this time, the mourner does not even respond to greetings, and remains in his home (except under certain special circumstances). It is a time when even visiting the mourner is usually somewhat discouraged, for it is too early to comfort the mourners when the wound is so fresh.

Third, is the period of *Shiva*, the seven days following burial. (This longer period includes the first three days.) During this time the mourner emerges from the stage of intense grief to a new state of mind in which he is prepared to talk about his loss and to accept comfort from his friends and neighbors. The world now enlarges for the mourner. While he remains within the house, expressing his grief through the observances of *aveilut* – the wearing of the rent garment, the sitting on the low stool, the wearing of slippers, the refraining from shaving and grooming, the recital of the Kaddish – his acquaintances come to his home to express sympathy in his distress. The inner freezing that came with the death of his relative now begins to thaw. The isolation from the world of people and the retreat inward now relaxes somewhat, and normalcy begins to return.

Fourth is the stage of *sheloshim*, the 30 days following burial (which includes the *Shiva*). The mourner is encouraged to leave the house after *Shiva* and to slowly rejoin society, always recognizing that enough time has not yet elapsed to assume full, normal social relations... Haircutting for male mourners is still generally prohibited.

The fifth and last stage is the 12-month period (which includes the *sheloshim*) during which things return to normal, and business once again becomes routine, but the inner feelings of the mourner are still wounded by the rupture of the relationship with a parent. The pursuit of entertainment and amusement is curtailed. At the close of this last stage, the 12-month period, the bereaved is not expected to continue his mourning except for brief moments when *yizkor* or *yahrzeit* (special times when the deceased is remembered) is observed. In fact, our tradition rebukes a man for mourning more than this prescribed period.

PART B. THE NEED TO MOURN

Judaism prescribes certain actions as outward manifestations of mourning. While these actions contain a certain amount of symbolism, we must appreciate that the main point is giving real expression to feelings of grief.

1. Joshua Loth Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, (Quoted in *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, pp. 77-78) – Judaism understands the psychological necessity to grieve.

The discoveries of psychiatry – of how essential it is to express, rather than to repress grief, to talk about one's loss with friends and companions, to move step by step from inactivity to activity again – remind us that the ancient teachers of Judaism often had intuitive wisdom about human nature and its needs which our more sophisticated and liberal age has forgotten. Traditional Judaism, as a matter of fact, had the wisdom to devise almost all of the procedures for health-minded grief which the contemporary psychologist counsels, although Judaism naturally did not possess the tools for scientific experiment and systematic study.

We find that Jewish law walks us through several stages in the mourning process to help us deal responsibly with the reality of our loss.

2. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 340:1 – Tearing a garment allows venting of one's grief.

Someone whose relative has died, if it is a relative that one is required to mourn over, he must tear his garment over the deceased.

מי שמת לו מות והוא מהמתים שראוי להתאבל עליהם
חייב לקרוע עליו.

3. Rabbi Yaakov Astor, *Soul Searching*, pp. 60-61 – The custom of tearing one's clothes is an important gesture to help us express our grief.

One of the more curious laws is the one that obligates all close relatives of the deceased to tear their garments. In Jewish mystical writings, the body is called a "garment of the soul." Tearing one's garment, therefore, may be more than just a symbolic gesture, but a reassurance to the deceased hovering nearby that the bereaved loved one feels the loss as if his or her own body was torn asunder.

Rabbis often decry the custom of tearing a small ribbon instead of an actual garment. It can be construed to imply that the loss of the loved one is not very deep; it merely calls for the tearing of some prefabricated ribbon the rabbi or funeral director hands out. For the grieving soul hovering about, it is a statement that their loss is not worth the price of a new shirt or sport jacket.

It is further reflective of the sterility with which modern society faces death... [Death] is something contemporary society tries to deny, and this is reflective of so many institutional practices. It is not

healthy for the grieving party to hide the inevitability of death behind septic, emotionally distant gestures. Certainly for the hovering soul, the loss is heartfelt. It is a great service therefore for those close relatives who remain behind to outwardly express their heartfelt grief by tearing their own outer garment as if it were their own body.

PART C. DON'T MOURN TOO MUCH

The death of a loved one is a traumatic experience often accompanied by grief and emotional turmoil. While these feelings are given expression in the Jewish order of mourning through actions like tearing one's clothes, nevertheless there are mourning-related practices that the Torah forbids. Even when we are struck by grief and sorrow, it is important to see the event in its true perspective. Although the loved one is no longer in this world, his life continues, albeit in a different form, in the World to Come.

There is a parable composed by Rabbi Y.M. Tuckachinsky about twins in the womb having a conversation about what their life will be like once they leave the shelter and comfort of their environment. The one twin is sure that outside the womb a world of opportunity awaits them, while the other twin maintains that leaving the womb will result in certain death. The argument between the two rages on, until the moment of birth arrives. The first twin is born, to the joyous sounds of Mazal Tov, while the yet-unborn twin assumes the worst – that the cries he hears must mean his brother has died. He does not know that where his brother is now, is actually the real world and that he will be joining him shortly, that there is life beyond the womb. He thinks that the womb is all there is, and that there is no existence outside of this.

This parable is symbolic of this world and the World to Come. We think that this world is the only world, and that once we leave this world, our existence is over. But this is not so. This world is merely a preparation for the next world, and the next world is really where our existence has meaning, and sheds light retroactively on our existence in this world.

1. Devarim 14:1 – Forbidden expressions of grief.

You are children of Hashem your God – do not cut yourselves, nor tear out hair between your eyes [in sadness] over a death.

בנים אתם לה' א-לקיכם לא תתגודדו ולא תשימו קרחה בין עיניכם למת.

2. Commentary of Tosefot to Torah, ibid. – We always have our Father in Heaven.

What is the connection [between being children of Hashem, and the prohibition of tearing out hair or cutting oneself]?

This is the explanation: If your parent, who brought you into the world, has died, you shall not [i.e., have no reason to] cut yourselves – for your Father in Heaven, praised is His Name, is alive eternally.

מה ענין זה לזה?

אלא הכי פירושו אם מת אביכם שהוליד אתכם אין לכם להתגודד עליו כי עדיין אביכם שבשמים ישתבח שמו לעד חי וקיים.

3. **Commentary of Rabbeinu Bachya to Torah, ibid. – It is wrong to grieve excessively, because the deceased continues to live.**

This was a practice of the Amorites, because they viewed this world as the essential one. Therefore when someone died, that person was eternally lost. We are not like that. We are children of God, heirs to His most special inheritance; we are destined for the World to Come. Therefore we should not cut our bodies nor tear out our hair, for we have confidence that although the body will no longer be in this world, the soul will inherit the next world – which is the main one.

ומנהג האמוריים היה לפי שהיו עושין מן העולם הזה עיקר וכאשר ימות להם מת ויאבד מביניהם הנה הוא אבוד לעולם. אבל אתם אינכם כן כי בנים אתם לה' אלהיכם ודרך האב להוריש לבנו מנה יפה שיש לו, ולפיכך העוה"ב שבראתי הוא מעותד לכם, ועל כן אי אתם רשאים להתגודד על המת ולא למרט שער הראש כי בטוחים אתם שאם יאבד הגוף בעוה"ב שתירשו חיי העוה"ב שהוא העיקר.

4. **Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, quoted in Alei Shur Vol. I p. 303 – The deceased is closer in death than in life.**

We should understand death as no more and no less than an uprooting from one city to another... it is only a change of location.

And those who know and understand these delicate matters know and understand that to the contrary, now the deceased is closer and more with us than in life, for now there is no barrier. [The self-interest that serves as a barrier between people during their lifetime is no longer there.]

אין לנו להבין ענין המיתה כי אם עם העתק מעיר לעיר ולא יותר... אין זה רק העתק מקום. ולהמבין והיודע דקות הענינים יודע ומבין דאדרבה, שכעת הוא יותר קרוב ונמצא עמנו עוד יותר מבחייו שאין שום חוצץ לפניו.

5. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Vol. II, pp. 62-63 – Death does not change our essence.**

One should know that death does not change a persons' essence. An evildoer, who throughout life was stuck in shallowness, will remain this way even after his soul has separated from his body. However, since the soul will have no outlet to experience shallowness, it will desire it even more, and will be filled with a great hunger...

On the other hand, regarding those who have filled their lives with true spiritual content... the roots of their portion in the World to Come are found within themselves, they will not desire other things. Therefore, they will be happy with their portion.

וזאת לדעת, כי אין מיתת הגוף משנה בעצם את מצבו הפנימי של האדם. הרשע, שבזמן חיי הבלו דבק היה בדמיון, גם כשיפרד מגופו נשאר הוא דבק לדמיונו, אך מכיון שאינו מוצא את סיפוקו, ישתוקק הוא אליו כל עוד יותר, וימלא רעבון עצום...

מצד שני, על אלה הדבוקים בחייהם בתוכן הרוחני האמיתי... וכל שורשי העולם הבא שלהם נמצאים בתוך עצמם, ואינם שואפים לדברים אחרים זולתם, וע"כ שמחים הם בחלקם.

PART D. CONSOLING THE MOURNERS

The Shiva process, aside from giving vent to natural feelings of loss, also fulfills a function of consolation

for the mourners. During the mourning period, friends and acquaintances visit the mourner and offer him comfort and solace. He learns to appreciate that despite his loss, life goes on; he becomes prepared for continued living without his loved one.

1. Mourners' Blessing – said by those who have come to console the mourners.

May God (literally, The Place) comfort you among the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך אבלי ציון ירושלים.

2. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Vol. IV, p. 342 – The miracle of consolation.

The meaning of this text is that it is not truly human nature to be comforted. Even if people will say many comforting things, it would naturally be of no avail. Rather, consolation is a gift from God; He Himself comes to comfort the mourner, performing a miracle for each one that allows healing to take effect through words of comfort. Thus the mourner is healed from the sorrow of his mourning.

פירוש נוסח זה, כי באמת אין בטבע האדם להתנחם, ואם גם ירבו לאמר לפניו דברי תנחומין לא יועילו כלל, אלא כי מתנה היא ממנו ית' שהוא בעצמו הולך ומנחם האבלים, הוא עושה נס לכל אבל ואבל, אשר שם בו סמוני רפואה אלו שהם התנחומין, ובוזר מרפא אותו מן סבל האבילות.

PART E. HONORING THE DECEASED IN WORD AND DEED

The mourning is also meant for the deceased. It constitutes shouldering the burden of the deceased and feeling his pain. This is also why we talk about the deceased, emphasizing his good deeds in particular.

1. Rabbi Yaakov Astor, Soul Searching, p. 63 – The living can help the deceased.

The dead may be helpless, but they are very much dependent on the living to help them.

For that reason, various mourners' prayers have become part of the thrice-daily Jewish prayer service. Through these prayers – above all, the Kaddish – the soul of the departed can become elevated.

This is an important principle. Normally it is understood that death freezes the soul at whatever spiritual level it is at. However, Kaddish – which is a prayer, not about death, but rather about the affirmation of God's greatness – is seen as a way for children to perform a righteous deed in the merit of their parents, raising their parents' status in the world beyond. (The righteous deed in this case is leading a multitude of people in a public declaration of God's greatness.) Kaddish, like other prayers (the Yizkor prayer recited on Jewish holidays and the Keil Malei Rachamim prayer), charity, and Torah study are viewed in Jewish law as tools by which the living can help the deceased, who are no longer able to help themselves. Thus, it is among the greatest and purest acts of altruism one can perform.

The more aware we are that our good deeds benefit our forebears, the more careful we will be to do the right thing.

2. **Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, Da'at Chochma U'Mussar, Vol. 3, pp. 230-231 – The deeds of the deceased's children affect the deceased's standing in Heaven.**

The children and relatives of the deceased are commanded to constantly think about his [the deceased's] condition and about how he is awaiting the [good] deeds of his children. For this is his only merit there, and only this can save him from hell. This is the purpose of [saying] Kaddish... for children save their parents through all their good deeds. Woe to the deceased if his children cause him anguish through their destructive behavior! If children could conceptualize and picture this to themselves, they would be busy with mitzvot and good deeds their whole life if for no other reason than for the love of their parents...

Be concerned about your father of blessed memory more than you were concerned for him during his lifetime... you are his only hope.

ובכן נצטוו בנים וקרובים להמת שיתבוננו תמיד במצבו, וגם איך הוא מחכה שם על מעשה הבנים, שרק זאת זכותו שמה, ורק המה מצילים אותו מיום רעה. וזהו ענין הקדיש... שהבנים מצילים האבות בכל מעשה טובתם, וחי"ו אוי ואבוי להנפטר, וכמה יצירו לו המצירים ממועשה הבנים, ולו יצירו ויתבוננו זאת הבנים המאמינים, אז היו עוסקים כל ימיהם במצוות ומעשים טובים אך ורק מאהבת הבן לאב...

תדאג בעד אביך ז"ל יותר מכפי שדאגת בעדו בעוד חיים הייתו... עיניו נשואות רק לכם.

3. **Based on Aish.com and Rabbi Chaim Binyamin Goldberg, Mourning in Halacha, Chapter 44, ArtScroll Publications – Yahrzeit customs are a merit for the soul of the deceased.**

Each year, on the Jewish anniversary of the death of a loved one, known as the yahrzeit, a proper commemoration should take place. If you are not sure of the Jewish date, contact a synagogue, yeshiva or funeral home, and they can assist you. There are several commemorations around this day which are a merit for the soul of the departed:

Light a yahrzeit candle at home, beginning at nightfall, the start of the Jewish day.
Give tzedakah in your loved one's memory.

Learn Torah that day. Read from a book about Judaism or Torah ideas, or arrange to learn with someone from the community. Many study mishnayot where the initial letters of the chapter spell the name of the deceased. This is followed by studying the last four mishnayot of the seventh chapter of Tractate Mikvaot, whose initial letters spell נשמה, soul.

Recite Kaddish. If you cannot, arrange for someone to recite it on your behalf. Call a local synagogue or yeshiva for help.

Sponsor a kiddush in synagogue on that day, or on the Shabbat that falls at the end of that week.

Fast from sunrise to sunset.

It is significant to note that in Judaism we downplay birthdays, never commemorating the date of birth of one who has passed away, yet we are careful to mark the anniversary of someone's death. The Talmud compares this to a ship. How odd that we hold a big party when the ship is about to sail, yet when it arrives at its destination, nothing is done. It really should be the other way around. Although the day of birth holds all the potential for the life that will be, the day of death is the marker of who we actually became. Our worth is measured according to how much of our potential was realized. Did

we live up to who we were to the best of our ability in the time that we had? When our loved ones die and go back to God, to their “port of call,” we mourn not having them here with us, yet we remember what they were able to accomplish in this life. The *yahrzeit* is a time to feel the sadness – but also to celebrate who they were and the life they lived.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ⌘ Jewish law leads mourners through various stages of coping with their loss, starting most intensely with *Aninut* directly after the death, then burial and the three days following it, then the seven days of sitting *Shiva*, followed by the one month and then the year after death.
- ⌘ For the mourner’s emotional health, it is important to give outward expression of one’s grief. The Jewish custom of rending one’s garments helps to facilitate this.
- ⌘ The pagan customs of mourning reflected their conception of death: injuring themselves expressed the finality of death, an end to which there is no continuation. This type of mourning is out of place in Judaism, which maintains that the soul is eternal. Excessive grieving is wrong, as this implies a finality of death, which is foreign to Judaism.
- ⌘ Sitting *Shiva* helps one feel consoled for one’s loss. Visitors help do this, and God Himself helps mourners deal with their loss.
- ⌘ While the deceased are no longer in a position to advance their spiritual standing, those they leave behind can help them through their own deeds, such as saying *Kaddish*, learning Torah, and observing the *yahrzeit*.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT IS JUDAISM'S ATTITUDE TOWARD DEATH?

Judaism is a religion of life, greatly valuing our time in this world to earn our attachment to infinity. Death is shunned, as it is an end of our time to earn our closeness to God.

On the other hand, being aware of death and the limitation it places on our time here can spur us on to be better and more creative people.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF DEATH? WHY MUST A PERSON DIE?

Death is the separation of body and soul at which point the soul returns to God. After the transgression in the Garden of Eden, it became impossible for the soul to complete its function of purifying the body without first passing through the portal of death. This was the result of Adam choosing to have a life based on free will, *bechira*, in order to build a relationship with God.

ARE THE DEAD AWARE OF WHAT HAPPENS TO THEIR BODIES AFTER THEY DIE?

The soul lives on and returns to God, but it feels pain at separating from the body and remains somewhat attached to it for a period after death. As such, the soul is aware of how the body is treated and even of what is said in its presence.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MOURNING OVER THE DEAD? ISN'T THIS MORBID?

Mourning is not simply a symbolic ritual. Judaism recognizes the psychological necessity to grieve and therefore gives concrete expression to this need in the laws of mourning.

We have to be careful to avoid morbidity and excess mourning because we need to maintain the proper perspective: while the dead have departed us, they are still very much alive in the presence of God.

WHY DO WE SHOW HONOR TO THE DECEASED? WHAT CAN WE DO FOR SOMEONE WHO IS ALREADY DEAD?

Since the hovering souls are aware of what happens to their bodies and feel pain upon being separated from them, it is of utmost importance for us – the living – to treat them with respect.

While the deceased can no longer affect their own spiritual growth, those that they leave behind can benefit them in the next world. The mitzvot that we do, like saying Kaddish, and the Torah that we learn on their behalf, can serve to elevate their spiritual standing beyond the grave.

FURTHER READING:

Rabbi Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*

Lori Palatnik, *Remember My Soul*

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, *Gateway to Judaism*, Ch. 3

Rabbi Doron Kornbluth, *Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View*

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Derech Hashem* 1:3:8-13

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, Vol. I, pp. 297-305

Rabbi Chaim Goldberg, *Mourning in Halacha*

Morasha Classes on *The World to Come and The Resurrection of the Dead*