

JEWISH PRINCIPLES OF CARE FOR THE DYING

BY RABBI AMY EILBERG

(adapted from "*Acts of Loving Kindness: A Training Manual for Bikur Holim*")

Entering a room or home where death is a presence requires a lot of us. It is an intensely demanding and evocative situation. It touches our own relationship to death and to life. It may touch our own personal grief, fears and vulnerability. It may acutely remind us that we, too, will someday die. It may bring us in stark, painful confrontation with the face of injustice when a death is untimely or, in our judgement, preventable. If we are professional caregivers, we may also face feelings of frustration and failure.

Here are some Jewish principles of care for the dying which are helpful to keep in mind:

***B'tselem Elohim* (created in the image of the Divine)**

This is true no matter what the circumstances at the final stage of life. Often it is our task to simply see that no matter how much time remains until the moment of death, this person embodies a spark of the Divine.

***Refu'at HaNefesh* (healing of the spirit)**

With surprising frequency, the final stages of life offer the possibility of healing of the spirit, precisely when healing of the body is no longer a possibility. It is helpful to simply know this truth, and perhaps to remember occasions when one has seen this in life.

Hopefulness

As long as there is life, there is hope. It is not helpful to encourage unrealistic expectations on the level of physical healing, lest the patient and loved ones feel betrayed and shattered when this hope proves unjustified. There are things to hope for, and an attitude of hopefulness is possible even in dark times.

***Teshuva* (repentance/turning/atonement)**

One Talmudic rabbi taught, "Do *teshuva* the day before you die." This poignant teaching encourages all of us to live our lives in such a way that we will be ready when death comes. It helps to know that extraordinary acts of soul-searching, reconciliation, and growth can and do happen right up to the end of life.

Community

Inevitably, we die alone, in our own body, on our own solitary journey. Yet as with every phase of the Jew's life, we journey with others, those who have

gone before and those who stand with us now. We are part of this larger community (a Jewish community, a human community) that has known death and will continue to live after our bodies are gone—part of something stronger and larger than death.

Appreciation of Everyday Miracles

Quite often, the nearness of death awakens a powerful appreciation of the "miracles that are with us, morning, noon and night" (in the language of the Amidah prayer). Appreciation loves company; we only need to say "yes" when people express these things.

Afterlife

Unfortunately, most Jews have little knowledge of our tradition's very rich teachings on life after death. Read up on the subject, then, just listen to the person who is dying.

For those who visit, care, and comfort.

A Blessing

May you be comforted by your ability to care and to give comfort.

May you derive strength from your own deeply held faith to be emotionally present to suffering and grief.

May your prayers give voice to the awesome state of our mortality in the face of the infinite.

And may you find grace to help others see that rage against loss carries within it the feisty spark of its own divine energy.

That our outcry is as important as our tears.

BY DR. KEN GORFINKLE

Adapted from "*When a Child Dies: Helping the Rabbi Help,*"

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*“Beloved
is human
who was
created in
the divine
image.”*

RABBI AKIVA,
quoted in Mishnah Avot 3:14

For Those Who Care:

Clergy, Professional Caregivers, Family Members, Loved Ones, *Bikur Holim* Visitors.

THE NEEDS OF THE DYING

BY RABBI AMY EILBERG

(from "Acts of Loving Kindness")

The following is intended as a sketch of the terrain that may be encountered at the bedside or in the home of a person facing death. Remember that each person's situation is different, and each person will bring the unique gifts and challenges of their life and being to this final stage of their journey. But it is helpful to have some sense of what dying people frequently need and long for, in order to have some sense of what issues may most need our compassionate response. Also note that though this summary is offered primarily in terms of what the dying person needs, loved ones who stand with the dying person will experience many of the same issues from their own vantage point.

FEARS

People facing death most often fear (in no particular order):

- ∞ Loneliness
- ∞ Death itself
- ∞ The twists and turns of the dying process
- ∞ Pain

END-OF-LIFE TASKS

Life review. The primary developmental task of this time of life is to look back; to savor and celebrate the gratifying parts of life, and to acknowledge, grieve, and perhaps make peace with the painful parts of the life one has lived.

Finishing business. There may be "business" to finish in relationship to the self, in relationship to others, and in relationship to God.

Reconciliation/forgiveness. There may be work to do to acknowledge guilt and pain. One may need to communicate these issues with those involved, in whatever way possible, in order to seek and receive forgiveness.

Leaving legacy. In addition to material preparations, people long to know that their legacy will continue to live in this world after their death.

Grief work. Remember that grief work includes not only sadness about leaving loved ones behind and fear about what death may bring, but also all kinds of ambivalences, anger, resentment, and guilt, to name a few.

Plans. Many people have a strong need to participate in their own funeral plans. Though often initially awkward, this process can become a way to exert control where they still can, as well as relieving those left behind of the full burden of decision-making when death comes.

Saying goodbye. Those lucky families who are able to do this difficult work inevitably feel grateful, enriched, and even comforted.

Cultivating moments of acceptance. Dying is rarely beautiful. Most people, even the most spiritually developed, struggle against death's approach. Yet for many there are moments, glimmers of a sense that this is OK, that people have been doing this for a long time. These fleeting moments, interspersed within a range of other feelings and experiences, can be consciously cultivated.

THE HARDEST TASK OF ALL...

A couple of years ago, an oncologist called for a consultation. Over the past two years, he had treated a medical colleague for cancer, and the two doctors had become good friends in the process. Barely holding back his tears, he explained that the cancer had advanced to a point where no more treatment was of use, and it was time to tell his patient, his friend, that it was time to turn to palliative care, to put his affairs in order, and to prepare for death. "But how?" he pleaded, "How can I say that to him?"

I didn't have a script to offer, but I did share with him the following midrash from the Middle Ages:

"Is this matter meant for me?"

Moses tells Aaron of his impending death.

A Midrash

Said the Holy Blessed One to Moses, "Do Me a favor and tell Aaron of his death, for I am ashamed to tell him."

What did Moses do? He rose early in the morning and went to Aaron. "My brother Aaron!" he cried.

Aaron immediately came down to him and asked, "Why have you come here so early today?"

Replied Moses, "There was a matter in Torah that was difficult for me, and I pondered it all night. That is why I have come to you early in the morning."

"What matter is it?" asked Aaron.

"I do not know what matter it was; I know only that it is in the Book of Genesis."

They took the Book of Genesis and read from it together. When they reached the creation of Adam, Moses said, "What shall I say about Adam, who brought death to the world?"

"Moses, my brother," replied Aaron, "shall we not accept God's decree in this matter?"

Said Moses, "And I, who ruled over the ministering angels, and you, who stopped the Angel of Death—will our end not be thus?"

As soon as Moses reminded him of the day of death, Aaron's bones felt weak. "Is this matter meant for me?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Moses.

Thereupon (the people of) Israel saw that he was diminished in size.

Moses said to him, "Do you accept death?"

"Yes," answered Aaron.

"Then let us ascend to *Hor HaHar*," said Moses.

When they ascended to *Hor HaHar*, a cave opened for them, where they found a bier which was the work of Heaven. Aaron took off one garment at a time, which

Elazar put on, while a fog enveloped Aaron.

Immediately, the Divine Presence (Shekhinah) descended and kissed him. Then the Holy Blessed One said to Moses, "Depart from here." When they left, the cave was sealed. And Moses and Elazar descended.

— YALKUT SHIMONI (early 12th century), HUKKAT 76

He asked me to fax him this story, and subsequently told me that the two of them read it together, and wept together. Even the Holy Blessed One finds it hard.

—RABBI SIMKHA Y. WEINTRAUB, CSW,
RABBINIC DIRECTOR, NCJH

Psalm One Hundred Forty-Three Last Days

Guide me, Holy One, on this final journey,
Your hand pointing the way,
Your loving eye upon my face
As I seek my new dwelling.

Surround me with Your kindness,
Embrace me with tranquility;
Soothe my fears with the surety of Your care,
Even as I release my tears to Your custody.

Then shall I find Your eternal gift of peace,
Laid out for my notice and my strength.
Linger near, Holy One, through these trials,
Easing my way as I fly to your keeping.

DEBBIE PERLMAN
Resident Psalmist, Beth Emet,
The Free Synagogue, Evanston, Illinois

LEAVING A LEGACY: Ethical Wills

BY HARRIET FEINER, CSW

Director, Shira Ruskay Hospice Information and Referral Service, JBFCS

My husband did not speak for the last 9 months of his life, due to a degenerative nerve condition related to Parkinson's disease. It is hard to convey how much it meant to us to have some of his words and thoughts after his death. Fortunately for us, our synagogue had sponsored workshops on writing ethical wills as part of its mutual support programming twelve years before he died, when he was completely well.

So, what is an ethical will? We are all familiar with wills which distribute material possessions, but many of us have lost track of the Jewish custom of writing an ethical will, a spiritual legacy that discusses the feelings, wisdom and values that we wish to leave to our children, grandchildren, and loved ones.

My husband died late on a Wednesday afternoon, too late to schedule a Thursday funeral. That Thursday became a very special and sacred day. Our three children, their spouses and our four grandchildren, then 17, 8, 5, and 1 year, spent the day quietly together. I took out the rudimentary ethical will that my husband had written as well as a fill-in book called "Grandpa's Story" that he had received as a Father's day gift years before and had filled out long before his death. I sat on the bed surrounded by grandchildren and children and read aloud to a rapt audience. When I stopped for a breath, I would hear, "Read, Grandma, read!"

As we listened to my husband's words, we felt that we had him back. We had a concrete legacy to hold onto. The little ones who really didn't know him as he once had been, somehow felt that they knew him better. Nevertheless, one of them commented that she was sad and angry that she had not had the opportunity to know him as her older cousins had. Later I made copies of Grandpa's story, of the ethical will, and of the very moving eulogies that were given. Each child and grandchild received a copy of the entire packet.

We often talk about dad or grandpa, and the written record provides a sense of continuity even for those grandchildren who were too young to remember or were not even born. Many of us may know the history of our people but not of our own family. An ethical will helps us to remember and thereby keep a person and our personal heritage alive.

We thank Harriet for sharing this personal story with all of us. Leaving this kind of legacy for our loved ones is something we can think about long before we are facing the end of life. As our ancestors gave blessings to their children, let us find a way to use the wonderful tools available to us today (video-tape, audio recordings, digital cameras, etc.) to create our own blessings for those we love. Some helpful books on the subject are included in the resource list on page 6.

Being Prepared



All of us are familiar with the concept of a will—the legal document which dictates your wishes concerning your material possessions after your death. You may have also heard the terms "living will" and "health care proxy or medical power of attorney." These are two other types of legal documents that are known as advance directives and have their impact while you are still alive. In all 50 states and the District of Columbia, we have the legal right to accept or reject medical treatment. These types of documents allow you to give instructions about your medical care even if you are unable to speak due to serious illness or incapacity. Basically, a living

will states your wishes about how you want to be treated if you have an illness with no hope of recovery. A health care proxy lets you appoint someone you trust to be your surrogate and to make these decisions for you if you become incapacitated.

Medical technology can be used to prolong life as never before. You and your loved ones may be faced with making difficult decisions at a time when you might also be dealing with fear, confusion, and sadness. Taking time to think about your wishes and concerns while you are still well and preparing these advance directives can be comforting for you and become a great gift to those you love. And, if you are concerned that decisions made for you by others reflect your particular interpretations of Jewish law, these directives can be very important in making your wishes clear.

Some things to keep in mind:

1. Discuss your living will with your health care proxy and your doctor. They need to know your wishes, and you need to know their concerns and if they can comply.
2. Individual state laws may require certain types of interventions to be specified on your health care proxy form (e.g. "do not resuscitate," artificial nutrition and hydration, etc.). You may want to discuss any questions with your doctor.
3. You can get health care proxy forms from the Department of Health or from your local hospital.
4. Make several copies of each document and distribute to your doctor, hospital, etc. Keep the originals safe and make sure they can be found when needed.
5. Each major denomination of American Jewish life has prepared some form of living will and/or guide to preparing for the end of life. Ask your rabbi or call your movement office to find out how to obtain copies.

Choices: Hospice Care at the End of Life

Since hospice care for the dying is a relatively new type of care on the American medical scene, many of us are just learning about what it offers. Hospice care provides aggressive comfort (palliative) care as well as pain management, and is considered an option when the disease process is irreversible and aggressive medical treatment to “cure” is either inappropriate or futile. Since most hospice services are primarily provided at home, hospice actually represents a philosophy of care rather than an actual physical structure. The philosophy is holistic, so the health care team for each patient and family not only includes medically trained members, but those trained in psychological and spiritual support as well. The goal of this kind of care is to help make every remaining moment at the end of life as comfortable and as meaningful as possible for the patient and his or her loved ones.

Here is a small compilation of resources echoing some of the Jewish voices on hospice care (put together by Rabbi Simkha Weintraub). We encourage you to learn more about the availability of hospice care in your community, and to address any specific questions and concerns you may have with your doctor and/or your rabbi.

“As we learn more about the dying process, hospice care becomes not only a permissible option, but, at least in most cases, the Jewish preferable one...It has become widely known that dying patients usually do not fear death as much as they fear pain, isolation, physical deterioration, and infantilization. Therefore, hospice care...has a much better chance than a hospital does of addressing the real needs of the dying...Even the person’s physical needs are probably better served through hospice care. One enters a hospice program fully aware that death cannot be avoided; therefore the goal of both the person and the attending health care personnel is no longer confused by unrealistic wishes but is rather clearly focused on pain management. Since Judaism generally is interested in the whole person and not just the body, and since even care of the body is greatly influenced by a person’s psychological well-being, rabbis should explore it (hospice care) with the terminally ill and their families, and where appropriate, recommend it...”

RABBI ELLIOTT DORFF,
in *Conservative Judaism* magazine,
Spring 1991, pages 26-7.

“In many ways, hospice care epitomizes what all medical care should be, and it exemplifies the Jewish vision of healing, addressing both *r’fuat hanefesh* and *r’fuat haguf*, healing of the body and healing of the spirit. Hospice care—whether provided in a residential center or in the patient’s home—is care that addresses the possibilities of healing, when the time to fight for cure has passed, when the pursuit of cure would only destroy the person’s opportunity to use the remaining time meaningfully. Hospice is care of the whole person—care of the person’s body and emotions and spiritual life, care for the whole family and the person’s circle of caregivers, care for the context in which the person will live the last chapter of life. Hospice care is offered by a team of care providers who actually talk to one another, who understand that the parts of the person are interconnected, and that the best care is care that recognizes and honors those connections. Hospice is care that is loving, fierce in its determination to alleviate the pain, and respectful of the life this person has lived. Hospice, at its best, is care that is unafraid of death and pain, reverent of the mysteries of life and death, aware of the limitations of medical technology and of the possibilities of love...”

RABBI AMY EILBERG, from “*Walking in the Valley of the Shadow: The Spiritual and Ethical Dimensions of Care at the End of Life*,” delivered at the “End of Life Issues and Care: Jewish Perspectives” Conference, Nov. 4, 1998.

“...Hospice reflects King Solomon’s observation: “There is a time to give birth and a time to die...” (*Ecclesiastes 3:2*)...Had King Solomon written there is “a time to live”, a dying patient’s family might feel that “they must do everything to keep him alive,” even if it is medically futile. Hospice helps us understand and accept the wisdom that “we are born...live...and die against our will” (*Avot 4:29*).

Medical science—with all its sophisticated technology—may, at best, postpone the arrival of the Angel of Death; it cannot deny him access forever. Accepting our mortality by acknowledging that our loved one is dying is not an act of abandonment or a lack of faith and love. It is, rather, the recognition of the reality that ultimately each of us must surrender our soul to our Maker. For patient and family, hospice can make those final days together among the most poignant and meaningful they have ever shared.

RABBI ZEV SCHOSTAK
“Precedents for Hospice and Surrogate
Decision-Making in Jewish Law,” in
Tradition magazine 34:2, page 50.

The Vidui prayer is the traditional prayer recited at the end of life. Since we will never know when we will be called upon to say it, either for ourselves or with or for someone we love or care for, we thought it helpful to present it here. Rabbi Amy Eilberg has prepared some pointed study/thought questions about the Vidui, to help us prepare for that moment.

VIDUI:

The Final Confessional Prayer

Translation and thought questions by RABBI AMY EILBERG

My God and God of my fathers and mothers
May my prayer come before You
Do not ignore my plea.

Please, forgive me for all of the sins
That I sinned before You throughout my lifetime.
I regret things that I have done.

Now, O God, take my suffering and pain as atonement.
Forgive my mistakes, for against You have I sinned.

May it be Your will, O God, my God and God of my ancestors
That I sin no more.

In Your great mercy, cleanse me of the sins I have committed.
But not through suffering and disease.

Send me a complete healing along with all those who are ill.

I acknowledge before You, Adonai, my God and God of my ancestors,
That my healing and my death are in Your hands.

May it be Your will to grant me a complete healing.
If it be Your will that I am to die of this illness,

Let my death be atonement for all the wrongs that I have done in my life.
Shelter me in the shadow of Your wings.
Grant me a place in the world to come.

Parent of orphans and Guardian of widows,
Protect my dear loved ones,
With whose souls my soul is bound.

Into Your hand I place my soul.
You have redeemed me, O God of Truth.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad
Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

Adonai Hu Ha'elohim Adonai Hu Ha'Elohim
Adonai is God Adonai is God

Thought questions

1. Why does the word "sin" feel so uncomfortable to us? Can you see any reason to acknowledge sin—with all of the starkness of that word—at the end of life? Can you imagine there being comfort in this for the dying person?
2. Why does the prayer have the person continue to pray for the possibility of healing?
3. What does the prayer mean by suggesting that death, when it comes, may be atonement for the wrongs the person has committed in life?
4. Why does it make sense to recite the Shema at the end of a life?

Some Jewish Resources on Dying

EILBERG, AMY; FLAM, NANCY; OFFEL, JANET. *Acts of Loving Kindness* (New York, NY: National Center for Jewish Healing, 1996)

GILMAN, NEAL. *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality on Jewish Thought*. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights)

HARLOW, JULES. *The Bond of Life* (NY: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1983)

LAMM, MAURICE. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969)

OZAROWSKI, JOSEPH S. *To Walk in God's Ways: Jewish Pastoral Perspectives on Illness and Bereavement* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995)

PERLMAN, DEBBIE. *Flames to Heaven: New Psalms for Healing and Praise*. (Willmette, IL: Rad Publishers 1998, call 847-256-4206)

RAPHAEL, SIMCHA PAULL. *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Northvale, JF: Jason Aronson, 1995)

REIMER, JACK, ed. *Jewish Reflections on Death* (NY: Schocken Books, 1976)

REIMER, JACK. *Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning* (NY: Schocken Books, 1996)

REIMER, JACK AND STAMPFER, NATHANIEL, ed. *A Treasury of Jewish Ethical Wills*. New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1983.

REIMER, JACK AND STAMPFER, NATHANIEL, ed. *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*. (Woodstock, Vermont; Jewish Lights, 1991)

ROZWASKI, CHAIM Z. *Jewish Meditations on the Meaning of Death* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994)

SHAPIRO, RAMI M. *Last Breaths: A Guide to Easing Another's Dying* (Miami: Temple Beth Or, 1993); also: SHAPIRO, RAMI M. *Open Hands: A Jewish Guide on Dying, Death, and Bereavement* (Miami: Temple Beth Or, 1986)

SYME, DANIEL AND SONSINO, RIFAT. *What Happens After I Die? Jewish Views of Life After Death* (NY: UAHC Press, 1990)

Jewish Teachings About Death Through the Ages

(selected and compiled by RABBI SIMKHA Y. WEINTRAUB, CSW, Rabbinic Director, NCJH)

SOME BIBLICAL EXPRESSIONS FOR DEATH

"He was gathered to his people."

GENESIS 25:8

*"The dust returns to the earth
as it was, and the spirit returns
unto God who gave it..."*

ECCLESIASTES 12:7

EARLY RABBINIC TRADITION

*"And the day of death is better than the day
of one's birth" (ECCLESIASTES 7:1) The day on
which a great person dies is better than the
day on which he was born; because none
knows, on the day of his birth, what his deeds
will be, but at his death, his good deeds are
published unto all, and for this reason is
'the day of death better than
the day of one's birth'.*

EXODUS RABBAH 48:1

*"Death was decreed for all, so that men
may not be righteous just for the sake of life."*
RABBI JONATHAN BEN ELIEZER IN GENESIS RABBAH 9:5

SOME MEDIEVAL JEWISH GUIDANCE

*"Death is the means of
transition to a future life,
which is the ultimate
goal of mortal existence."*

SAADIA, EMUNOT VEDEOT, 933 CE, 3:7

*"If God didn't hide from all people the
date of their death, nobody would build
a home, nobody would plant a vineyard,
because everyone would say, 'I'm going to
die tomorrow, so of what purpose is it for
me to work today?' For this reason, God
denies us knowing the day of our death,
in the hope that we will build and plant.*

*If not for ourselves, others will
benefit from our labor."*

YALKUT SHIMONI ON ECCLESIASTES 9:5

HASIDIC TEACHINGS

*"Fear not death.
It is just a matter of
going from one room
to another, ultimately
to the most
beautiful room..."*

MENAHEM MENDEL OF KOTZK, EMET VEEMUNA (1940)

CONTEMPORARY JEWISH VOICES:

*"The greatest problem is not how to continue but
how to exalt our existence. The cry of a life
beyond the grave is presumptuous, if there is no
cry for eternal life prior to our descending to
the grave...Eternity is not perpetual future but
perpetual presence. He has planted in us the seed
of eternal life. The world to come is not only a
hereafter but also a herenow...This is the meaning of
death: the ultimate self-dedication to the divine.*

*Death so understood will not be distorted by
the craving for immortality, for this act of giving
away is reciprocity on man's part for God's gift
of life. For the pious man, it is a
privilege to die."*

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, FROM MAN IS NOT ALONE

SOME YIDDISH FOLK SAYINGS ABOUT DEATH

*For dying, you always have plenty of time.
Every man knows he will die,
but no one wants to believe it.
There are no bad mothers and no good death.
Death does not knock on the door.
The Angel of Death always finds an excuse.
One is certain only of death.*

Lekh Ki Shilahakha “Go, For You’ve Been Sent by God...”

RABBI SIMKHA Y. WEINTRAUB, CSW
Rabbinic Director, NCJH

In 1626, a remarkable collection of Jewish readings, laws, and customs related to helping the sick, supporting those on their death-bed, and burial and mourning rites, was published in Venice, Italy. The author was Rabbi Aharon Berechiah ben Moses of Modena, an Italian kabbalist, with strong ties to the city of Safed. Rabbi Aharon drew together words from every corner of the Jewish Bible, Talmudic and Midrashic teachings, and profound Kabbalistic insights and approaches in this collection, which he named Ma’avar Yabbok, “The Crossing of the Jabbok,” after the story of Jacob in Genesis 32. Ma’avar Yabbok was widely used in the 17th and 18th centuries, greatly valued for its prayers, rituals, ideas, and innovations rooted in ancient text and tradition.

What follows is one prayer from Ma’avar Yabbok, from a section dealing with death-bed prayers and practices. Rabbi Aharon suggests that ten family members or friends gather and recite these 43 verses culled from diverse books of the Bible. (We have indicated the source for each verse in parentheses.) Many themes are interwoven here, among them: letting the dying person go, to embark on the next stage of their journey; the approaching reunion with God as our Refuge and ultimate Source of lovingkindness, a sense of triumph over adversity and the attainment of a new level of sanctity; and the sincere reaching for atonement and reconciliation.

“When it seems that the last breath is approaching, these close ones who are standing nearby say the following out loud:

Go your way; for you’ve been sent by God!
(I Samuel 20:22)

Go, and Adonai be with you!
(I Samuel 17:37)

Adonai his God be with him, and let him go up!
(II Chronicles 26:23; last words in entire Jewish Bible)

May Adonai bless you and protect you.

May Adonai illumine the Divine Presence for you, extending grace to you.
May Adonai lift you up with the Divine Presence, granting you shalom.
(Numbers 6:24-26)

On his right Michael; on his left Gabriel;
before him Raphael; behind him Oriel;
and above his head, Shkhinat El/the Divine Presence.
(adapted from the bedtime ritual of Sh’ma)

Be strong and courageous; be neither afraid nor dismayed;
for Adonai your God is with you wherever you go
(Joshua 1:9)

And God said, “My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest.”
(Exodus 33:14)

Free his soul from its prison, to give thanks to Your name;
the righteous will surround him; for You will deal bountifully with him.
(Psalm 142:8, adjusted to second person)

Why so downcast, O my soul?

Why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him,
My deliverance, light of my countenance, my God.
(Psalm 43:5)

“And he shall kill it on the northern side of the altar before Adonai;
and the priests, the sons of Aaron,
shall sprinkle his blood around upon the altar.”
(Leviticus 1:11)

“For on that day shall the kohen make an atonement for you,
to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before Adonai.”
(Leviticus 16:30)

“But its entrails and its legs shall he wash in water;
and the kohen shall burn all on the altar, as a burnt sacrifice,
an offering made by fire, a sweet savor to Adonai.”
(Leviticus 1:9)

Gracious and compassionate is Adonai,
slow to anger, overflowing with lovingkindness,
(Joel 2:13; modified)

Adonai will be a refuge for the oppressed,
a refuge in times of trouble.
(Psalm 9:10)

The right hand of Adonai is exalted;
the right hand of Adonai does bravely.
(Psalm 118:16)

Remember Your compassion, Adonai, and Your lovingkindness;
for they reach into eternity.
(Psalm 25:6)

And Adonai passed by before him, and proclaimed,
“Adonai, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering,
abundant in lovingkindness and truth!”
(Exodus 34:6)

Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down;
for Adonai upholds him with his hand.
(Psalm 37:24)

The angel of Adonai encamps around those who fear Him,
and saves them.
(Psalm 34:8)

Adonai will rout out your enemies who rise up against you,
to be defeated before your face;
they shall march against you one way, but flee before you seven ways.

(Deuteronomy 28:7)

You will winnow them, and the wind will carry them away,
the whirlwind will scatter them;
but you, you will rejoice in Adonai,
you will glory in the Holy One of Israel!

(Isaiah 41:16)

Delight yourself in Adonai;
Who will give you the desires of your heart.

(Psalm 37:4)

Blessed shall you be when you come in,
and blessed shall you be when you go out.

(Deuteronomy 28:6)

As an eagle rouses its nest, flutters over its young,
spreads out its wings, takes them, bears them on its pinions.

(Deuteronomy 32:11)

God set him atop the high places,
feasting on the produce of the fields;

God fed him honey out of the crag,
oil from the flinty rock

(Deuteronomy 32:13)

The name of Adonai is a tower of strength;
To which the righteous runs, and is safe.

(Proverbs 18:10)

Awake, O north wind; come, O south wind!
Blow upon my garden, that its perfume may flow out.
Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat its luscious fruits.

(Song of Songs 4:16)

Above it stood the seraphim; each one had six wings;
with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his legs,
and with two he did fly

(Isaiah 6:2)

Open the gates, and let a righteous nation enter,
one that keeps faith/truth.

(Isaiah 26:2)

But those who trust in Adonai shall renew their strength;
they shall grow new wings as eagles;
they shall run, and not be weary;
they shall walk, and not grow faint.

(Isaiah 40:31)

Then shall your light break through like dawn,
Your healing spring up quickly;
and your righteousness shall march before you;
the Presence of Adonai shall be your rear guard

(Isaiah 58:8)

Adonai will guide you continually, satisfy your soul in drought,
and give strength to your bones;

You shall be like a well-watered garden,
Like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

(Isaiah 58:11)

Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity,
Passing over the transgression of the remnant of his heritage?
Who does not retain anger forever, delighting instead in lovingkindness?

(Micah 7:18)

Adonai of hosts is with us; our refuge is the God of Jacob, Selah.

(Psalm 46:8)

Adonai of hosts – happy is the person who trusts in You!

(Psalm 84:13)

Save, Adonai! The King will answer us on the day that we call.

(Psalm 20:10)

You are my hiding place/my shelter; you preserve me from distress;
You surround me with joyous songs of deliverance. Selah.

(Psalm 32:7)

Thus God redeems his soul from going into the Pit,
and his life shall bask in the light.

(Job 33:28)

Adonai will guard you from all evil/harm; Adonai will guard your soul.

(Psalm 121:7)

Adonai will guard your going out and your coming in
from this time forth, and for evermore.

(Psalm 121:8)

"Faith in the world-to-come makes a difference. It makes a difference to how one views life, and surely to how one accepts death."

-RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Two Classic Jewish Stories on the Afterlife

The Twins

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

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

A Ship Leaving Port

An old rabbinic teaching says that birth and death can be thought of like the launching of a ship. People are apprehensive when a ship leaves, for they do not know what storms and adventures may befall it. When it docks in a safe harbor, everyone celebrates. We do the reverse with people—we celebrate birth, although not knowing what life will hold, and we mourn over death. But death is really the return, the docking in a safe harbor.

From, RABBI DAVID WOLPE, *"Images of God as Healer"* (1995 monograph, NCJH)

We have asked five wonderful friends to comment on this moving story from the Talmud.

FRAN GREENFIELD

The shattering of the jug precipitates the inevitable moment that separates life from death. It frees the eternal life spark to rejoin the invisible as it leaves the body and returns to its source. It marks both the beginning and the end—the beginning of the new life and the end of the old, the beginning of freedom and the end of enslavement. In essence, this shattering is the shock of release. Resolving both ambivalence and suffering, it forces and defines the separation of dark from light, of soul from body, which, like the jug, no longer presents a viable vessel. In an instant, all involved (the students, the handmaid and of course the Rabbi) enter the presence of the present. Attachment, longing, doubt, fear, regret, are no longer a choice. Like a hologram, the shattered jug exquisitely mirrors the moment and contains the whole. Each piece reflects Rabbi Judah's life on earth—his kindness, joy, suffering, and brilliance, enliven even the smallest one. While the emptiness that remains, forever bears witness to the great mystery—to the void, the infinite, the invisible, unlimited and divine.

FRAN GREENFIELD is a psychotherapist who uses imagery and dreamwork for emotional and physical healing.

Praying for Healing into Death

A story about the death of

Rabbi Judah HaNasi (the Prince)

FROM THE TALMUD, TRACTATE KETUBOT 104A

(Rabbi Judah was suffering from a severe and painful stomach disease.) His devoted students and colleagues decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy. Furthermore, they announced that whoever said that Rabbi Judah was dead would be stabbed with a sword.

The Rabbi's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed:

The immortal beings in heaven desire Rabbi to join them,
and the mortals desire Rabbi to remain with them.

May it be the will of God
that the mortals may overpower the immortals.

When, however, she saw how often Rabbi Judah resorted to the privy, painfully taking off his tefillin and putting them on again each time, she prayed:

May it be the will of the Almighty
that the immortals may overpower the mortals.

Watching the rabbis incessantly continuing their prayers for heavenly Mercy, she took up an earthenware jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground. For a moment they ceased praying, and the soul of Rabbi Judah departed to its eternal rest.

DEBBIE PERLMAN

A few months ago, after years of procrastination, my husband and I met with an attorney to “get our affairs in order.” Included was the execution of Living Wills: “If I am incurable and death is imminent I direct that life-sustaining procedures be withheld and that I be permitted to die naturally.”

Perhaps what we are asking is that our final suffering will be acknowledged for what it is—not a challenge to medical skill or the agenda of our loved ones, but the opportunity for God's hand to release us, to welcome us. The handmaid knows. Her action is an act of kindness. Her intimate knowledge of Rabbi Judah's suffering moves her to interrupt the students' life-sustaining prayers to surrender her master into the Master's arms.

DEBBIE PERLMAN is the resident psalmist of Beth Emet, the Free Synagogue, Evanston, IL.

RABBI CHARLES RUDANSKY

As the Jewish chaplain at the Hospice Care Network, I received a call with a request from a patient's wife to visit her dying husband whose nurse felt he would not survive the day. When I arrived, the whole family had gathered in his room. Though extremely frail, he was able to greet me. He requested that a prayer be said, not for him for he was ready to die, but for the well-being of his wife, and family. I invited everyone to express their feelings to this beloved man. I found myself in a very powerful and spiritual moment as each family member came up to his bedside and told him how much he had meant to them.

When I got to the office on Wednesday, I learned that he was still alive. I visited him again on Thursday, but this time he was in a deep coma. In sharp contrast to Sunday the house was quiet, and only his wife and the nurse's aid were around. As I was leaving, his wife whispered to me, "Why? How is he surviving?" I turned to her and told her the story of Rabbi Judah's handmaid. Then I said to her, "Your children are still praying and hoping that a miracle could occur." She nodded and began to weep. I stayed with her a little longer, then left. As I was travelling along the highway it began to storm with heavy rain and lightening. Nearing the city I entered the tunnel, and as I came out I was paged by the patient's wife and returned her call. "Rabbi," she said, "during the storm we lost our electricity for a few minutes. By the time I got a flashlight and went upstairs to check on my husband, he had passed away. The oxygen machine had stopped during the storm. I guess the immortals finally won. Thank you for that beautiful story. I will never forget it and will make sure that everyone at the funeral will know that this righteous man had the same kind of death as the great Rabbi Judah."

RABBI CHARLES RUDANSKY is the Pastoral Counselor/Rabbi of the Hospice Care Network of Long Island and religious leader of the Westchester Religious Institute, Mamaroneck, N.Y.

DR. IRA BYOCK

Death is an unwanted intruder in our lives. Particularly when death approaches someone we love, we cling to any remnant of life. But we are mortal—and as much as we'd like to deny it, illness, dying, death and grief are part of the fullness of life.

In the story of Rabbi Judah HaNassi's death, we glimpse the paradox of illness as a gift, a way God has given us to prepare for death. The progressive symptoms and disability of illness can help the person who is forced to confront death gradually adjust to leaving this life. In the process a persons' family and friends may come to realize that death is not only an enemy to be battled, but also the inevitable and natural culmination of life. This insight allows those of us who struggle against the pain of looming loss to loosen our selfish hold on the person who is suffering, allowing him or her to leave with our love and our blessing.

In momentarily distracting the Rabbis from prayer, the handmaiden acted out of love for Rabbi HaNassi. She performed a mitzvah.

IRA BYOCK, M.D., Research Professor of Philosophy, University of Montana, Missoula. Author of *Dying Well* (Riverhead 1998)

RABBI DAVID LAZAR

We are often preoccupied with our human inadequacy. So preoccupied, in fact, that in our search for ways to control, or at least influence, the reality in which we live, we remove ourselves from that reality. Particularly when dealing with a close one's mortality, we may try to prolong his or her life regardless of the person's suffering. Along with all of our love and compassion, we may sometimes be more concerned with our fear of death and loss than with the quality of life of the one who is dying. We confront our fears by attempting to take control, and when we are unable to influence the situation physically, we resort to the metaphysical and we pray.

The students and disciples of Rabbi Judah are doing whatever they can to keep their beloved teacher alive. Not being able to really control the situation on a physical level (although they try by decreeing that anyone caught talking about Rabbi Judah as dead will be punished), they are successful in influencing the situation on a metaphysical level through their prayers. But they are unable to appreciate just how poor the quality of their master's life is. The handmaid, on the other hand, is able to perceive this, and it is she who is able to jolt the others back into reality by breaking the jar. At this moment, their concentration on their metaphysical task is broken just long enough to perceive the physical reality.

RABBI DAVID LAZAR is a Masorti (Conservative) Rabbi living in Jerusalem, working in the field of community leadership training.

A Special Issue on Dying



“Death can be a teacher about the fragility of life and its beauty, about the deep importance of loved ones and of treasured values, about the ways in which life gives us extraordinary gifts, that even loss sometimes brings blessing in its wake. Death is a teacher about God’s presence in the world, about human goodness and compassion and love. Death is a teacher about courage and hope and faith, about believing in that which we cannot see, about moving through the valley of the shadow until light is visible again...”

-RABBI AMY EILBERG

We all die, every one of us, and yet somehow we don’t like acknowledging it, and we rarely want to talk about it. It is our firm belief that rather than bringing us to despair, thinking about and discussing death and the dying process can be a life-affirming experience. As the psalmist says, “Teach us to count our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). Facing our mortality can be a way for us to truly learn to live fully in every moment.

This issue of *The Outstretched Arm* is a special collection of resources related to Jewish ways of looking at death and the dying process. Through text study, prayer and ritual, and personal narrative we explore the depth and richness of the wisdom that is found in the Jewish tradition. From thoughts about the afterlife to writing ethical wills, we take a closer look at many of the things we have all wondered about, but rarely choose to explore.

The National Center for Jewish Healing is grateful to the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation for their generous support in producing this resource.

We dedicate this issue to the memory of some of our teachers, Shira Ruskay, Dr. Daniel Frimmer, and Rabbi Charles Lippman. May their wisdom and courage continue to guide and inspire us.

As this publication contains a representation of God’s name, please treat it with the proper care and respect.

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