



This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Aveilut: A Time to Mourn

One of the most difficult things a person can ever experience is the death of a loved one. Particularly painful is the death of a parent – those who gave us life and, in most cases, accompanied us throughout our lives from our very first moments.

I myself experienced this kind of loss just over a year ago when my father, Rabbi Simon Eckstein left this world at age 96. Since his death on September 24, 2016, my siblings and I have gone through the journey of grieving and healing as prescribed by our Jewish tradition.

In Hebrew, this time is known as *aveilut*, which means “mourning.” Children who have lost a parent officially remain an *avel*, a mourner, for a period of one year. It is a year filled with ups and downs, twists and turns, as we mourn and celebrate the life of our loved one. It is the beauty, wisdom, and inspiration of that journey that I wish to explore with you in this month's *Limmud* teaching.

The Jewish approach to death and mourning is based on three fundamental beliefs. First, we believe that the soul lives on eternally. Second, we believe that the body, though it returns to the earth, is considered holy, as it served to carry the soul through its journey on earth. And third, we believe that there will be a time of resurrection when the soul will return to its body and live in this world once again.

Accordingly, Judaism encourages us to mourn the passing of our loved one – but not to mourn excessively. In Deuteronomy 14:1-2, we read: “You are the children of the LORD your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the LORD your God.” This verse, pregnant with meaning, directs us not to engage in ancient

practices like cutting oneself in a show of mourning or harming ourselves in any way. That would be taking our grief too far. Rather, our loved ones are children of God – we will see them once again.

At the same time, Scripture also teaches us that there is “a time to mourn.” We must mourn, out of respect for the departed and as healing for our own souls. As Paul instructed the early church in Rome, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15).

The Jewish way of mourning provides a biblical framework for honoring the deceased, allowing mourners a healthy space for grieving, and helping the mourners move on in their lives with clarity, comfort, and meaning. The rules, laws, and regulations, set into place thousands of years ago, encourage true healing to take place in the right way, at the right time.

I hope you will join me this month as we learn about Judaism's rich traditions and rituals when it comes to mourning a loved one. I know that this study will not only prepare you for those dark valleys of grief, but it will also enhance the relationships that you have at the present moment, just as it has for me. Paradoxically, looking at the loss of life instructs us on how to embrace life.

As I learned from my father's passing, it's not how much we leave behind in this world that matters; the important thing is leaving behind what matters most. Indeed, my father left behind a rich spiritual legacy full of invaluable wisdom for living. His example serves as an inspiration not just for me, but for us all.

Rabbi Eckstein

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity
under the heavens:
a time to be born
and a time to die
... a time to
mourn and a time
to dance ...*

—Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

The First Day

... and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

— Ecclesiastes 12:7



As soon as a person passes away, Jewish mourning laws and customs that have evolved over the centuries spring into action. These practices serve to honor the deceased, console the living, and help mourners accept the reality of death. Additionally, they provide great cathartic value by giving vent to the mourners' feelings of grief.

One of the first things we do is prepare the body for burial. Often this is done by a group of men and woman known as the *Chevrah Kaddisha*, or "Sacred Society," who thoroughly wash the body as part of the "act of purification" known as *taharah*, and then clothe the body in a plain white linen garb called *takhrikhim*, or shrouds.

Their deeds of loving kindness are regarded in the Jewish tradition as among the holiest because, as the rabbis note, God Himself buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:6). In the Christian Bible, we see these practices carried out after the death of Jesus, when Joseph of Arimathea came with Nicodemus to take Jesus' body, wrap it in strips of linen "in accordance with Jewish burial customs" and place it in a tomb (John 19:38-42).

The Jewish concept of *kibbud hamet*, or "honoring the deceased," permeates all the laws and rituals associated with mourning. It is founded on the belief that when God breathed a divine soul of life into a human's body, the body was transformed from mere matter into a holy vessel bearing the image of God (Genesis 2:7). In the Christian Bible, the Apostle Paul expressed this belief in 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" Since humans, therefore, are not only earthly but also divine beings, our bodies must be treated with utmost reverence and respect.

Upon learning of a death, or at the funeral, mourners recite the traditional phrase: "*Baruch dayan ha'emet*," "Blessed is the true judge." In our deepest pain, we take a moment to acknowledge that even if we can't understand God's ways, God is the supreme judge and decision-maker.

After those words have been recited, the mourners enter a state known as *aninut*. This is the stage between death and burial that applies to the seven closest relatives of the deceased: A mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, or spouse. These are based on the rules God gave in Leviticus 21:1-4 to the Levites, the priests, as to whom they are allowed to have contact with after a person dies.

These mourners are not allowed to perform many of the biblical commandments, nor are they required to do the usual things Jews are obligated to do, like blessing their food, studying God's Word, or praying. As I can personally

attest to, during this in-between state, it is hard to focus on our relationship with God while the pain of loss is still fresh and raw. Judaism recognizes this stage of grief, and allows the mourners to simply focus on their loss during this time.

Moreover, it is taught: "do not comfort the mourner during the time that his deceased lies (still unburied) before him." At this stage, the grief is too intense for any effort at consolation. Simply the presence of friends and family is what is most needed, and I was fortunate to have had both and benefited from the love and support from those closest to me.

At my father's funeral, my siblings and I symbolically tore our clothing according to Jewish tradition, just as Jacob did when he heard about the supposed death of Joseph: "*Then Jacob tore his clothes . . .*" (Genesis 37:34). This practice, known as *keriah*, symbolizes the emotional tear in our hearts, our deep grief and pain. As with all Jewish funerals, eulogies intended to evoke tears and prayers in honor of the deceased were uttered, and in my father's case, the kind words poured in from so many people.

The funeral concludes with prayers that affirm our belief that the soul is with God and that God is great. Finally, the mourners walk through two lines formed by those gathered at the funeral. They are showered with words of comfort and the unspoken message from their friends and family that they are not alone – they are surrounded by love and support.

With that, the mourners proceed to the next stage.

think about it

1. Think about loved ones who you have lost in your lifetime. How are you comforted by the sincere belief that the soul lives on eternally?
2. According to Jewish tradition, when we do something good in the name of someone who is deceased, we honor our loved ones. What might you do to honor someone you have lost?
3. Consider how observing mourning rituals – from sitting *shiva* to not buying new clothing – might ultimately help the mourner find peace and move on. How might they have helped you in mourning the loss of a loved one? Or comforting someone who has lost a loved one?
4. When we integrate into our own lives the wisdom that we have learned from those who have passed on, we honor their memory and keep them present in our lives. What have you admired in a loved one that you can strive to become?
5. All too often, we only appreciate the people in our lives when they are gone. How can we love, cherish, and enjoy the people in our lives today?

Seven Days

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

— Isaiah 40:1



In the Jewish tradition, burial is followed by three successive stages of mourning that decrease in intensity, gradually bringing the family members from the solitude of their anguish back into the community. The first period is called the *shiva*, which means “seven,” during which visitors come to comfort the mourners, or family members, for seven days.

In fact, comforting mourners is considered one of the greatest *mitzvot*, divine commandments. We find this expressed in the Jewish Bible when God, through the prophet Isaiah, commanded, “*Comfort, comfort my people*” (Isaiah 40:1), and in the Christian Bible, when the apostle Paul talked about “*the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God*” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

During the *shiva*, all mirrors are covered to symbolize that this is a time during which we are not concerned with our appearance and other external things. Rather, it is a time to focus on what matters most – the loved one who we lost, our faith in God, and the friends and family still among us. Mourners generally do not leave the house, and the community provides food for the family.

Mourners sit on low chairs (from which the expression “sitting *shiva*” is derived), forgo leather shoes, do not shave or get haircuts, and do not wear freshly laundered clothing. During this first week of intense mourning, our grief is expressed through these practices.

The first time we come across mourning for seven days in the Bible is when Joseph mourns for Jacob: “. . . *they lamented loudly and bitterly; and there Joseph observed a seven-day period of mourning for his father*” (Genesis 50:10). However, according to the *Talmud*, it was Moses who established the seven-day mourning period as an official custom. In his wisdom and sensitivity, Moses understood that people would benefit from a designated time period for mourning, with a beginning and an end, so that although they would grieve, they would also find comfort and the strength to move on.

We observe this ritual being carried out in the Christian Bible as well, when we witness the mourners gathered to comfort Mary and Martha in the loss of their brother, Lazarus (John 11:17-19) and then in the book of Acts, when the widows gathered to mourn the loss of Tabitha (Acts 9:39).

The week of *shiva* also is designed to bring about healing. Part of the mourning process is celebrating the life of our loved one. To that end, it is customary to have photos of the deceased and other memorabilia on display. Stories about his or her life are shared. The life that was lost is

appreciated and celebrated. At the same time, mourners are encouraged to express their pain to comforters who are there to listen and offer support. In this way, when the seven days are over – after one whole week – the mourners have already begun to heal.

When my siblings and I were sitting *shiva* for my own father, I learned things about my father that I never knew before. Stories of his kindness and greatness surfaced from the most unlikely places, bringing great comfort to my family and me. People had long called my father *Shimon HaTzadik* – Simon the Righteous – and until this past year, I never completely understood why. Starting at the *shiva* and continuing throughout the year, I came to understand that my father was a great man – a better man than I had ever imagined.

I was deeply moved by the number of people who took the time and visited in that one week, either to share memories about my father or to comfort us, the mourners. Each visitor added a bit of comfort, a balm for our aching hearts, helping us know our father more than we had ever known him while simultaneously easing the pain of letting him go.

The seven-day period carries with it the wisdom and sensitivity that mourning is healthy, honorable, and an important part of the grieving process – one which we must have proper time to experience. However, after a week of sitting *shiva*, the mourners are then to “get up” from *shiva*. We cannot remain frozen or paralyzed in the endless abyss of grief. After seven days, we are to begin to resume the rhythms and routines of daily life, while still honoring the memory of the departed.

apply it...

- 1. HONOR THE DEPARTED.** Honor a loved one who has departed by lighting a candle or reciting a prayer on the anniversary of the day the person passed away. (Deuteronomy 5:16; Ephesians 6:2)
- 2. COMFORT A MOURNER.** Comfort someone who is mourning right now. One of the greatest acts of kindness that we can do for someone is to comfort them while they grieve, whether it is through just our silent presence, empathetic listening, or words of sympathy. (Isaiah 40:1; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4)
- 3. LIVE MEANINGFULLY.** Death reminds us to live with purpose and meaning. As we read in Ecclesiastes 7:2, “*It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.*” Consider how you might live purposefully in the days ahead. (Proverbs 16:3; Ephesians 2:10)
- 4. CARE FOR YOUR BODY.** Our bodies are the temples that house our souls, and the vehicles through which we can serve God and help others. Consider how you can care for your body in the best possible way. (Genesis 1:27; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20)
- 5. NOURISH YOUR OWN SOUL.** Knowing that our soul is the part of us that lives forever must direct us to do what is good for our soul. Studying God’s word, living God’s values, prayer, and acts of kindness will sustain our souls in this life. (Proverbs 2:3-6; James 1:5)



Thirty Days and One Year

*“The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised.”*

— Job 1:21

After the period of *shiva* ends, the mourners enter a new stage, known as *shloshim*, the remainder of a 30-day period that begins at burial. During this time, the mourners re-enter the realm of regular living and remain in mourning at the same time. It is a time of transition that allows the mourners to ease back into life while bearing the burden of loss. We find precedent for this specific length of time in the Bible as the Israelites mourned Moses for “*thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over*” (Deuteronomy 34:8).

During the *shloshim*, the mourners continue to observe some of the mourning customs, such as refraining from getting haircuts, buying new clothing, listening to live music, attending any other types of entertainment, and more. They are, for the time being, still in the midst of grieving their loss and honoring the memory of the departed. Upon the conclusion of 30 days, mourners, with the exception of children mourning a parent, are no longer obligated to observe these restrictions. Children, however, will continue to adhere to restrictions and obligations for an entire year.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the yearlong mourning process for the children is reciting the *kaddish*, also known as “the mourners’ prayer,” three times a day at synagogue. Few prayers in the Jewish liturgy can equal the *kaddish* in terms of the depth of emotion it elicits. The prayer begins, “Exalted and hallowed be His great Name . . .” and then elaborates on this central idea. Through the *kaddish*, we declare that God is holy, awesome, and great. We praise Him and pray that the entire world be filled with His glory. It is a declaration of faith in both God and redemption in the face of personal loss and grief.

In Judaism, when God created man, He breathed a soul of life into man’s nostrils. We believe that our soul is actually a part of God. When a person passes away and the soul leaves the body, in a very real sense a part of God is now missing from the world. There’s a vacuum of God’s presence. But when we children say the *kaddish*, we are effectively declaring that while our loved one is gone, we pledge to fill the void they left by exalting God’s name and by bringing greater holiness to the world.

Remembering my father three times a day in this particular way and focusing on exalting God’s name despite the loss of my father was the most transformative experience of my own year of mourning. It was an

opportunity for me to reflect on my life and faith, and to remember my father throughout the year.

There are several reasons why the Jewish tradition places so much emphasis on saying the *kaddish*, a custom instituted in the 6th century BCE. Part of the answer lies in the fact that at the very time we question God for taking away our loved one, we also accept His will and praise His name as Job did: “*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised*” (Job 1:21). We find Paul expressing similar sentiments in the Christian Bible when he exhorted the early church to thank God for everything and in all circumstances (Ephesians 5:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:18). The *kaddish* is a prayer of hope and faith when our world seems dark and our faith might otherwise grow weak.

Finally, we observe the anniversary of the death of our loved one with the *yahrzeit*, named after the German term meaning “time of year.” On the anniversary of my own father’s death, my family and I gathered, recited the *kaddish*, and spent time recalling the life of my father, while reflecting on our own lives. It is a powerful time to remember, to reflect, and to honor our loved ones who have died. It is one of the most widely observed Jewish practices today. In fact, most Jews have as their deepest and most fervent prayer the hope that their children will, in turn, recite the *kaddish* for them.

During my year of mourning and reciting the *kaddish*, I came to realize that I had been using the wrong barometer to measure achievement and success. My father taught me from his death that it’s not how many books you write or are written about you; it’s not whether you’re on TV or in the newspapers; it’s not how many meetings you had with the Prime Minister.

Ultimately, what is important is whether you were a good person. My father was one of the finest people I have ever known, and he has inspired me to become the best version of my own self.

Mourning our loved ones, and in particular, parents, is a journey no one desires, yet one we need not regret. With God’s help, we can travel from grief to growth, from pain to purpose, and from feeling despair to the faith that we will be reunited with our loved ones once again.

Until that time, we can learn from those we have lost and become better people. There is no better tribute to our loved ones than that.