

# **A New Jewish Response to Bereaved Children**

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*For Steve, whose love knows no bounds*

*In Memory of:*

*My beloved sister  
Arlene "Cookie" Nissenthall  
1944-1997*

*My beloved father  
Benjamin Shames  
1914-2000*

*My beloved mother  
Ann Shames  
1917-2003*

*My beloved brother-in-law  
Harold Nissenthall  
1939-2003*

**זכרונם לברכה**

*May Their Memories Be For a Blessing*

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*See how precious children are to God: The Sanhedrin and the priests were exiled, but the Shechinah did not go into exile with them. But when the children were exiled, the Shechinah went with them.*

**Lamentations Rabbah 1:32**

## Digest

The need to help children cope with grief looms large. At times of crisis involving a death, a family is reeling from their loss and children may be inadvertently forgotten. Parents are often at a loss for knowing how to cope with their own grief that is compounded by the grief of their children. *Halachah* stipulates that traditionally children under the age of thirteen years are exempt from the process of mourning. Despite this exemption, we do know from psychosocial research, that children grieve. Thus, there is a gap between the traditional approach to “mourning” for children and what contemporary research has shown.

This thesis is a study in the exploration of a new Jewish response to bereaved children who are grieving a parent or sibling. This response is one that recognizes the needs of bereaved children as mourners. The synagogue is an important institution in Jewish community life. Our synagogues play a critical role in the education of children and in the support of bereaved families. In order to learn how some synagogues and Religious Schools support children who are bereaved, a qualitative study was conducted of twelve rabbis in various sized synagogues in large urban centers in both the United States and Canada. Furthermore, some wonderful organizations exist such as Fernside in Cincinnati that support bereaved children and their families.

The first chapter of this volume covers the vast area of children and bereavement and is followed by the second chapter, which is a study of mourning and *halachah*. The survey of rabbis is reported in chapter three and chapter four is a description of just some of the fieldwork done with Fernside for this thesis. The final chapter offers a new Jewish response to bereaved children with an innovative proposal for a model designed with the

goal of training Jewish professionals and teachers in the teaching of death education in Religious Schools and ultimately the support of bereaved children. A review of children's books and videos on bereavement and death is presented in the appendices.

## Introduction

The subject of death is a difficult one that is not easily confronted by adults. Death as a lifecycle event is expected to occur in old age. The fact of the matter, however, is that people die at all ages of all causes. Some people die young leaving surviving children and young siblings. A death of this nature is a frightening reminder of the randomness of life; we are shaken by the unexpected disruption in our preconceived notion of the order of things in the universe. Lamm writes that mourners experience chaos when their accustomed order is suspended or destroyed and life seems to unravel.<sup>1</sup> Making sense of the loss of a significant person and attaching meaning to it are monumental tasks as each individual travels on the painful and lonely journey of grief. When the survivors are children, the journey is all the more agonizing and complex.

As adults wanting to protect children from painful experiences, we often and incorrectly assume that they can bounce back like “flexible rubber dolls”. Contrary to this fallacy, children, as adults, need to know what to expect so that they, too, can cope and feel competent. Wesley writes that the most powerful communication is not what is said but what is not said. As we try to protect children from the pain and complexities of death, we increase their insecurity and compromise their ability to trust adults who believe that they are helping.<sup>2</sup> She adds that we are doing children a disservice if we believe that they will forget the person who died, that the relationship is of less value to them, and that they will get over it more quickly. Regardless of age or developmental

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<sup>1</sup> Lamm, Maurice. *Consolation*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. 2005, p. 9

<sup>2</sup> Wesley, Carol. “Teaching Children to Survive”. *The Forum*. May/June, 1995; 3:21, p. 9

level of the child, parents and caring adults are key mediators in helping children to grieve. Children need to learn the “language of feelings”<sup>3</sup> and we must allow them to do so in their own way. Each developmental level is characterized by responses given the cognitive ability and personality traits. Emotional responses to grief in children are less pervasive, more intermittent, and more situation-specific than they are in adults.<sup>4</sup> It is crucial that caregivers understand grief patterns in children and that they even examine their own feelings. We must remember not to “fix” the situation for grieving children but to provide opportunities to heal.<sup>5</sup>

Well-meaning people, who are unaware of how children understand death and deal with feelings, run the risk of making the situation worse for them. Wolfelt writes that by not talking about the reality of death with children, adults postpone reality for themselves as well, and instead of open, honest and appropriate answers, half-truths are given in the hopes that the subject will be dropped.<sup>6</sup> Unknowing adults who observe bereaved children playing judge them as being disrespectful but do not realize that children grieve in short doses at one time, and play is how children experience their world. Wolfelt adds that any child mature enough to love is mature enough to grieve.<sup>7</sup> Adults need to provide children with the freedom and opportunities to do so. Although we ultimately strive to teach children that death is a part of life, we as adults, are often afraid to expose them to the realities of death. Corr and McNeil write that unless death is

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<sup>3</sup> Crenshaw, David A. “Reluctant Grievers: Children of Multiple Loss and Trauma”. *The Forum*. July/August, 1992; 4:17, p. 6

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, Paul. “A Child’s Spirit”. *The Forum*. July/August 1994; 25:4, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfelt, Alan. *Helping Children Cope With Grief*. Muncie: Accelerated Development Inc. 1983, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 20



ritualized and given meaning, the child has no constructive way to store the memory of their lost loved one(s).<sup>8</sup>

Children react to the responses of their parents and other significant caregivers. It is vital, therefore, that adults be willing to explore their own feelings and fears around death in order to be of assistance to children. Sometimes children suffer from the absence of the attention of the surviving parent or overprotection than to the death itself. The child's ability to grieve is very much based on what he/she learns from the parents in terms of how acceptable it is to express feelings. Children will often express themselves in play rather than by words; this is important for adults to recognize and accept.

Adolescents must struggle with the meaning of life and death and come to a personal self-understanding of the reason for living. Along with the many other tasks inherent in adolescent development such as self-identity, self-esteem, and autonomy, the meaning of life is modified by life experience for adolescents.<sup>9</sup> The adolescent has to deal with many emotions as a natural course of development, let alone those that threaten self-control and even embarrassment at the time of a funeral and death. Corr and McNeil advocate preparation of the adolescent in childhood for funeral and death rituals. Perhaps, then, taboos concerning death can be removed.<sup>10</sup>

Unresolved grief has been found to be related to mental disorders and adjustment problems. Based on his research findings, Barrett reports that accessibility to a single caring adult who took the time to validate a young person's pain made a huge

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<sup>8</sup> Corr, Charles A. and Joan N. McNeil. *Adolescence and Death*. New York: Springer Publishing Company. 1986, p.17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 24

difference.<sup>11</sup> Loss of self-esteem, safety, and protection are common in children who are grieving, and they are vulnerable to social difficulties such as bullying, victimization, crimes, drugs, and suicide.<sup>12</sup> Some deaths such as suicide are associated with stigma and shame, making it especially difficult for survivors to tell the children the truth. Goldman offers a child's definition of suicide and teaches that parents and professionals must find ways to explore the topic of suicide openly with children; only then will the need for shame and secrecy around the death be unnecessary and children can begin to even approach the complexities of grief magnified by the pain of suicide.<sup>13</sup>

Donna Schuurman, director of the Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families in Portland, Oregon conducted interviews of adults who had been bereaved children, each having lost a parent. In the analysis of their histories of relationships, she observed three categories: one group of respondents said they were afraid to attach or get to close to anyone for fear that the person might die or abandon them; a second group was comprised of "people pleasers" who would do anything to hold on to relationships even if they were not healthy and would do anything to avoid losing that bond; and, the third group of respondents felt they were able to achieve a healthy balance in their relationships. Each of the three groups represented roughly 30% of the total study sample.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Barrett, Ronald K. "Unresolved Grief and Urban Youth Violence". *The Forum*. January/February 2000; 26:3, p. 3

<sup>12</sup> Goldman, Linda. "Bullying Victimization and Unresolved Grief in Children". *The Forum*. September/October 2001;27:5:1-6

<sup>13</sup> Goldman, Linda. "Suicide: How Can We Talk to the Children?" *The Forum*, May/June 2000; 26:4, p. 7. What is Suicide? A Child's Definition: suicide is when people decide they do not want their body to work anymore and they stop their body from working. They are so, so, so sad or so, so, so angry or so, so, so depressed that their mind becomes mixed up. They forget they can get help. There is always another way .

<sup>14</sup> Schuurman, Donna. *Never the Same. Coming to Terms With the Death of a Parent*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 2003, p.159

Noel and Blair write, "No human being is without feelings"; feelings are a conscious response to our experience.<sup>15</sup> Grieving a loved one who has died turns a person's world upside down and sends him or her on an emotional roller coaster. Love and grief, writes Kumar, are intertwined; he adds that to love is always to open oneself to the grief of loss. Yet this type of loss is about love itself, not about the loss of that love; love is the fuel that drives the grief and only accentuates the depth of the capacity to love and be loved.<sup>16</sup> For a child, that loss of love is concrete and immediate; depending on the age of the child, he/she may have difficulty remembering a loved one who is absent and will need help to do so by reminders and photographs.<sup>17</sup>

Bereaved children find themselves in a situation they cannot fully understand due to limited cognitive development and thus limited comprehension of the depth of the situation at hand as well as the disruption in the family life they had heretofore known. A death in the family may also involve secondary losses as the family may be forced to move due to financial changes, a child may need to change schools, new adults arrive to be caregivers, and/or surviving parents may be emotionally absent due to their own grief. A child's sense of safety is compromised when such dramatic changes occur. At an early stage in a child's life, temporary separation is normally associated with anxiety until the person to whom he or she is attached returns. Permanent separation, therefore, is all the more traumatic for a child, especially when such separation cannot be conceived as

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<sup>15</sup> Noel, Brook and Pamela D. Blair. *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc. 2007, p. 5

<sup>16</sup> Kumar, Sameet M. *Grieving Mindfully. A Compassionate and Spiritual Guide to Coping With Loss*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2005, pp. 11-12

<sup>17</sup> Rando, Therese. *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*. New York: Bantam Books. 1991, p. 218

irreversible. Caring adults must recognize a bereaved child's emotions resulting from the death of a significant person in his or her life.

Grieving for a loved one requires the mourner to learn to love in a new way in the absence of the person who died. Attig writes that this is indeed possible because the lives of those who have died remain real in the lives of those of us who knew and loved them; we knew them in life and those memories are real. We can hold onto those memories and feel the influence of the deceased in a myriad of spiritual ways. However, the path to such lasting love is long and difficult, and forces us to face our own personal darkness and suffering.<sup>18</sup>

*Halachah*, the set of laws in Judaism regarding mourning, offers a very structured and methodical approach to mourning. Rites and rituals allow the mourner to withdraw from society and everyday obligations in order to mourn and pay respect to the deceased. Ongoing memorial activities and customs foster the perpetuation of the memory of the dead. Specific prayers and *mitzvot* often bring comfort to those who grieve. However, children are traditionally not included in such mourning practices and as a result, do not derive the same psychological benefit from such customs. Psychosocial research has made it evident that children do indeed grieve and thus need ways to express themselves. Reform Judaism offers the opportunity to explore ways to provide children with such possibilities. Teaching children from an early age about death and the *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved are important components of their lifelong education. Adults who recognize bereaved children's need for connection to the deceased, for honest information, and for inclusion in mourning rites and rituals that enable them to say

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<sup>18</sup> Attig, Thomas. *The Heart of Grief. Death and the Search for Lasting Love*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2000, p. xviii

goodbye and find a new way to love the person they lost, can walk alongside them through this agony. This is not an easy task and one that requires a framework that incorporates knowledge of the needs of bereaved children, awareness of one's own feelings concerning death and personal losses, knowledge of traditional rituals and obligations and their sources, and creativity in their application to bereaved children in unique ways that reflect those traditions.

# Chapter One

## Understanding Children and Bereavement

### **Background**

According to John Bowlby, all societies have seven common features: they all speak a language, conserve fire, have a type of cutting implement, have biological bonds, have division of labor based on age and sex, have incest prohibitions and rules concerning sex, marriage partners, and legitimizing offspring, and they all have rules and rituals concerning the disposal of their dead and appropriate behavior of mourners.<sup>19</sup> Although death occurs universally for everyone, the rules and rituals around it vary greatly from one sociocultural group to another. Historically, drastic changes have occurred in how death is handled. With radical changes in mortality rates of infants and the remarkable shifts due to immunization, death in childhood due to infectious disease has changed the predominant age of death from the young to the old. Today death is associated with ageing and is now the domain of specialists in the medical model.<sup>20</sup> This presents a radically different reality from days when people died at younger ages, more often than not at home, and death rituals were public events.

Western society today tends to be death denying and discourages open emotion at funerals, sometimes minimizing the need for funerals and rituals, and offering little time for mourners to grieve as return to work is encouraged within a matter of a few days following the death of a loved one. Aries writes of the increased privatization of death

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<sup>19</sup> Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 3. Loss: Sadness and Depression*. New York: BasicBooks, 1980, p.126

<sup>20</sup> McCarthy, Jane Ribbens. *Young People's Experiences of Loss and Bereavement*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press. 2006, p. 27

with the resulting rejection of ritualized public ceremony and Herz suggests that restriction of open communication about death is exacerbated in our death-phobic society and has led to what she terms “death specialists” – physicians, morticians, and funeral directors – who separate communities and families from the realities of death.<sup>21</sup> Doka adds that western societies have grieving rules that limit grief to family members and determine how one is allowed to grieve without acknowledging that humans exist in intimate networks that include both kin and non-kin and that we all have attachments to other humans, animals, places, and things. Furthermore, grief occurs in ways that may conflict with societal rules often leading to disenfranchised grief.<sup>22</sup> Company policies concerning grief frequently minimize the impact of loss and expect employees to assume a stance of “business as usual” in a short period of time. This may be attributed in part to the many conflicting theories concerning grief, bereavement, and mourning that have evolved over the last century.

Freud wrote that mourning is a reaction to the “loss of a loved person or to loss of some abstraction, which has taken the place of one such as a fatherland, an ideal, and so on”. He believed that mourning continues until the ego succeeds in freeing its libido from the lost object. He added that freeing of libido occurs when the wish to survive overcomes the wish to cling to the deceased.<sup>23</sup> Lindemann (1944) added a somatic component to Freud’s theory and introduced the concept “grief work” in which the person experiencing the death of a loved one must be “emancipated from the bondage to the deceased”, readjust to the environment that now does not have the loved one who

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<sup>21</sup> Shapiro, Ester. *Grief as a Family Process. A Developmental Approach to Clinical Practice*. New York: The Guilford Press. 1994, p. 132

<sup>22</sup> Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, pp 6-7

<sup>23</sup> Brabant, Sarah. “A Closer Look at Doka’s Grieving Rules” in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press, p. 24

died, and form new relationships.<sup>24</sup> In his description of the steps needed to detach from the deceased, he acknowledged the mourner's disintegration of the social system and the function of rituals to maintain interactions with others. He defined a mourner as "someone who grieves".<sup>25</sup> Maris (1974) defines grief as 'the psychological process of adjustment to loss' and mourning as "the more or less conventional institutionalized expressions of grief". Parkes and Weiss (1983) define grief as the "overall reaction to loss" and mourning as the "observable expression of grief". They added that the death of a member of a social unit affects not only the other members but also the unit itself. Rando (1993) adds the inclusion of adaptive behaviors necessitated by the loss of a loved one. She says the cultural or public display of grief through one's behaviors focuses on mourning as a vehicle for social communication. Kubler-Ross says that grief work allows one to get in touch with and express one's natural emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, jealousy and love and Neimeyer (1998) says the central process of grieving is the reconstruction of meaning. Wolfelt writes that grief is a process rather than a specific emotion like fear or sadness and can be expressed by a variety of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors while Bowlby defines grief to be the sequence of subjective states that follow loss and accompany mourning and Kastenbaum writes that bereavement is the status of a person who has suffered a loss and may be experiencing psychological stress.<sup>26</sup> Thus for some specialists mourning implies a response, for others the expression of that response, and for others still, mourning is about the work needed to resolve the initial response. In fact the terms "grief", "mourning" and "bereavement" appear to be used interchangeably

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<sup>24</sup> Grollman, Rabbi Earl. *Explaining Death to Children*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1967, p. 39

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Boyd-Webb, Nancy. *Helping Bereaved Children: A Handbook for Practitioners*. New York: Guilford Press. 1993, p. 8.



in many cases. For all of them social and cultural factors may be barriers or assets but are not the means through which loss is defined, expressed, and worked through; this requires emotional and psychological work.<sup>27</sup>

Brabant provided a psychosocial framework to define these complex terms. She defines bereavement as “a loss”; grief as “a response to that loss”; grief work as “the work needed to move through the pain associated with the loss”; and mourning as “social expectations as well as cultural definitions and rules tell us how important our loss is, whether we have a right to grieve and if so how much, how long, and in what ways we can and should do so”.<sup>28</sup> Doka writes that mourning is concerned with the attempt to manage one’s bereavement emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between grief and mourning because we risk ignoring the differences between reacting and coping; the result of this lack of awareness is disenfranchisement. He says that the term bereavement applies only to situations and individuals in which one has lost an important person or object and is aware of that loss. He adds that mourning has three elements: 1) the primary and secondary losses 2) grief reactions provoked by those losses, and 3) the new challenges involved in living without the deceased person.<sup>29</sup> According to Seale, bereavement implicates a relationship and grief is a reaction to extreme damage that is done to the social bond.<sup>30</sup> James and Russell write that grief involves conflicting feelings caused by a change or end in a familiar pattern adding that it is difficult to measure loss experiences because they are accompanied by loss of trust, loss of safety, and loss of control.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 24-30

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 30

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 45-50

<sup>30</sup> McCarthy, 32

Mourning is a complicated process and because every person is a unique individual as well as a member of a social group there are two complementary aspects to mourning: outward or interpersonal and inward or intrapersonal. Confusion arises as well as to the “endpoint” of mourning. Terms used include “recovery”, “completion”, “resolution”, and “adaptation” but most specialists agree that these do not adequately describe the end of bereavement because they suggest a point when one is finished grieving. The reality is that there are no fixed endpoints in mourning; people cope differently and grieve throughout their lifetime.<sup>31</sup> Grief is a normal and appropriate reaction to loss; although it is experienced as a cataclysm of emotional, physiological, and spiritual crises, it is not a medical condition or illness and the term “symptoms” that is often used to describe the process is misleading and contributes to discrepancies and myths in societal views toward death and bereavement.

The reaction of individuals to the loss of a loved one is complex and influenced by many variables. The age, sex, gender, and relationship to the deceased are obvious factors but other death-related factors are the type of death, the amount of contact the survivor had with the deceased, the expression of “goodbye” that was experienced as well as social, religious, and cultural conditions.

Difficult as it is for adults to cope with death, children are faced with additional challenges as they lose either a caretaker or sibling with the accompanying “loss” of their devastated parents at a time when they are developing their own cognitive potential and physical growth and lack the intellectual and emotional capacity for handling the intensity of feelings associated with loss. Moreover, children see death on television and in books but adults avoid discussing death with children due to their own anxieties

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 51-54

around the subject and their desire to protect children from sad events; it is a taboo subject in western society. Adults are generally uncomfortable with the prospect of breaking the news of a death to children. Whereas children used to be exposed to death when it occurred at home and funerals were likewise held at home, now there is a tendency to avoid discussion about death and funerals leading to inability to openly grieve for some. Granot writes that children today are not exposed to life passages such as sickness, aging, and death since elderly are generally not at home, terminally ill patients die in hospitals, and funerals are held in places outside the home. Furthermore, video games and movies give the message that death is for the “bad guys” and the hero never dies. Even though children see death on television usually in a violent kind of presentation, they are not taught anything about coping with death after it happens.<sup>32</sup> Experts believe that children need to be included in funerals even though adults often want to shield them from the painful reality.

Children have a natural fascination with death and explore death in their play even as early as when toddlers play “Ring Around the Rosy” that represented the Black Death. This is not obvious to children but they do play all kinds of roles in death games as they eventually come to realize that other people die and they too will die. Teachers and parents do teach that death is a part of life yet avoid talking about it when it happens. Children worry when they see that death in real life is not like death on television or fairy tales because they see adults who are grieving and the happy endings they are accustomed to do not play out. Bowlby teaches that children have two profound fears: fear of bodily injury and fear of loved persons who care for them and whose death would

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<sup>32</sup> Granot, Tamar. *Without You. Children and Young People Growing Up with Loss and Its Effects*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2005, p. 37

leave them alone and helpless.<sup>33</sup> When something does indeed happen to the loved person who cares for them, they mourn. Unlike adults however, children express these fears and reactions by crying, searching, and exhibiting behavioral responses rather than by talking about how they feel. They want their old life back and right away, but Miller writes that for the child who has lost a parent in particular, the death of the parent also means the death of a way of life with painful aftermaths that affect every aspect of life as it once was. Not only does it affect the child at the time of death, but bereavement is a cognitive and emotional process that weaves the experience of the death, the meaning of the loss, and a changing relationship with the deceased into the fabric of their lives over time. All the components of this complex are not static but change with each new developmental level the child reaches.<sup>34</sup>

Bereaved children are confronted with many questions, as their life is suddenly topsy-turvy. Five common questions are: What is dead? Did I cause it? Who will take care of me? Am I going to die also? What am I now that I have lost this important person in my life?<sup>35</sup> These concerns elicit great fear and confusion. The initial challenge is providing children opportunities to receive honest information at a level they can comprehend when they lack the cognitive ability to do so; the challenges that follow involve providing opportunities that facilitate mourning at an appropriate level. Parents often feel helpless as they deal with their own grief and worry about their children; children who grow up in religions and cultures that prepare them to be faithful may

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<sup>33</sup> Grollman, 145

<sup>34</sup> Miller, Mary Anderson. "Re-Grief as Narrative: The Impact of Parental Death on Child and Adolescent Development" in Adams, David W. and Eleanor J. Deveau. Eds. *Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Factors Affecting Children and Adolescents' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Death. Vol 3.* Amityville, New York: Baywood Publishing Company Inc. 1995, p. 100

<sup>35</sup> Ward-Wimmer, Dottie and Carol Napoli. "Counselling Approaches with Children and Adolescents" in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Living with Grief. Children, Adolescents, and Loss.* Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000, pp. 115-116.

become angry at a God whom they feel took away their loved one; the social norms of the majority culture may not match those of their family and bereaved children can get caught between the two sets of values and social expectations. Doka explains that bereaved children have four general responses: I hurt inside; I don't understand; I don't belong; and I'm not special enough. These responses occur as a result of feeling vulnerable, not receiving honest or complete information, feeling that they should have been the child to die instead, and assuming the responsibility of not being able to make their parents happy again.<sup>36</sup> Adults want to help but this often minimizes the significance of the loss for the child if adults impose their own grief styles upon the child, aggravating the situation for the child and contributing to their own feelings of helplessness.

According to Worden, mediators of the mourning process for children fall into six major categories: 1) the death and the rituals surrounding it; 2) the relationship of the child and the deceased; 3) the functioning of the surviving parent; 4) family size, solvency, and structure as well as its ability to cope, support, and communicate; 5) support from peers and others outside the family; and 6) the child's age, gender, self-perception, and understanding of death.<sup>37</sup> Granot adds additional factors that influence a bereaved child's ability to cope with loss as: 1) emotional expression and sharing; 2) open lines of communication in the family; 3) emotional closeness; 4) family unity and cohesion; 5) personal space; 6) flexibility; 7) pathological equilibrium in the family unit; 8) boundaries; 9) family myths; and 10) family secrets.<sup>38</sup> Boyd-Webb adds age, development, and cognitive factors; past coping and adjustment experience; medical

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 234-236

<sup>37</sup> Worden, J. William. *Children and Grief*. New York: The Guilford Press. 1996, pp. 16-17

<sup>38</sup> Granot, 172-179

history, global assessment of functioning level; and past experience with death or loss.<sup>39</sup> Sandra Fox says that children are “do-ers” and their ways of mourning are by means of activities, therefore children must be provided with those creative opportunities that will allow them to gain a good understanding of the event as a loss; to go through the feelings of grief about the loss; to commemorate what has been lost; and to receive permission to go on with his or her life.<sup>40</sup> All these lists of tasks of grieving are overwhelming and represent complex outcomes that bereaved children must achieve. It is no wonder that bereaved children respond with such reactions as denial, anger, bodily distress, hostility, guilt, anxiety, and panic. Helplessness ensues when the tasks are not successfully completed.

The death of a parent is for a child a devastating experience that changes his life forever. Regardless of the age of the child, the type of death, how the child was informed, which parent died, and whether the death was witnessed are critical factors over and above those already outlined. If the death carries a stigma, was sudden and unexpected, violent, or occurred in the line of duty, the bereaved child may be confronted with the challenges imposed by media and publicity as well as the tasks accompanying mourning. The innocence of childhood is shattered with the loss of a parent. Bowlby says that knowledge of death is a powerful symbol between innocent childhood and adult maturity. Language and ritual, he adds, allow us to understand this symbolism.<sup>41</sup> Bereaved children are deserving of opportunities to use these tools to mourn and heal. It is the adults in their

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<sup>39</sup> Boyd-Webb, 31

<sup>40</sup> Fry, Virginia Lynn. “Part of Me Died Too” in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Living with Grief. Children, Adolescents, and Loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000, p. 131

<sup>41</sup> Bowlby, 111

world who are called upon to learn how to provide them for children who are grieving a loss.

### **Attachment Behavior**

A child's sense of self is highly dependent upon the child-parent relationship he/she experiences as a newborn and young individual. Parents play a key role in this development of self as they facilitate the four necessary processes for this growth: regulation of physical needs; development of a range of emotions that allow for the ability to experience and express a range of feelings and cope with anger and emotional distress; formation and socialization of interpersonal relationships, including developing attachments and the internalization of cultural norms; and learning from the exploration of the environment. For infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, these processes occur within the context of their relationships with their parents and/or significant others who offer a secure base for achieving these tasks. It is the daily interactions with those individuals that offer safety and reassurance for the young child.<sup>42</sup>

John Bowlby writes that attachment theory offers a new way of understanding the need and tendency for humans to form bonds with others and helps to explain the distress associated with separation from these bonds. He defines attachment behavior as "any form of behavior that results in a person attaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual".<sup>43</sup> It is distinct from feeding behavior and sexual behavior, and leads ultimately to the development of affectional bonds first between child and parent, and later between adult and adult. The goal of attachment behavior is to maintain degrees of proximity with the attachment figure. Certain situations will cause distress such as

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<sup>42</sup> Lieberman, Alicia F. F, Compton Nancy C, Van Horn, Patricia, and Chandra Ghosh Ippen. *Losing a Parent to Death in the Early Years*. Washington D.C.: Zero to Three Press. 2003, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Bowlby, 39

strangeness, fatigue, fear, an unfamiliar environment, or unavailability of the attachment figure. Our most intense emotions are developed during the formation of attachment relationships including falling in love. Security is derived from the existence of a bond that is unchallenged. How we handle difficulties such as losing a partner, anger, or sorrow is also rooted in our early attachment relationships. Attachment behavior is common to many species allowing individuals to stay close to their caregiver and ensuring preservation of the species as a whole.<sup>44</sup> Attachment behavior is potentially viable throughout one's life as relationships are created between adults long after the solidification of the attachment relationship with the parent. The way in which a person's individual attachment behavior becomes organized is a major determinant in the type of relationships he/she develops during his/her lifetime. Thus, these early relationships are crucial in the healthy formation of self.

When a parent dies, the child's sense of security is shattered with the loss of the significant attachment figure. Attachment figures are not interchangeable for the child. Even though children can eventually love a replacing caregiver in time, one loved person cannot replace another even when providing comfort for the loss.<sup>45</sup> A child believes in a world that is secure and safe with predictable events; when a parent dies, this outlook and reality are in crisis. A child who loses a parent when he is an infant knows only absence; the dead parent is known only by his/her nonexistence.<sup>46</sup> For a child who knew the deceased parent, the impact of the death shatters the child's comprehension, his

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 39-40

<sup>45</sup> Lieberman, 8

<sup>46</sup> Harris, Maxine. *The Loss That is Forever. The Lifelong Impact of the Early Death of a Mother or Father*. New York: Penguin Books. 1966, p. 17. This child has no memories of his dead parent and sees someone in the photo album who is a stranger whom he is told is his parent



reasonable sense of security, and his belief in his parent's omnipotence.<sup>47</sup> The development of self is challenged as he/she is bereft of inner resources and in some cases without a role model. The loss of a parent may deprive the child of a solid anchor and the protective boundaries that parent provided, sometimes leaving the child feeling alone and frightened even while the surviving parent is nearby. When a child's parent "disappears" and is no longer there to care for him, nourish, protect and give him love, he suffers greatly as he feels the absence of the significant person in his life. At a young age, the child normally learns that the person to whom he is attached comes back and he learns to cope during the absence. When the parent is suddenly "no more", it is a huge blow and the child feels alone. Even at a very young age, children experience the feelings of anger, sadness, and longing.<sup>48</sup>

The early loss of a parent may have negative effects on the child's ability to develop loving relationships later in life. While we all must learn the sad lesson that nothing and no one we love will last forever, most of us have the privilege of learning this when we are old enough to have experienced the joys and pitfalls of relationships with those we love and when we have the ability to accept it in the context of having lived a full and secure life. When children must learn this lesson, the way they experience relationships heretofore may be seriously compromised. When a parent dies young, the pleasure of loving for the child, is permanently tied to the pain of loss and he learns that

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<sup>47</sup> Mayer, Ruth Rothbart. "The Legacy of AIDS: The Untold Stories of Children." In Adams, David W. and Eleanor J. Deveau. Eds. *Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Factors Affecting Children and Adolescents' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Death. Vol 3.* Amityville, New York: Baywood Publishing Company Inc. 1995, p. 129.

<sup>48</sup> Granot, 27

to love is to lose.<sup>49</sup> The loss of a mother-figure according to Bowlby, creates serious “scar tissue” for children.<sup>50</sup>

Children who are bereaved undergo major life changes and a roller coaster of emotions. The mourning process they experience has profound repercussions on their ability to develop strategies for coping and connecting with others later in life. Bowlby writes that while this does not occur in all cases, the death of a parent is an experience that may predispose an individual to “unfavorable personality development” that could lead to future psychiatric illness.<sup>51</sup> Harris points out that while most survivors of early loss are afraid of losing a loved one, they are willing to accept the risks of being in an intimate relationship. Others, however, believe that love is fleeting and have brief relationships while others still want to be the first to leave in order to avoid the pain of being left alone again. Some adults who were bereaved as children are terrified of being hurt again and do not let others get close; staying at a distance from others gives them a sense of self-reliance. Others keep others away by being angry while some feel a sense of terror about getting too close to someone who may die. Harris reports that some may create imaginary relationships that are safe.<sup>52</sup>

### **Children’s Understandings of Death**

It was once believed that children were unable to mourn because they either had a limited understanding of the concept of death or they lacked the ego strength to do so.<sup>53</sup> During the last century there has been a wide range of opinion. Freud said that children

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<sup>49</sup> Harris, 140

<sup>50</sup> Bowlby, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Boyd-Webb, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Harris, 144-163

<sup>53</sup> Corr, Charles A. “What Do We Know About Grieving Children and Adolescents?” in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Living with Grief. Children, Adolescents, and Loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000, p. 29.

couldn't distinguish between temporary absence and permanent loss.<sup>54</sup> Deutch (1937) said children who experienced a loss were indifferent because the ego of the child was not sufficient to handle the burden of mourning; rather, the child experienced narcissistic self-protection. Furman (1964) reported that children could grieve at the age of three and one-half to four years. Bowlby (1963 and 1980) wrote that infants as young as six months of age grieve the loss of a parent or caregiver, while Wolfenstein (1966) reported that mourning occurs in adolescence when full differentiation occurs. He wrote that mourning involves detachment from the attachment object and recognizing oneself as a separate entity as observed during the adolescent period. Anna Freud agreed and added the requirement of withdrawal of libido from the lost object. Kliman (1968) said that mourning involves a broad spectrum of responses created by the death of a loved one.<sup>55</sup>

Rabbi Earl Grollman, one of the most important pioneers in the field of childhood bereavement, writes that the child's unique individual thinking is influenced by both his "biological equipment and his adjustment to the world as understood through his world and social hierarchies."<sup>56</sup> Other current specialists in the field of child bereavement, specifically, Wolfelt, Worden, Boyd-Webb, Doka, Corr, Fitzgerald and many others have recognized the reality that children do indeed grieve and support Grollman's belief that the success of mourning is dependent upon the ability to have an understanding of what death is as well as its implications. Alan Wolfelt (1983) informs us "grief does not focus on one's ability to 'understand' but instead upon one's ability to 'feel'. Therefore, any child mature enough to love is mature enough to grieve".<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Boyd-Webb, 9

<sup>55</sup> Worden, 9-10

<sup>56</sup> Grollman, 5

<sup>57</sup> Boyd-Webb, 13

Maria Nagy (1948) outlined three stages in the development of children's understanding of death. The first stage is comprised of children from three to five years of age who see death as a continuation of life but in a "diminished" form that could be temporary.<sup>58</sup> They believe the deceased exists but lives somewhere else.<sup>59</sup> Five to nine year olds represent stage 2 in which death is understood and final with the comprehension that the dead don't return; for these children, death is personified such as in the form of a skeleton. Stage 3 is made up of children nine years of age and older who understand that death is final and inevitable for everyone including themselves.<sup>60</sup>

Speece and Brent outlined five principal components that children must ultimately grasp of the concept of death. These include: universality; irreversibility; nonfunctionality; causality; and some type of continued life form.<sup>61</sup> These are complex concepts for children to deal with and undergo change with each developmental level. The notion of universality concerns itself with three important notions, which are 1) All inclusiveness concerning questions such as *does everyone die? Could I or those I love avoid dying?* 2) Inevitability involving questions such as *does everyone have to die? Why does death have to happen?* When children watch television they see that some people or cartoon characters die but are resuscitated because they appear in the next episode or the following cartoon. This is confusing for children grappling with the concept of inevitability 3) Unpredictability is especially challenging for a child who makes the assumption that if death must happen and happens to everyone, then why is the timing of

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<sup>58</sup> Kastenbaum, Robert. "The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies" in Doka, Kenneth, Ed. *Living with Grief. Children, Adolescents, and Loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000, p. 18

<sup>59</sup> Worden, 10

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Corr, Charles A. "Children's Understandings of Death" in Doka, Kenneth, Ed. *Children Mourning, Mourning Children*. Washington D.C.: Hospice Foundation of America. 1995, p. 4

death not predictable? *He questions when will you/I die? Why don't we know when? Could it be at any time?*

The second component, irreversibility, requires children to realize that once a living thing physically dies, it can no longer be alive again. Children want to know *how long do you stay dead?* Along with irreversibility, the third component nonfunctionality, comprise “finality”. The task for children is to comprehend that all physical function ceases when the body dies. Corr defines irreversibility as the inability to reverse the processes and the state involved in death whereas nonfunctionality is the final cessation of bodily functions. This includes observable functions such as eating and walking and functions as well as those not directly seen by the child such as thinking and dreaming. Children often ask how the deceased will eat after being buried. Another example is *can you see when you are dead?*

The fourth component, causality, challenges children in their need to comprehend what causes death. Sometimes they think there are magical causes such as a bad wish or poor behavior on their part. They ask questions such as *why?* If a parent was angry at her, she may ask the question *did I make Mommy die?* Finally, the fifth component is concerned with the notion of some type of continued life form. This is a struggle for children and adults alike with such questions as *what happens after death? Where does your soul go? Do people ever come back?*<sup>62</sup> While all children must confront these challenges, it takes time for the development of a mature understanding of death. Young children believe that death is not universal, is temporary, and will not happen to them. Indeed, their exposure to death in stories lends itself to this way of thinking: characters in fairy tales are magically brought back to life; therefore death must be like sleeping after

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 4-11

which one wakes up. The coyote that is continually outsmarted by the roadrunner and is run over, crushed, or blown up is back to his antics in the following cartoon. The complexities of the development of the concept of death and the immature thoughts of young children make the task of understanding death difficult, as chronological age and cognitive development are not always synchronized.

Piaget also outlined the progress of understanding of death in three stages. In the pre-operational stage, the young child (ages 2-7 years) is egocentric and has magical thinking. He does not fathom the idea of irreversibility of death nor does he realize the dead body can no longer function. He has very concrete thinking that is related to his egocentricity. The latency ages of 7-11 years form the concrete operational stage in which children are not as egocentric and have an increased capability of reasoning. At this stage they are aware that death cannot be reversed but believe that it will not happen to them. Although they feel threatened by the reality of inevitability of death, they believe that it happens only to elderly people and this enables them to put it out of their mind for the present time. In the pre-pubertal years children experience the formal operational stage in which their thinking becomes logical and they can deal with abstractions and are able to handle many ideas at one time. Piaget reported that spirituality and ideas of life after death can be understood after the age of ten years.<sup>63</sup> Lonetto believed further that children between the ages of nine and twelve years appreciate the abstract nature of death and can even describe their feelings concerning it.

### **Reactions According to Developmental Level**

Children generally react to a death with similar emotions as adults. They feel fear and anxiety, confusion, anger, guilt, helplessness. They may exhibit somatic disturbances

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<sup>63</sup> Boyd-Webb, pp. 4-7

such as difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, behavior changes, falls and being accident prone, daydreaming, aches and pains, and susceptibility to infections due to being run down and emotionally exhausted. Bereaved children may have difficulties with school work or may immerse themselves in their studies as a way of escaping the pain. Inability to concentrate or get homework completed may cause friction with teachers or their peers. Taunting by their classmates renders a bereaved child at risk of isolation and depression as he realizes that he is now “different” from the other students. The need to assume additional responsibilities at home prevents continuation of a previous active social life leading to lack of popularity particularly for older children and adolescents. On the other hand, a bereaved child may be lucky enough to have an understanding teacher or sports coach who can offer a great deal of support.

An infant who loses the continuity of the primary caregiver will search for that person and cry, refuse to eat from others, and perhaps have changes in bodily functions. Children between 2 and 5 years will cry, cling, and exhibit pining behaviors. They become confused by explanations and need to hear them repeatedly. Five to nine year olds are sensitive to the mourning behaviors of the adults around them and will take cues from them and copy them. They may also feel that they need to stifle their feelings to protect the adults. They now have a greater awareness of guilt and may feel a sense of responsibility for the death that happened. These children experience fear and fantasy and may imagine death as a skeleton or ghost. Children between the ages of nine and twelve years understand that death is final and often fear their own death as they begin to grieve in a more adult way, sometimes denying their pain and trying to move on. Adolescents grieve more as adults do but also face the challenges of the powerful emotions and

hormones of their physical developmental stage. They may feel a sense of doom as their question their own identity and the meaning of life when a loved one has been snatched away from them at such a vulnerable time. They may resort to risk taking behaviors and reject adult values due to the sudden unpredictability of life. They may be resentful if expected to assume more adult roles and behaviors especially if a parent has died.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Tasks of Mourning**

Bowlby uses the term “decathexis” which Boyd-Webb explains as “relinquishing the object”. Nagera (1970) and Wolfenstein (1969) believe that children need to hold on to the relationship with their parents in order to achieve all the necessary developmental tasks and are unable to relinquish until the completion of adolescence; only then is mourning possible. Baker, Sydney, and Gross (1992), on the other hand, state that childhood grief requires specific psychological tasks over time and decathexis is not necessary because many children can maintain an internal attachment to the mental image of the person who died. Boyd-Webb writes that decathexis is not equivalent to relinquishing; rather there is a reduction in the longing for the deceased so that development and life may proceed for the child.<sup>65</sup>

The tasks of mourning are complicated and difficult and are magnified even more for children who are still developing their understanding of death. Therefore, they must be understood in terms of the cognitive, emotional, and social development of each child who is bereaved.<sup>66</sup> Worden outlines four tasks of mourning: 1) accepting the reality of the loss; 2) dealing with the emotional impact and pain of the loss; 3) adjusting to the environment where the deceased person is missing; and 4) emotionally relocating the

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<sup>64</sup> Smith, Susan C. *The Forgotten Mourners*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 1999, pp. 12-23

<sup>65</sup> Boyd-Webb, 10

<sup>66</sup> Worden, 12



deceased. Accepting the reality of the loss requires that the child understand the abstract concepts of finality and irreversibility. Young children who don't understand the world through the skills of reality testing may think that the deceased individual has simply gone away; going away implies that the person will return. Children need to be given accurate information in a language they can understand at their age level with repetition so that they can fully comprehend; otherwise, they may fill in the gaps with their own thoughts that could scare them.<sup>67</sup>

The second task which is dealing with the emotional impact of the loss can be frightening and painful for children especially those who are very young as they lack skills for dealing with intense feelings. This experience must be gradual for children as they experience feelings similar to those of adults, such as sadness, anger, guilt, and anxiety. They are easily influenced by the behaviors of adults in their world. The third task, adjusting to the environment without the deceased, may be largely determined by the role the deceased played in the life of the child and the family. For example, if the mother who died was a full time mother at home, there may be more changes in the daily routine than in the case of a deceased father who went to work every day. The loss of a parent is forever, and children will re-grieve at various stages throughout their lives.

The fourth task of emotionally relocating and memorializing the deceased person is indeed challenging for a child. The focus is not to give up the relationship with the deceased but to find a new way to include the dead in his life that will allow him to go on living in a healthy way. Rather than separating from the deceased, a new perspective is needed to transform the connection of the relationship.<sup>68</sup> All these tasks are highly

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 15-16

complex and require maturity of the ego and understanding of abstract concepts. The developmental level of the child as well as circumstances around the death are both influencing factors that will determine the intensity and duration of the reactions of a bereaved child.

The bereaved child experiences a “double edged sword” as he struggles to find the balance between understanding on a cognitive level and accepting on an emotional level. Granot explains that if a child does not understand the irreversibility of death, he searches and attempts to do what he can to restore the situation in which the loved one returns. Even if he does understand, he has difficulty accepting the reality on an emotional level.<sup>69</sup> This is difficult enough for adults to deal with and the desire to lessen the load for the child may create the situation in which they avoid explaining that the loss is forever, leaving the youngster confused, frightened, and lonely. She points out as well that attempting to reassure the child that the deceased loved one is “still there” such as telling him “Mommy is watching over you” prevents him from internalizing the finality of the situation and hinders emotional adjustment to his loss.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, children equate death with punishment when they have not made the connection that all living things die, complicating their understanding that they did not do anything to cause the death of their loved one. This complexity is certainly one that adults struggle with as well.

Wolfelt’s tasks of mourning are similar to Worden’s yet at the same time, different. He outlines the six tasks of mourning to be: 1) to acknowledge the reality of the death; 2) to feel the pain of the loss; 3) to remember the person who died; 4) to develop a new self-identity; 5) to search for meaning; and 6) to receive ongoing support from caring

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<sup>69</sup> Granot 28-29

<sup>70</sup> Ibid 29

adults.<sup>71</sup> In order to fulfill these tasks, bereaved children require the support of adults who will speak honestly and openly, allow them to grieve, and speak freely of the person who died. These adults need to be willing to explore their own feelings and vulnerabilities and be brave enough to allow the bereaved child to see them expressing their grief. Children will imagine and fill in gaps that exist for them when there are discrepancies between what they learn and what they observe in adult behavior. Wolfelt encourages parents and adults to allow their child to play, recognizing that it is easy to feel in over their head. Seeking professional help, he writes, is not an admission of failure, but rather an expression of love for the child who is struggling.<sup>72</sup>

### **Reactions to Parental Death in Children**

Bowlby has outlined three phases of grief that children experience: 1) Protest – the child can't believe the person is dead and tries to regain the deceased.<sup>73</sup> Continuous crying and searching for 2 or 3 days are typical with the child alternating between accepting and rejecting others who are trying to help him. These behaviors continue with less intensity but are triggered at times particularly at night and at bedtime when the child is especially reminded of the absence of the loved one. The emotional attachment of the child to the deceased as well as the centrality that person held in his life are factors that affect the intensity and duration of these responses.<sup>74</sup>

2) The second phase outlined by Bowlby is that of despair and disorganization.<sup>75</sup> In this phase, the intensity of the first period diminishes and the child experiences intense

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<sup>71</sup> Wolfelt, Alan D. *Healing a Child's Grieving Heart. 100 Practical Ideas*. Colorado: Companion Press. 2001, pp. 3-8

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Grollman, 13

<sup>74</sup> Lieberman, 11-12

<sup>75</sup> Grollman, 13

sadness, withdrawal and lethargy. He wants to know when the parent will return and insists on doing things the way the lost parent did. He focuses on the possibility of reunion and brightens up upon hearing a sound or seeing a sight that offers hope of seeing the parent again, only to slip back into his sadness when this realizes this will not take place.<sup>76</sup> Adults often remark that it does not seem like their children are mourning or even appear to feel sad after the loss of a significant person in their life. It is a known fact that children grieve intermittently due to a limited capacity to tolerate negative feelings for a long period of time. Wolfelt calls this the "short sadness span".<sup>77</sup> Mahon writes that children can spend ten minutes feeling sad and then go to play outside. This may be interpreted by adults as not caring, however, she writes that this is a healthy response that is self-protective and allows them to balance their grief with the rest of their lives.<sup>78</sup>

Young children who lose a parent realize their worst fear. Children experience separation anxiety as part of normative developmental growth, learning that persons and objects do continue to exist even if they cannot be seen. The death of a parent makes this anxiety a reality and creates a crisis situation not only because a parent has died and is permanently gone but also concern of losing the surviving parent as well becomes a real cause for fear. During this phase, children may exhibit physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, vomiting, bedwetting, and depression among others.

A common behavioral response is anger directed at the parent who died, the surviving parent, siblings, peers, at overall changes in the child's life and even at self. The anger may be exacerbated by the caregiver feeling hurt by the child's overt reactions and feel unloved and rejected, adding further to the already tense relationship between

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<sup>76</sup> Lieberman, 12

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>78</sup> Mahon, Mimi. "Bereaved Children and Secondary Losses". *The Forum*. July/August 1994; 25:4:5

them. Temper tantrums, nightmares, and toileting regression are common in bereaved children as they struggle with the intensity of their situation. Some children become frightened of situations that had not previously been problematic such as fear of being alone in a room, fear of the dark, of loud noises, or of strangers. Grollman adds that some children may experience panic, becoming preoccupied with symptoms of the disease that their loved one died of such as fear that a bump might be a sign of cancer if a parent or sibling died that way. Children need reassurance and explanations to help make distinctions between life threatening illnesses and bodily reactions to physical stimuli that most often disappear spontaneously.

Children often feel guilt when a loved one dies. Grollman explains that there is a degree of guilt in almost every death as survivors fret and agonize over what they could have done to prevent the death or why they are still alive when their loved one has died.<sup>79</sup> Children often feel guilty if they misbehaved prior to the death of a parent or if they had a pang of jealousy of their sibling who experienced an accidental death. They may feel that their parents are of the opinion that the wrong child died and they feel guilty having survived. Granot explains that it is during this phase that the numbness wears off and the child really begins to comprehend the reality of the loss, responding with intense grieving and mourning as the understanding of the implications and the pain of the loss become more profound; the internalization process of mourning begins.<sup>80</sup>

3) The third phase according to Bowlby is that of hope. The child begins to organize his life recognizing that he must do so without the significant individual who died. Granot further elucidates the realization that the loss is a reality takes place at this

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<sup>79</sup> Grollman, Rabbi Earl. *Bereaved Children and Teens. A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1995, p. 10

<sup>80</sup> Granot, 39

time and the child begins to adapt to this new and painful actuality in his life. She is careful to remind the reader, however, that acceptance is not equivalent to acquiescing or forgetting the deceased or what happened; rather it is an adaptation to the “changed reality” requiring the bereaved to investigate the best way to integrate this difficult and painful reality into his/her life.<sup>81</sup> Acceptance and readjustment are the tasks of this phase but one must take care to understand that the phases are not necessarily linear but overlap and weave in and out over the lifetime of the person.

### **The Anguish of Childhood Grief**

The grief of children is highly complex and painful because responses to death are closely related to their age and stage of development at the time. Some children cannot quite grasp what has happened due to their age and lack of understanding. Others still have difficulty responding emotionally due to their immature<sup>82</sup> development. Adults in their world who are struggling with their own grief may not recognize the needs of the bereaved child, inadvertently adding to the emotional isolation that the child experiences. Parents and other adults serve as role models as children watch how they grieve and typically follow suit. Bereaved children are faced with many challenges as they struggle to readjust their lives without their loved one and sometimes in the forced setting of a new environment. They are challenged emotionally, socially, and spiritually as they attempt to make sense out of a situation that has left them and their family feeling helpless.

Anguish is a very difficult emotion for parents to allow their child to undergo, but Fogarty writes that when children are denied the opportunity to feel anguish they rarely

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 40

<sup>82</sup> Immature – is meant to imply undifferentiation as opposed to childish behavior

learn to embrace, process and adapt to grief while bonding with others who are mourning the same loss. It is imperative, therefore, that parents allow their bereaved children to feel the very painful but necessary feeling of anguish. Fogarty illustrates the purposes of anguish as: 1) offering important insight and knowledge as they learn the very essence of the person who has died 2) allowing children to realize how much they loved the person they have lost, and 3) teaching children their own potential for love. He writes a strong admonishment that although parents want their children to be happy, stopping their anguish is like stopping love.<sup>83</sup>

Two issues according to Bowlby for mourning in pre-adolescent children are: 1) whether a pre-adolescent child can respond to the loss of a parent with healthy mourning. This involves his ability to accept both that a change has occurred in his external world and that he must make the relative changes in his internal world; he must now reorient his attachment behavior accordingly. 2) The nature of responses after loss in the first year or two of a child's life.<sup>84</sup> The process of healthy mourning for a child requires an eventual withdrawal of emotional investment in the lost person and that he prepare for developing a relationship with a new one. This is a painful progression that leaves the child emotionally exhausted due to his persistent yearning for the deceased and his sense of guilt and fear. When a child perceives his loved one to be temporarily absent he feels anxiety, but when he recognizes and believes that the figure is permanently absent, he experiences the interplay of anxiety and despair that characterizes grief. His urge to find the person again and bring him/her back is powerful and exhausting as are increased crying and appeals to others for help. Anger, hatred, and ambivalence experienced by the

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<sup>83</sup> Fogarty, 17

<sup>84</sup> Bowlby, 18-19

bereaved child, even though these constitute normal grief responses, add to a sense of shame, weakness, and loss of self-esteem.<sup>85</sup> The big question then is: how and when does one reach a state that allows a child to respond to loss in a favorable manner? Bowlby explains that this develops slowly during childhood and adolescence and in some cases, may never be fully attained.<sup>86</sup> Engel writes "the loss of a loved person is as traumatic psychologically as being severely wounded or burned is, physiologically."<sup>87</sup> The processes of mourning are likened to those of healing that follow that severe wound or burn.

Older children have added difficulties as they move through childhood to adolescence and take on the tasks required of that challenging time while they have the job of reorganizing their life without their loved one be it the result of a loss at the present time or from a loss experienced years prior. Children re-grieve as they enter new stages of development and encounter significant moments even as adults. The literature is replete with reports of bereaved children indicating feeling different because of their loss, socially and emotionally isolated, and many report the feeling of loneliness. Older kids are faced with social challenges as they want to be invited to parties yet have apprehensions about how they will behave or feel when others don't know what to say. Some children don't know how to handle their peers upon returning to school and are afraid teachers will be too demanding or insensitive to what they are experiencing. Some school experiences may serve as painful reminders of the loss such as recitals or school trips that parents and siblings attend. Some children develop depression from their inability to reestablish themselves in their new status because children do not have the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 26-29

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 43



tools for this new complicated situation. A child may feel he is in a "no way out" situation and isolates himself as a means of minimizing the pain.<sup>88</sup>

### **Variables Affecting Bereavement in Children**

Children do not mourn in a vacuum but do so within the context of the family and society in which they live. Boyd-Webb has outlined three groups of factors that influence how children grieve: individual factors; factors related to the death itself; and, family, social, and religious/cultural factors.<sup>89</sup> Brown (1989) provided six more specific variables including: the social and ethnic context of death; the child's history of previous losses; the timing of death in the life cycle; the nature of the death; the position and function of the person in the family system; and, the openness of the family system in which the child lives.<sup>90</sup>

The age and developmental level of the child at the time of death are critical in his understanding and ability to cope with his loss. Of prime concern is the relationship of the child to the deceased person. Wolfelt's Loss Inventory indicates that the death of a parent or sibling has the highest impact on a child followed by the death of a relative and then the death of a friend.<sup>91</sup> Although the first experience of death for many children is the loss of a pet, Wolfelt does not include a ranking for the impact of such a loss. While the loss of a parent at any age creates a crisis situation for a child, the degree of dependence of the child on the deceased is important; a toddler who is highly dependent on his mother and cannot understand what happened will have a different response from that of an older child who may watch a parent struggle with a chronic or terminal illness.

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<sup>88</sup> Granot, 47

<sup>89</sup> Boyd-Webb, 29

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 62

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 37

The gender of the bereaved child can determine how they are treated by others. Sometimes girls are expected to be sad and express their sadness in tears but are reproached for displaying behavior that exhibits anger. In some situations, they are expected to take over chores and help in the running of the household despite the fact that they are indeed children. Boys, on the other hand, may be told that they have to be strong and keep a “stiff upper lip”. While some cultural groups encourage boys and men to cry, this is not generally the case in our society in which boys are often told that they are now the “man of the house” if a father has died. Wolfelt warns us that encouraging boys to “be strong” only postpones normal thoughts and feelings, complicating the child’s life, and compromising his ability to have happiness later in life. Girls, he says, must be allowed to be children and not be burdened with the task of maintaining a household.<sup>92</sup>

The gender of the person who died has a serious effect on the child. If the father was the main or only breadwinner, his death may cause dramatic changes in economic status. The death of a mother will result in the loss of the child’s primary emotional caregiver and stability of daily routines. Worden’s studies of bereaved children have shown an increased impact with mother loss.<sup>93</sup> While the mother is the child’s principal caregiver and source of emotional attachment, a young child sees the role of the father as a protector, someone who is powerful, caring, and a receiver of love and honor.<sup>94</sup> The relationship the bereaved child had with the deceased individual plays a vital role in the response to the loss. Grieving a loss when the relationship was not nurturing or was marked by animosity is complicated. A significant loss creates conflict for a child who by

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<sup>92</sup> Wolfelt, *Healing a Child’s Grieving Heart*, 20-21

<sup>93</sup> Worden, 76

<sup>94</sup> Johns, Stan. “The Role of the School” in in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Living with Grief: Children, Adolescents, and Loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000, p. 83

virtue of magical thinking, may believe that he caused the death. The individual child's general way of coping with stress, personality characteristics, and past experience with loss and death are major variables in the way he mourns.

Other important factors related to the death include the cause of the death, whether the death was anticipated or sudden, whether it was "timely" if anticipated and whether it could have been prevented. Parkes (1972) observed in his studies with bereaved children, that sudden death is harder for a child to grieve. These children, he said, experienced higher amounts of crying and fewer attended the funeral or saw the body. The intensity of the impact is in part related to the reaction of the surviving parent. The shock of a sudden death brings a high level of stress and more difficult feelings with fewer opportunities to share these feelings due to uneasiness felt by others in how to respond to and support these children. Parkes did find interestingly enough that those families experiencing the sudden death of a family member tended to have increased cohesiveness and religious and spiritual support as they were suddenly thrown into their situation of traumatic loss.<sup>95</sup> If the deceased person experienced pain, violence, and trauma, the child will have to grapple with this as well. The need to face a death involving a stigma such as suicide, murder, or death by AIDS places the child in an overwhelming situation.

The place of death is important as well; the child who watched a sibling or parent die at home as a result of a lingering illness has a different experience from the one who is told that Daddy got sick and went to the hospital where he died. If the death was violent, there may be media involvement and an intrusion not only in the daily routines of the child but disturbances in the privacy of his life and that of his family. The

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<sup>95</sup> Worden, 74-75

involvement of the child in the death process of the loved one will play a role in his mourning; being there during the dying of his relative allows him to help create a more “positive” death experience. If the child witnessed a violent death, issues surrounding the trauma compound the tasks of mourning.

Opportunities for children to have contact with the deceased person are significant since children are very literal and curious. Rando says that children must be included in death rituals or they have more difficulty resolving their loss. There are four times that children may have contact with their dead relative: they may be present at the time of the death, viewing the body, attending ceremonies, and visiting the grave or mausoleum.<sup>96</sup> Since young children do not have the ability to comprehend abstractions and they are so literal, doing something tangible offers a chance to make the death as “real” as possible. This could include placing flowers on the casket or viewing the body. Boyd-Webb explains that these give some personal control to the child in a situation that is beyond everyone’s control.<sup>97</sup> Silverman emphasizes the reality that children do not live in the past but remain connected with the deceased. They derive comfort and solace from remembering the person they have lost and from constructing a new relationship with this individual who is important.<sup>98</sup>

The family with which the child lives and identifies himself is key to his grief experience. Some families are more child-oriented while others are more parent-centered. Irrespective of the orientation of the family, the shifts and changes that take place in the family depend largely upon the ability of the surviving parent to grieve while taking on

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<sup>96</sup> Boyd-Webb, 36

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>98</sup> Silverman, Phyllis R. “When Parents Die” in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Living with Grief. Children, Adolescents, and Loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000, p. 222

the formidable task of guiding the family through the major transition it is now faced with.<sup>99</sup> Family members often have different opinions as to the role of children in a death in the family and sometimes the needs of the child may be overlooked. The reaction of the surviving parent plays a vital role for the child who has lost a parent. Issues concerning the surviving parent deal with the level of dysfunction experienced following the loss of the spouse; how the parent perceives the child's needs at this time; the consistency of discipline he/she is capable of providing; and the possibility of dating and remarriage of the parent.<sup>100</sup>

The gender of the surviving parent may play an important role, as men and women often approach emotional situations including grief, quite differently. These all have direct repercussions on the bereaved child who is in dire need of attention, consistency, and discipline from a parent who is bereaved at the same time and often overwhelmed with major life changes, financial difficulties, and having to assume the role of both parents. Children may feel less supported and develop health problems, social difficulties, and emotional problems.

It is important for parents to be aware of the issue concerning the need for their children to know what caused the death of the person who died. This helps not only the child but the parent as well as it forces them both to face the reality of what happened, how it occurred, and to give it accurate and honest words. Moreover, it lets the child know how the death affects the parent and offers an understanding that life has changed dramatically. The age of the child is important here because young children see their parents as people who do things for them and the concern will naturally arise about who

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid*, 223

<sup>100</sup> Worden, 78

will care for them especially if the surviving parent is struggling. Older children see their parents as separate individuals and don't rely on them for as much.<sup>101</sup> How the news is imparted to children will play a vital role in their adaptation to the situation. Children who see their parent or sibling suffering with an illness will witness a decline in ability to function and even be lucid at times. A sudden death brings shock and disbelief.

Complicating the entire already overwhelming situation is the inability for young children to apprehend not only what has happened but also the implications around the finality of death. Older children who do understand these implications struggle with panic and horror as their worst fear is realized. Honest and open information is essential for children to spare them the agony of hearing the truth later on from others or even worse, imagining what really happened. Since children model the behavior of their parents, so too will grief patterns be similar to a great degree. This may also hold true for defense mechanisms that they may copy of their parents. Denial, avoidance, repression, projection, and intellectualization are some ways that adults cope with intense emotions and stress. Children might copy these defenses and parents need to be aware of this possibility. Granot says replacement of these by healthier mechanisms provides healthier modeling for children as they attempt to cope with a situation that has overwhelmed the entire family.<sup>102</sup>

Religious and cultural aspects concerning death are critical in how a family functions but children can get caught between what they are taught concerning death rituals and what actually is practiced in their own family. This can cause confusion and isolation as the child struggles to find his place and receive help for his own needs. Some

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<sup>101</sup> Silverman, 220-222

<sup>102</sup> Granot, 153

religious explanations can be so confusing that they are even counterproductive because they encourage denial and prevent the resolution of emotions.<sup>103</sup> An example of this is guilt that may result when a child is told that "God wanted Mommy" or "only the good die young". Well-meaning adults are not aware of the lack of comfort such words cause, contrary to what they hope to impart to the child. Some cultural groups are more overt in their behaviors around death and mourning customs. A child who grows up in such a culture may find a significant dichotomy in the norms of the western society which tends to be a "death denying" society. Behaviors such as wailing or open weeping that are perfectly acceptable in his nuclear and even extended family may not be acceptable when he returns to school or re-integrates into activities such as baseball leagues and dance lessons. Children really have no role to play in death situations in modern western society because they rarely are exposed to death in their immediate family and as a result, adults don't know how to relate to a grieving child, often deferring to professionals to fill that gap. Some deaths have a stigma or a prestige in the case of a famous person. Even if information is kept secret, children are sensitive to how others around them are behaving and feeling.

Children spend a great deal of time at school where they learn about relationships and attachments to peers and teachers who serve as role models. The school environment while ideally should be a place of comfort and security, can be a place that presents conflict to the bereaved child. Upon returning to school following a death, the child is confronted with peers who may be supportive or may taunt and ridicule him. If the death is associated with a stigma, other children can be cruel. Children do not like to feel "different"; this adds to the vulnerability they are already feeling. At this time especially,

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<sup>103</sup> Ward-Wimmer and Napoli, 120

they need the reassurance of ongoing and supportive friendship and opportunities to maintain their self-esteem.<sup>104</sup> Teachers are significant in the adaptation of a child to a loss of a parent or sibling and they serve as role models for the other children in how to respond to the grieving classmate. While we would assume that a teacher will be sensitive to the child's needs, the literature reports experiences of children who received little sympathy from their teacher with expectations that work would be completed as usual with no exceptions made. Others have indeed reported on the difference that a sensitive teacher and school made in their mourning process.

Whether a bereaved child has had prior experience with loss or is now experiencing loss for the first time can profoundly affect his ability to cope. When a parent dies, the child sees the surviving parent as next in line to die and lives with this fear that haunts him.<sup>105</sup> The child who loses his surviving parent experiences the nightmare that he dreads most ever since the first parent died. This devastating situation is proof to the child of utter lack of security and control over life and how he reacts depends on what has happened in his life since the initial loss.<sup>106</sup> Even worse is the loss of both parents at the same time. Granot describes this situation as one in which the child feels a sense of calamity and loss that is absolute. His world is shattered and he is truly alone, belonging to nobody even if there are other siblings. The unique nature of this type of loss necessitates the intrusion of outside people into the family sometimes requiring the law to intervene, minimizing family autonomy and offering no control for the child. If children are removed from their home they suffer traumatic secondary losses. For siblings who are separated, the loss is even more extreme and almost beyond

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<sup>104</sup> Boyd-Webb, 40

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 83

<sup>106</sup> Granot, 137



imagination. Substitute parental figures are crucial for children who suffer these types of losses; they must be fully cognizant of the reality that it takes years for these children to reorganize their lives and only then can they even begin to deal with the rawness of their pain.<sup>107</sup>

### **How Children Grieve**

Children experience the same emotions as adults when a significant person dies but do not have the tools with which to express how they feel as succinctly as adults. They experience intense feelings that should not be underestimated. Similar to adults, children feel anger, sadness, guilt, and despair. When they appear sad one moment and then want to go play the next, adults misinterpret this reaction as not feeling or not caring, however children do indeed feel the pain of loss. Behavior changes in children who are bereaved such as physical aggression, mood swings, sleep and appetite changes, withdrawal, fearfulness, denial, and regressive behavior are often signs of feelings related to their grief. Children experience feelings of guilt if they feel they contributed to the cause of death; anger at the loved one for dying and abandoning him, for lack of attention, and at the major changes that have taken place in their lives; confusion by the overwhelming sequence of events that are suddenly taking place about something they cannot understand. In the case of murder or suicide there may suddenly be media and public inquiry about the event intruding upon their once quiet and secure life. Well-meaning adults confuse them with odd statements such as “be a big boy now”; they feel fear about what happened to their loved one and whether they are safe, who will take care of them, and fear of forgetting the person who died. Accidental deaths leave children fearful for their own safety and that of their surviving family members. Death of a parent

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 135-137

makes the bereaved child afraid that something will happen to the surviving parent. All these feelings leave a bereaved child feeling helpless about what has happened and in some cases, powerless to make the adults in their family feel better. Children may react in a variety of ways such as acting out, being “good”, taking on adult roles, either struggling in school or becoming an overachiever, or slipping into a depression. Whatever their response, bereaved children struggle to understand their emotions and at times feel very much alone in the world.<sup>108</sup>

### **Vulnerabilities of Bereaved Children**

Children and adolescents thrive as they learn about their world through actions, experiences, and connection. They learn that life has an order with which they become familiar as they find a place for themselves within that order. This is accomplished against the backdrop of the safety and security of attachment figures and expectations of order and regularity in their lives. Attig outlines three ways that children succeed in the experience of “thriving”. These include: 1) realizing achievement values by “doing” 2) realizing experiential values achieved by interactions with others, and 3) finding meaning through connection to something transcendent, something that is greater than themselves.<sup>109</sup> In these ways, children learn to care about others in their life and to know that others care about them. Thriving involves respect for each individual that includes the understanding of how people thrive or are vulnerable taking into consideration the unique life patterns of each person. Grieving not only disrupts but can distort children’s expectations of life patterns; subsequently their ability to thrive and develop is in crisis.

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<sup>108</sup> Smith, 15-19

<sup>109</sup> Attig, Thomas W. “Respecting Bereaved Children and Adolescents” in Adams, David W. and Eleanor J. Deveau. Eds. *Beyond the Innocence of Childhood. Vol 3.* Amityville, New York: Baywood. 1995, p. 43

Their ability to grieve in a “healthy” way determines the degree to which they will be able to thrive in the future.<sup>110</sup>

Granot explains that loss for a child “colors” his internal world and his behavior. The safe world that he once lived in is now chaotic and “the naïve trust that he once had in a safe, cheerful world where dreams come true” is no longer true. The loss of a significant person in his life is a loss that is forever. Each new developmental level he enters into forces him to encounter his grief once again with its accompanying challenges to his already exposed vulnerability. Unlike adults, children don’t always externalize their feelings and may carry their heavy emotional burden throughout childhood and even into adulthood. They are often unaware of their emotions and feelings and don’t know how to express them. This is in part due to lacking a sense of support they need to help them with this expression.<sup>111</sup> As a result, a “pressure cooker” kind of experience may ensue in which they don’t quite know what they are feeling nor do they feel there is a way of unburdening themselves. Whereas adults express their grief and are aware of the vast range of emotions they feel that at times necessitates a change in how they handle themselves, children want to distance themselves from the difficult feelings and resume their normal life as soon as possible so that they can be like their peers once again.

Separation is a key reason for the vulnerability of the bereaved child especially in the case of a parent’s death. As the young child learns about separation and comes to realize that separation is usually temporary with the parent returning, he is strengthened by this important and necessary task in his personal emotional and psychological growth. However, traumatic loss incurred by the permanent absence of the parent brings intense

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 47

<sup>111</sup> Granot, 9

pain and is often perceived as abandonment with the possibility that every separation now stirs up fears and memories of the loss. Older children who have more memory of their loved one and comprehend separation better will have a more accurate understanding but may still experience difficulties with separation. Regardless of age, the bereaved child must now learn to differentiate between threatening separations and those that are part of the normative developmental growth process for everyone. Repercussions that result may include low self-esteem, low self-image, and difficulties in interpersonal areas.<sup>112</sup>

Bereaved children face a multitude of vulnerabilities as outlined by Attig in the following four categories: 1) limitations in coping capacities and background experiences 2) interferences from the social circumstances in which they grieve 3) complications due to unhappy features of their relationship with the person who died, and 4) the challenging nature of some deaths.<sup>113</sup> The limitations in coping capacities of children cause extreme difficulties for children who are in the early stages of development and usually have a lack of experience with loss. These limitations include emotional and psychological hurdles that result in inability to cope behaviorally. They have real physical limitations, requiring care by adults that includes bonding. Coping socially for a bereaved child is overwhelming as he struggles with his range of emotions, behavior that may be frowned upon, friends who may taunt and ridicule, social environments that do not offer the empathy he needs, and constant reminders that he has lost someone important and is now "different". A child has intellectual and spiritual limitations by virtue of his lack of life experience until now; he is suddenly confronted with trying to make sense out of what has happened and struggles to fit together the information he has learned in school, the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 56-58

<sup>113</sup> Attig in Adams, 47

experiences from his family, and even what his religious education has offered, if applicable. These are huge and devastating challenges for a child to face not only at the time of the loss but also as he re-grieves throughout his life at each new developmental stage.

Social circumstances offer vulnerabilities as well as children grieve in the context of community. They are often vulnerable to poor modeling and little if any support that may result in alienation and isolation. Sometimes the people they need most such as adults, teachers and peers distance themselves due to their own feelings of inadequacy or else they offer poor advice or insensitive platitudes. Children often experience disenfranchised grief when their loss is not recognized or their needs are overlooked as the adults in the family are disproportionately cared for.

The relationship the child had with the deceased is an important vulnerability factor. Attig writes the more connected the deceased was and the more “interwoven into the tapestry of their lives” the greater the vulnerability of bereaved children.<sup>114</sup> Not all parent-child relationships are loving or nurturing and the child may have feelings of guilt, ambivalence, and anger that challenges him. There may be “unfinished business” around differences in opinion around socialization, activities, or school that he needs to address.

The fourth category of vulnerabilities concerns circumstances of the death itself. Whether the death was anticipated or happens suddenly, the child is traumatized and violent deaths bring the additional complications of shock and horror. Witnessing a violent or accidental death may add posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the already insurmountable grief for the child. Attig adds that deaths that the child believes could have been prevented could lead to lack of trust and preoccupation with those deemed

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 54

responsible for the death. The death of a sibling or peers forces a child to face his own mortality. Death by suicide may cause a "copycat" response especially among adolescents, and survivors may be tormented with thoughts about how they could have intervened to prevent the suicide, with resultant guilt and remorse.<sup>115</sup>

Families that experience the death of a family member experience tumultuous times. Normal life will never be exactly the same and children see the adults in their family struggling with their own emotions and changed behavior. Some children sense the tenuous situation and take it upon themselves to attempt to lessen the burden for their parent(s) by being "good". They assume responsibility to preserve the family and surviving parent or both parents if a sibling has died. They try to help with the household duties, do their homework, behave well in school, assist with their siblings' care, and not make demands for themselves. While adults may marvel at the strength and kindness of these children in the midst of their world that is collapsing, Granot explains that it is precisely these children we must be most concerned about because they forego their own emotional needs to help their parent(s). This pattern results in a role reversal leaving the child emotionally neglected because not only do the adults not look after the child and help him through his necessary mourning, but also the child ignores himself and his own needs.<sup>116</sup> This exacerbates the child's vulnerability causing him to feel even more alone.

Some deaths are clouded in shame and stigma which some families handle by keeping secrets. Secrets are kept for a variety of reasons including protection from shame, religious, cultural or social prohibitions, housing restrictions, or even to protect children from being taunted by their peers. The desire of parents to protect their children

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 56

<sup>116</sup> Granot, 48

(and themselves in some cases) from the truth creates what Cain and Fast call a "conspiracy of silence".<sup>117</sup> However, young children cannot interpret the notion of keeping secrets due to their tendency to be concrete and literal. Keeping a secret does not always succeed for a family as children sense that something is not right and often know more than adults realize they do. Children recognize distress in the family and often feel angry and frightened when they find out the truth, resulting in confusion and possibly distrust.<sup>118</sup> Adults evade the questions the children pose thereby ignoring their need to know and understand the truth, but moreover, to be a partner in the reality of his life. When peers tell snippets of what they have heard, the bereaved child is at a loss as he attempts to filter them resulting in distorted information that does not match what he knows.<sup>119</sup>

Secrets differ from matters of privacy that are concerned with information that families choose not to share because they are important only to them. Secrets, on the other hand, are hidden concerns that reflect shame.<sup>120</sup> The additional burden of being told "don't tell" leaves a child isolated with knowledge and feeling cheated by not being able to talk openly. Sometimes the child may want to hear what others know, to get a reaction, or to enlist a friend who will be a support.<sup>121</sup> This is often the case following a death due to AIDS or suicide. When children sense stress in the family and they don't understand the cause, they wonder if they are the cause of the stress, adding to their vulnerability and feelings of guilt.<sup>122</sup> The synergistic effect of coping with the loss while at the same time

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<sup>117</sup> Boyd-Webb, 139

<sup>118</sup> Mayer, 117-120

<sup>119</sup> Granot, 20-21

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 121

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 127

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 119

keeping the secret is monumental for anyone and especially for a child who does not have the ego strength or social support to cope with such expectations imposed upon him by the adults in his family.

### **Magical Thinking**

Due to the concrete nature of thinking employed by young children, they define events in tangible terms such as good, bad, happy, etc. Forgarty defines magical thought as “a child’s inaccurate conclusion(s) regarding a loss experience resulting in the child believing that he/she is responsible for the loss experience and needs to fix it”.<sup>123</sup> Since young children believe that death is not final, it seems reasonable to them that their magical thoughts can bring a deceased loved one back to life. The egocentric nature of the child that causes him to think the world revolves around him enables the belief that he was responsible for the death. Furthermore, the child believes that he can also fix the loss and magically cause the grief that everyone is burdened with to disappear. Fogarty adds that the child is under the impression that he has created a method of mourning that helps him cope but in reality he has developed an unhealthy complicated one.<sup>124</sup> Fears and fantasies that children have fill in the gaps of a loss they don’t understand. This may be the result of the truth that the child is truly too young to comprehend but occurs also in situations in which children are not told the truth or only partial information, are absent from the funeral and mourning rituals, or are sent away to stay with others at the time of the death. Sometimes the fantasies they create are more difficult to bear than the real story, as they may be unrealistic.<sup>125</sup> Imagination, Granot writes, is part of the child’s way

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<sup>123</sup> Fogarty, James A. *The Magical Thoughts of Grieving Children*. New York: Baywood Publishing Company. 2000, p.44

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 49

<sup>125</sup> Trozzi, Maria. *Talking With Children About Loss*. New York: A Perigee Book. 1999, p 17



of using denial of horrendous news as a means of protection; perhaps the bad news will disappear if he chooses not to believe it is true. Magical thinking allows him to rationalize in his mind that if he is good, the deceased will return.

In addition to magical thinking, children can derive inaccurate conclusions due to their tendency to misinterpret information they receive from others. Since their “cognitive equipment”, the term Fogarty uses to refer to their intellectual development, is incomplete, they make wrong conclusions about traumatic events that happen to them with resultant dysfunction and cognitive distortions. David Burns (1999) defines cognitive distortions as restricting patterns of thought that fuel magical thought to develop into potential defense mechanisms and personality disorders”.<sup>126</sup> Some children may develop symptoms of persistent anxiety, hopes of reunion with the deceased and even the desire to die themselves, persisting blame and guilt over the death blaming himself or the surviving parent if there had been marital conflict, overactivity, compulsive care-giving and self-reliance feeling they have to care for their remaining parent or siblings, euphoria and depersonalization with a sense of relief over the death that is disturbing to the child for having this feeling, or identificatory symptoms in which the bereaved child develops symptoms resembling those of the person who died.<sup>127</sup>

Young children according to Harris, have no story because they lack the words or language to make sense of their loss. They have a sense of being “adrift” with a lack of structure and the loss of the anchor in their life causing them to feel “rootless” with no solid ground. With this loss of foundation, they experience a crumbling of personal identity and profound internal emptiness that cannot be filled. The loss leaves a huge void

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<sup>126</sup> Fogarty, 53

<sup>127</sup> Bowlby, 351-376

in their world and some report feeling cheated.<sup>128</sup> Sometimes children use “if only” ideas known as mythologies to help cope with their pain. These help the bereaved child to manage the period of time in which they undergo the most intense and acute mourning. These “if only” ideas in which they idealize the deceased, especially the parent, can last throughout the child’s life as either a treasured legacy of their dead loved one or else as what Harris calls “unwanted baggage”.<sup>129</sup> Myths about self are also created in which the child wonders whether he caused the death and also who he might have become if his parent had lived, imagining an ideal self.<sup>130</sup>

### **Catastrophe**

The child who experiences a loss undergoes a “great and sudden calamity, a violent and abrupt change, and nothing in the child’s life remains unchanged”.<sup>131</sup> This child now is forced to continue in a world that is changed where continuity and security no longer exist; his world now is chaotic. Harris writes that adults who were bereaved children mark time as “before” and “after” the death even up to fifty years later.<sup>132</sup> Granot adds that adults must carry the “hurt child” with them, sometimes struggling for years as they are forced to mature early in order to cope. They feel different and always vulnerable. Some feel they are “toxic” to others and avoid human contact, creating loneliness and social and emotional isolation.<sup>133</sup> The loss has profound repercussions as they often also “lose” the other parent as well as their own childhood, innocence, and confidence. Granot stresses not only the effect the loss has on the child’s support system

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<sup>128</sup> Harris, 14-15

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 84

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 90

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 10-13

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 262-264

but also the break in the bonds of love and human contact that the child needs for normal growth and development.<sup>134</sup> A death in the family also brings about secondary losses that aggravate grief for the entire family. Some secondary losses that accompany grief are socioeconomic status, moves, living with relatives or a foster family, new school with forced goodbyes to classmates and familiar teachers, and loss of the future with the deceased parent or sibling.<sup>135</sup>

When adults grieve they feel a sense of powerlessness that comes from the past as they reflect on memories of the deceased person and the significance that individual had in their life. Children on the other hand, are preoccupied with the present and the future and are cognizant of what they miss now in this instant and they worry about the path their life will take without the significant person beside them. The loss therefore affects the child on two levels - those of dependency and detachment, both of which exacerbate his fears.<sup>136</sup> A sense of abandonment after loss of a parent is common if the surviving parent is not always available to the child. Despite the intensity of the pain of early loss, some people gain added sensitivity and empathy for others as a result of exposure to life and death situations at an early age.

### **Disenfranchised Grief of Children**

Bereaved children have needs that require assistance from the adults in their life. According to Furman, children who have suffered the loss of a significant person such as a parent or sibling depend on adults to assist them in the overwhelming crisis they are suddenly faced with. Adults, he says, need to present the death realistically, to meet the child's needs consistently, to accept his feelings, to support his reality testing, and to help

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<sup>134</sup> Granot, 8

<sup>135</sup> Smith, 36-40

<sup>136</sup> Granot, 8

him in mastering the terrifying reality of his premature loss.<sup>137</sup> Because children have immature cognitive development they have difficulty grasping the full understanding of the components of death as outlined earlier (irreversibility, universality, and inevitability). Furthermore, their limited capacity to tolerate emotional pain and ability to verbalize and find the language to express their grief makes the situation all the more arduous. Children are very sensitive to being different from their peers and need to know that some aspects of their life have not changed, specifically that there are loved ones close by in this time of anguish.<sup>138</sup>

Grieving children need to be heard and to have their questions answered. They are sensitive to the emotions concealed by those around them and are attuned to nonverbal messages and body language of the adults in the family. They require an environment of empathy, genuineness, and self-disclosure. Children need to be respected and acknowledged as mourners but are often overlooked or neglected in this context, and are vulnerable to the myth that young people don't grieve as well as the myth of childhood innocence. Sometimes the significance of their loss is minimized or not even tolerated. They may be subject to abuses of power and authority such as teachers who are insensitive to the inability of bereaved children to perform as before or peers who taunt them or say insensitive or hurtful things. The result of these behaviors by others in the bereaved child's world is disenfranchised grief. Doka defines it as "the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported."<sup>139</sup> There is failure to recognize that a real loss has

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<sup>137</sup> Boyd-Webb, 121

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>139</sup> Corr, Charles A. "Revisiting the Concept of Disenfranchised Grief" in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, p.39

occurred, and he adds that this often happens to people who are not given the status of persons who are capable of experiencing grief: children, elderly and people with developmental disabilities are among those groups often considered to be incapable of grieving. Disenfranchisement is experienced by the bereaved person as a failure of society to sanction and support his need to grieve and have that grief recognized. This threatens the security of belonging and connection with the social group and leads to alienation, loneliness, and abandonment. The mourner eventually feels detached from the group to the point that attachment bonds may be threatened and damaged, as safety and the feeling of the security of the group are lost.<sup>140</sup>

The three types of disenfranchised grief include 1) lack of recognition of the relationship that is lost due to the death. Society places emphasis on the assumption that closeness occurs only among spouses of immediate kin and others may not be supported in their grief. 2) Sometimes the loss is not acknowledged because it is not socially defined as being significant such as a perinatal death or the death of a pet, or the reality of the loss may not be socially validated. Other problematic issues are those of 'social death' in which the person is alive but is treated as if dead such as someone who is comatose, psychological death when a person is brain dead, or psychosocial death as in the case of individuals with mental illness. 3) The third type of disenfranchised grief is concerned with the griever being excluded because the person is not considered to be capable of feeling grief. Because the child in this case is not recognized as having a loss or the need to grieve he is often excluded from decision making as well as rituals such as

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<sup>140</sup> Kaufman, Jeffrey. "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief: Liberation, Shame, and Self-Enfranchisement" in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, p. 69

funerals.<sup>141</sup> Serious repercussions result when children experience disenfranchised grief such as intensified emotional reactions, ambivalent relationships and concurrent crises that complicate grief

Every society has norms that frame grieving and govern what losses one grieves, how one grieves those losses, who can grieve a loss, and how and to whom others respond with sympathy and support.<sup>142</sup> Faith groups are often the most obvious place to turn for support at the time of a loss but these may not recognize or sanction the loss or the right to grieve such as for some groups, death due to suicide, AIDS, or as a result of illegal or immoral activity. The death of an institutionalized child or even death of a pet may be minimized. Sometimes the person experiencing disenfranchised grief is forced to face silence by others as a way of demonstrating disapproval of unwillingness to acknowledge the significance of the loss, and indeed in some cases, that a death even occurred such as a miscarriage. These behaviors inhibit the working through of the grief and have the potential of creating serious emotional damage.

Children need to feel safe in order to express feelings of grief yet may find themselves caught by a society that expects them to know a great deal and be mature in our sophisticated world. Grieving children are taken care of physically but tend to be neglected emotionally by adults who are often embarrassed by their helplessness to make things better for them. Adults in the family have their own difficulties at the same time and dealing with the problems of the children are yet another burden that they sometimes cannot handle. Others feel that children should be protected and want to shield them from the pain of the anguish by pretending it is not a real loss for the child.

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<sup>141</sup> Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, pp. 10-13

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 6

All civilizations create myths to shape reality and address human problems; this holds true for children's loss experiences with three myths framing a traditional approach: death is not part of living; children don't mourn; and, we can protect children by shielding them from loss.<sup>143</sup> There is mixed opinion concerning whether children experience a mourning process similar to adults. Wolfenstein claims they do not, Furman and Bowlby believe otherwise, Buirski and Buirski write they do mourn as adults if emotional surroundings facilitate it. Worden agrees that they do mourn but express their grief differently from the way adults do.<sup>144</sup> The various opinions concerning this leave families confused. Many families are torn over the amount of information the children should be told especially in the case of a death that carries a stigma and its associated embarrassment and shame. Families also struggle with advice given by well meaning but often uninformed relatives and friends who believe that children get over a loss quickly if they grieve at all, it is best for them not to attend the funeral, and it is better to shield them from the pain. We know, however, that children need to be included in death rituals and allowed to express feelings of grief that they do indeed feel at all ages.

Unfortunately, bereaved children are often "not heard" and after several attempts at being heard, they quit and bury their feelings since nobody is listening. Their original grief gets overlooked and the focus shifts to the child's behavior which becomes a discipline problem rather than a grief issue which is not the correct source of difficulty the child is dealing with.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Trozzi, 6

<sup>144</sup> Crenshaw, David A. "The Disenfranchised Grief of Children" in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, p. 299

<sup>145</sup> James, John W and Russell Friedman. *When Children Grieve*. New York:HarperCollins. 2001, p. 51

Boyd-Webb is of the opinion that bereaved children need conditions that help the tasks of grieving as summarized in the following questions: 1) What does the death mean to me now; what has been lost? 2) What will happen to me? Am I safe to grieve? 3) Can I talk about it? Are my feelings acceptable? 4) Is my loss important in this world? How can I know? 5) How can I change these feelings into healing?<sup>146</sup> These concerns are precisely those that get dismissed when a child is forced to experience disenfranchised grief. Doka explains the two components of disenfranchised grief as complications inherent in the loss and in the grief itself that has been disenfranchised and the grief that is inflicted by the disenfranchisement.<sup>147</sup> The potential thus exists for a “snowball” effect as the grief becomes magnified as the child is not allowed to express what he is feeling and then is further isolated by the disenfranchisement itself. Furthermore, Kauffman writes that spiritual freedom and healing are affected by disenfranchised grief by disallowing the reality of the loss.<sup>148</sup>

Empathic failure occurs when one part of a system fails to understand the meaning and experience of another.<sup>149</sup> An individual can achieve empathic failure with self by denying, disowning or disapproving some aspect of his grief experience; with family when one member of subgroup tries to control or condemn the grief reactions of another or fails to accept different bereavement responses. This occurs when the importance of the loss is minimized for a vulnerable family member such as a child; and with the larger community by difficulties abiding by the standards for “good grieving”

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<sup>146</sup> Boyd-Webb, 134

<sup>147</sup> Kauffman, 66

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 62

<sup>149</sup> Neimeyer, Robert A. and John R. Jordan. “Disenfranchisement as Empathic Failure: Grief Therapy and the Co-Construction of Meaning” in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, p. 96



that are the specific norms for that group. Empathic disconnection occurs for those who do not have the skills to elicit enough support from others.<sup>150</sup>

Disenfranchised grief occurs when children lose relationships other than a parent or sibling. Very often, adults do not recognize the degree of attachment children have to such people as teachers, sports coaches, and public idols such as movie stars. Adolescents are especially vulnerable at a time when they are normally struggling with their identity and need to be like everyone else. Feelings of inadequacy and loss of control in death situations challenge the developmental task of striving for independence on one hand yet needing adults in their world on the other. The desire to be in control is threatened when a death occurs at the time that control seems most out of kilter. Failure by adults to recognize an adolescent's loss can lead to increased withdrawal, thereby compounding the loss even more. When teenagers lose a peer, they have a devastating void; equals are helpers in achieving developmental tasks especially at this time in their lives. Peer relationships are critical for adolescents as identity formation and inter-personal ties are learned and attained through them. The loss of a peer, Doka writes, is extremely problematic because it is a loss not only of the friend but also of a symbolic nature and a threat to a young person's identity and sense of security.<sup>151</sup>

Schools are usually not prepared to handle the depth of grief that students may be experiencing thereby neglecting their needs within the social context of the environment in which they spend most of their time. Worden explains that young people often do not discuss the death with their friends for a variety of reasons: they have a fear of crying in front of friends; the subject never arises (due in part to the lack of education around

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 98-99

<sup>151</sup> Rowling, Louise. "Youth and Disenfranchised Grief" in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, p. 281

death); friends are either overprotective or else feel awkward and therefore do nothing either way making the bereaved child feel uncomfortable; sometimes peers do not know about the death or don't care about the death; in some cases, the circumstances around the death are shameful such as a death by suicide and it is difficult to share for fear of judgment or fear that the deceased may be devalued by peers as in the case of a dead alcoholic; some adolescents feel the details around the death are too personal and they choose not to let others in.<sup>152</sup>

A death may cause a spiritual crisis in which the bereaved feels abandoned by the very God whom he or she is taught to believe in for comfort, security, and good things. The child is taught about the kindness of God yet cannot understand when clergy says that his loss was "God's will" and the loved one is in heaven and at peace. The child wonders how this could be God's will when so much pain has been inflicted and questions *wasn't Mommy at peace living with me?* When families are unwilling to allow children to participate in rituals such as funerals or memorial services, the child's grief is disenfranchised even more, exacerbating the spiritual crisis and forcing the child into a tailspin as he tries desperately to make sense of something that seems completely senseless.

### **Rituals**

Doka writes "rituals are highly symbolic acts that confer transcendental significance and meaning on certain life experiences."<sup>153</sup> They provide a structure that brings a community together to express emotions on both an individual and a community

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<sup>152</sup> Worden, 48-50

<sup>153</sup> Doka, Kenneth. "The Role of Ritual in the Treatment of Disenfranchised Grief" in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, p. 135

level. Rituals offer a sacred meaning and interpretation to events that occur in everyday life and beg special recognition. For these and other reasons, they are powerful. Gennep (1960) added that rituals are liminal meaning they affect us both consciously and subconsciously, allowing a structure within a time of chaos and generating social support.<sup>154</sup> Rituals symbolize healing, transition, and continuity; Rando specifies that they “cut through intellectualization directly reaching the emotions” adding that they provide a means by which individuals have an outlet for the expression of their innermost feelings with a safety measure attached to it.<sup>155</sup>

Miller outlines four kinds of rituals that allow for expression of emotion and support: 1) Rituals of continuity emphasize the ongoing bond with the deceased such as creating a panel for the AIDS quilt commemorating someone who died of the disease or the annual Remembrance Day/Veteran’s Day honoring of fallen soldiers; 2) Rituals of transition mark movement from one phase to another such as a funeral; 3) Rituals of reconciliation involve offering or accepting forgiveness or completing “unfinished business”; and 4) Rituals of affirmation involve affirming the loss and offering thanks for a relationship and the legacy left by the deceased.<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, there are certain principles and conditions that are necessary for rituals to be meaningful and effective. Rituals always develop from the story of the mourner and as a result, the audience, the message, and the actions of the ritual come from the direct experience of the person seeking the ritual. Rituals cannot be imposed but rather invited and fashioned according to the person’s story and how it is shared with others. There are usually objects involved

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<sup>154</sup> Doka, 154

<sup>155</sup> Miller, 105

<sup>156</sup> Boyd-Webb, Nancy. “Play Therapy to Help Bereaved Children” in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Disenfranchised Grief*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 2002, pp. 144-145

that are symbolic and effective such as a candle or a picture of the deceased. Some rituals are private whereas others need witnesses in order to be therapeutic. Above all, rituals need to be planned and then processed afterwards to receive the full therapeutic value they can provide.<sup>157</sup>

The most common death ritual for all cultural groups is the funeral or memorial service. Doka writes that the purpose of the funeral is threefold: to dispose of the body appropriately, to make the implications of the death real for the mourners, and to allow the survivors to work toward social reintegration and ongoing living in a healthy way.<sup>158</sup> Bowlby adds additionally that funerals give help to the bereaved in that they allow for public expression of grief and their induction into a new social role such as widow, widower, orphan etc. Furthermore, funerals allow other members of the community to acknowledge their loss and say goodbye to the deceased as well, allowing those members to express the anger and fear that they are also feeling; this brings people together and helps to maintain the integrity of the continuing society. There is an economic function of a funeral as well in that it provides an opportunity for an exchange of goods and services between families and groups; these exchanges are seen as reciprocal altruism in which members of a "caring community" rally and offer a willingness to help. Finally, funerals allow the living to express gratitude to the dead for the life experience they shared together.<sup>159</sup>

Grollman teaches that for children the funeral is a rite of separation in which the survivor realizes the bad dream is real especially when seeing the casket with the body of

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<sup>157</sup> Doka, Kenneth. "Using Ritual with Children and Adolescents" in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Living with Grief. Children, Adolescents, and Loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000. p. 158

<sup>158</sup> Ibid

<sup>159</sup> Bowlby, 127

the loved one inside of it as it reinforces the truth that the loved one who died is no longer part of the ongoing environment. It offers a chance to say goodbye and although it is a time of sadness, funerals teach that sadness is a fundamental component of the life cycle. Strange as it may seem, children do not see funerals as bizarre as adults are afraid they will and children should be allowed the opportunity to be involved in a ceremony of farewell.<sup>160</sup> In his work with bereaved children, Worden observed that funerals help meet three important needs of children that are not so different from those of adults: funerals are a means by which the child acknowledges the death; funerals allow children to honor the life of the deceased loved one; and, funerals provide a means of comfort and support for bereaved children.<sup>161</sup> There is a trend now among some families to reject the formally structured funeral and opt for a simple burial, believing that the ritual funeral is unnecessary. Doka writes that to think rituals are not needed and that people mourn in private only is to misconceive the needs of humans, running the risk of disenfranchised grief.<sup>162</sup>

A major concern for families of bereaved children is whether children should attend the funeral of a deceased loved one. The opinion among the specialists in this field is that children should be allowed the opportunity to attend, participate, and have the chance to say farewell. Grollman writes that being denied this opportunity may harm even older children because it can cause them to deny the reality of the death and contribute to the potential of incompleting grief with its accompanying emotional illness that may develop later. However, he is careful to explain that a child should be permitted

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<sup>160</sup> Grollman, Rabbi Earl A. *Talking about Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990, p. 57

<sup>161</sup> Worden, 21

<sup>162</sup> Corr in Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief*, 52

and encouraged with honest and correct information but never forced to attend a funeral.<sup>163</sup> James and Russell agree that children should attend but must be prepared; inadequate preparation for a funeral can alter children's lives. They add that not being allowed to attend the funeral of someone significant can have a negative impact with a lasting negative effect. Moreover, the funeral can provide elements of completion for the child.<sup>164</sup> Helen Fitzgerald, another pioneer in the field of bereaved children, writes of the importance of seeing the dead body in order to confirm the reality of the death for the child; without confirmation of the reality, he could search for his loved one and spend months or even years waiting for that person to return, with the risk that he will imagine his loved one chose to leave. Fitzgerald recognizes that viewing the body is not always an option for example some religions do not practice viewing or open caskets, or sometimes the body has been badly damaged in a fire or car accident. In these cases, she recommends that a person who is trusted by the child identify the body and then convey directly to the child that it is indeed the body of the loved one, explaining that the child is more likely to believe this than when no special effort is made to confirm the reality of the death. Additionally, this trusted person can lovingly describe the body as gently as possible to the child.<sup>165</sup>

Funerals also offer meaningful cultural and religious experiences for children as their family is brought together to share in the commemoration of the life of their loved one. Funerals show ways that culture and religion help in the crisis of loss. Children need careful explanations and can be offered a choice as to whether they wish to attend if they are at a developmental age that allows understanding. If they choose not to attend the

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<sup>163</sup> Grollman, *Explaining Death to Children*, 24

<sup>164</sup> James and Russell, 236

<sup>165</sup> Fitzgerald, Helen. *The Grieving Child*. New York. Fireside Book/Simon&Shuster. 1992, pp. 84-85

funeral, visitation at the funeral home or a *shiva* visit is an alternative. Having an adult assigned to be with the child offers reassurance that someone will be close by. If the bereaved child chooses not to attend even after receiving explanations and preparation, it is important that he be helped to feel that his decision is acceptable and not a means of backing out of something he should be doing; it is still important, however, to discuss the death with the child after the funeral.<sup>166</sup> In his focus on disenfranchised grief, Doka explains that “protecting” bereaved children by not having them attend the funeral of their loved one deprives them of the power of rituals and the support they provide. By missing out on the benefits of the ritual they also fail to learn effective responses that can assist them in coping with future losses.<sup>167</sup> Grollman emphatically warns adults not to send bereaved children away to relatives or friends during the time of the funeral as this might be perceived as another kind of abandonment. He writes that children not only have a right and a need to say goodbye, but also have a role to play such as answering the doorbell, mingling, and feeling needed and recognized as a mourner.

Attending the cemetery is another concern for families concerning bereaved children and their participation in ritual. Adults are often uncomfortable with the image of a child watching a casket being lowered into a grave as it is painful for them as well. Grollman’s view is that seeing the grave is important for a child since the funeral does not end in the funeral home, church or synagogue . He writes that the mystery is removed as to where the person goes and reassures parents that they need not assume that the burial is too traumatic for children.<sup>168</sup> Smith writes that children have many curiosities

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<sup>166</sup> Smith, 57

<sup>167</sup> Doka, *Living With Grief*, 153

<sup>168</sup> Grollman, Rabbi Earl A. *Bereaved Children and Teens. A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, p. 16

about graves such as: what is a grave? How is a grave created? Are we walking on dead people? Seeing that bodies are buried in caskets six feet under the ground answers some of their questions.<sup>169</sup> Being present at the cemetery allows children to see the sanctity and serenity of the setting as a strong balance to the harshness of the burial. The same concerns hold true for viewing the dead body of their loved one. Again, the opinion of experts in this field agree that with appropriate preparation, a child at a developmental level that allows enough understanding can be encouraged to make a personal choice. Grollman writes that it is easier for children to understand being included than excluded.<sup>170</sup>

At all times, bereaved children need reassurance that a reliable adult is immediately present during the funeral and burial, that they can change their mind, and that they can help in planning the service. Emswiler and Emswiler write that if a child did not attend a funeral that was already held, the family can plan another memorial service or graveside ritual and the child can help to plan the readings, music, and activities.<sup>171</sup> Miller suggests that this kind of ritual could be multigenerational, offering the bereaved child new information about the deceased and integrating fragmented parts into their present life if the service is held years after the death. Afterwards, the family could recall the service together for many years.<sup>172</sup> A family ritual such as this would help to “enfranchise” the child who was excluded earlier.

In his work with bereaved children, Worden asked them to reflect on their memories of the funeral of their loved one. Some said that it was difficult to recall even

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<sup>169</sup> Smith, 54

<sup>170</sup> Grollman, *Talking About Death*, 59

<sup>171</sup> Emswiler, Mary Ann and James P. Emswiler. *Guiding Your Child Through Grief*. New York: Bantam Books, 2000, p. 240

<sup>172</sup> Miller, 20



vague memories because of numbness at the time, lack of preparation they were provided with before the funeral, or a reluctance to speak of it. Younger children had generally hazy recollections such as a speech given but not details of what was said, people saying, "I'm sorry", and some recalled concrete things such as a box in which their parent lay. Older children had memories with more meaning but still vague in nature such as "many people" in attendance who knew their parent and some recalled others saying there was now "no more pain".<sup>173</sup>

### **Reconstructing the Deceased**

Silverman et. al. write that one cannot deal with a loss without recognizing what was lost. Some specialists say that staying connected with the deceased and holding on to memories is an important and necessary part of bereavement whereas others believe that the mourner must disengage and let go of the past. Freud had said that survivors best resolve their grief when they slowly let go of the dead loved one and engage in new relationships with others.<sup>174</sup> Children establish a set of memories, feelings, and actions to help them maintain a connection in a positive way to their loved one who died.

Silverman, Nickerman, and Worden outlined five strategies of connection that assist the child to remain connected to their deceased parent: 1) an effort to locate the deceased such as heaven; 2) experiencing the deceased in some way such as feeling that their parent is watching them; 3) reaching out to initiate a connection such as going to the cemetery to talk to the parent who died; 4) remembering the loved one such as memories of times together; and 5) keeping something that belonged to the deceased such as objects

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<sup>173</sup> Worden, 24

<sup>174</sup> Miller, 101

or clothing that the child can carry with him or keep in his room.<sup>175</sup> Trozzi emphasizes that reconstructing meaning involves a shifting of attachments and not a severing of them. She explains that children display the characteristics in four ways: they assume the loved one is now a "ghost"; they hold on to memories of the deceased; they engage in an interactive relationship by believing the dead parent is in heaven and can talk to them thereby seeing themselves as a living legacy of the parent; and they have memory embraces in which children imagine they look and act just like the parent who died.<sup>176</sup> Construction of the lost parent is an ongoing cognitive process that helps the child to make sense of the experience of loss and to make the loss part of the child's reality. According to Doka, reconstructing meaning is a vital component in the grief process. These processes allow the child to develop an inner representation of the dead parent thereby enabling the child to maintain an ongoing relationship with him or her. This relationship changes as the child matures and the intensity of the grief lessens. At the same time, the bereaved child negotiates over and over the meaning of the loss and relocates the dead person in his child. This allows the child to accomplish two important tasks: life is allowed to move forward and the child memorializes the dead loved one.<sup>177</sup>

According to Fogarty, there are four purposes for attempts to reconstruct the deceased for children. Reconstructing the deceased helps children to realize their loved one is dead, it helps keep denial to a healthy minimum, failure to reconstruct the deceased help them accept a hard reality, and it allows children to realize and value the importance of the dead person.<sup>178</sup> Bereaved children want their loved one to come back and they will

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 137

<sup>176</sup> Trozzi, 69-74

<sup>177</sup> Worden, 27

<sup>178</sup> Fogarty, 15

try to recreate situations when that person was alive or attempt to “people replace” by forcing others to be like the person who died. Some children want to revisit places they went with the deceased to recreate special times together. All these attempts are designed to fail but Fogarty recommends allowing them as it helps to minimize denial.<sup>179</sup>

Russell and James write that there are four areas that are incomplete and must be converted into emotional categories: apologies, forgiveness, significant emotional statements, and fond memories.<sup>180</sup> Immediately following a death, memories of the relationship are most accessible and intense. They report that memories can be helpful for a bereaved child to discover what he wishes had been different as well as to be aware of unrealized hopes and dreams about the future.<sup>181</sup> Reviewing one’s relationship with the deceased is an automatic,<sup>182</sup> normal and healthy response that is to be encouraged.

Silverman et. al. write that although the intensity of the relationship diminishes over time, it does not disappear; this is not living in the past but recognizing how the past informs the present. Language and ritual are important to keep the experience in memory for the child. They emphasize that we need to know how to transform connections and place the relationship in a new perspective rather than on how to separate from the deceased.<sup>183</sup>

### **The Bereaved Child as a Member of a Bereaved Family**

The bereaved child does not grieve alone but rather as a member of a family. Just as each individual member, so too does the family as an entity undergo a process of mourning beginning with shock and trauma, ultimately having to adjust to the new reality of the death of a family member. The process is comprised of advances and retreats as the

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>180</sup> James, 113

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 92

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 91

<sup>183</sup> Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief*, 145-146

family struggles to function as the unit it once was. The struggle is complex as it attempts to adjust as a whole with each individual member grieving at his or her own level and pace. Each family has its own ways of coping and its own grieving style and family members have to help each other maintain their relationship with the lost loved one. However, although coping with the loss is a "shared mission" it is difficult for each family member to really understand and share what the others are going through.<sup>184</sup>

For a bereaved child the patterns of his normal life and routine are completely overturned and adults behave in what seem bizarre ways. Granot writes that family boundaries feel "ruptured" with a sudden onslaught of outsiders in his immediate world. Children need a framework and boundaries but the adults in their life are now distracted and unable to provide attention and discipline. The child does not know what is expected of him at this time and may see the estrangement of his parent(s) as a rejection.<sup>185</sup> The equilibrium of the bereaved child's life changes because the loss of the loved one leaves a huge void at both the level of the individual and that of the family as an entity. This void forces changes, often unwelcome ones on the child such as the need for a move to a new house or community, a new school, living with relatives, or unusual parental behavior. Later on, there may be stepparents or stepsiblings if remarriage takes place. Parents may want to replace a dead child through pregnancy but this sometimes produces detrimental results. Changes are difficult for children who have had a loss. Sometimes this disequilibrium does not allow children "space" for emotions and needs to develop. This is especially true when children suddenly find themselves in new roles in the family. Granot explains the role of the parental child in which the child is enlisted to emotionally protect

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<sup>184</sup> Granot, 163-165

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 113-114

and “raise” his parent, and that of the spousal child in which the child serves as the parent’s partner with special privileges provided. These are unhealthy responses on the part of the parent and the child and add a huge burden to the child who is already experiencing overwhelming pressure.<sup>186</sup>

The family is the source of identity and attachment, offering the place in which we develop relationships and learn social norms and expectations. Grief creates both a crisis of identity and a crisis of attachment as the family is faced with finding a strategy to cope with ongoing functioning and to support each member in the grief process. Grief counselors teach that the first crucial task of a grieving family is to reestablish emotional control and stability of daily life.<sup>187</sup> The best way to achieve this is by means of open expression and sharing of emotions of grief, however family stability is dramatically disrupted in the face of death, making this indeed challenging. The priority for a bereaved family at the time of a death is the reestablishment of the stable equilibrium that is necessary to facilitate ongoing family development. This is not an easy task for a group of family members who each grieve differently for a beloved individual with whom they each had a uniquely different relationship. Moreover, children and adults grieve very differently and sometimes adults are not aware of the needs of the children in this context.

Family history, culture, coping methods, and relationships of the family members are important factors in how the family will experience the grieving process as a unit. Furthermore, the circumstances of the death as well as who died are critical variables in the reaction of the family within the larger culture. Some children grow up in families

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 161-169

<sup>187</sup> Shapiro, 14

whose religious and cultural norms allow for open expression of grief but find that such behaviors are not as readily welcomed in our death denying western culture. Children experiencing such discrepancies are vulnerable to rejection and teasing by their peers, judgment by teachers, and emotional and physical isolation.

Families undergo various stages of development, and over the course of the family life cycle the reality of the death and its implications must be revisited and interwoven into each new phase. Changing family relationships transform the relationship of the deceased as a member of the family and ideally the dead family member will be reintegrated into the family as a living, evolving spiritual and psychological presence whose image continues with the family in its development.<sup>188</sup> Parents often cannot understand how their children do not appear to be grieving in a way consistent with their own experience. It is difficult for them to offer their children the understanding and caretaking needed when they themselves are overcome with grief. Emswiler and Emswiler write that parents worry about whether their children will be “okay” but they need to examine their definition of the word “okay”. Life, they warn, will never be the same for themselves, their family or their child. But there is the possibility of grieving with a minimum of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual damage if proper care is taken to allow children to grieve in a healthy way.

How a child experiences and copes with grief often depends on his coping skills before the death occurred. They outline the three goals for grieving families to be: 1) reestablishing stability; 2) acknowledging the experience and implications of the loss for each person and for the family as a whole; and 3) supporting each person and the family

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 17-18

as a whole in their efforts to start growing again.<sup>189</sup> These take a long time to fulfill and are fraught with emotional difficulties such as acquaintances asking innocent questions such as “how many are in your family?” “What is your brother’s name?” “Where does your Dad work?” “How many children do you have?” Some families dread being with other families that are “whole” and children often feel isolated and vulnerable when their class prepares Mother’s Day cards, goes on family outings, invites parents to recitals, and participates in graduation ceremonies. Grieving families often fall prey to the handling of stress by blaming, shaming, cutting off of emotions, restricting the expression of emotions, and cutting people off. Flexibility, patience, respect for each other, and love are needed at the time when it is most difficult for family members to offer.

The Emswilers write that families sometimes try to reestablish stability by maintaining the usual way of doing things but the old patterns no longer work because too much has changed in the family; new approaches are necessary to meet the new needs that have emerged. The old practices that were once familiar and comforting now cause more tension because they just do not work any more. The need for flexible planning and adjustments are now required to meet the needs of all the family members who are in a state of disequilibrium. The ability of the parent to process his or her own pain and emotions and to readjust to the disruption in family equilibrium serves as the primary model of grieving for the child. If the parent is in touch with the painful feelings, the bereaved child is “invited in”. Since young children are not conscious of their emotions this opportunity allows them the freedom to express them openly through behaviors with parents who understand the need to do so. Older children are afraid of emotional intensity of their feelings and need their parent’s support to vent and process. Conversely, it is

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<sup>189</sup> Emswiler, 48-66

difficult for a parent to help the child if he or she is unaware of his or her own painful emotions.<sup>190</sup>

Family systems theory offers an understanding into some of the complexities of the family that is bereaved. The family is governed by some of the same rules of other biological systems in that the family is an organized whole with interdependent members and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, the family is composed of individuals and also of relationships between those individuals that define the organization of the family as a unit. Furthermore, the action of any one member of the system affects all others, which in turn change all others in a spiral fashion. In a family system the same triggering event in a sequence can lead to different outcomes yet an outcome is not necessarily caused by a specific triggering event as much as by the dynamics of the family relationships.<sup>191</sup>

The processes of adaptation and self-regulation are achieved by means of homeostasis and transformational mechanisms that help to maintain family stability under changing circumstances. Disturbed families experience change as overwhelming and use rigid mechanisms to maintain emotional stability. The balance of connection and self-assertion of families was described by earlier family systems theorists as a continuum of differentiation of self from the family with overinvolvement or “enmeshment” at one end and extreme isolation or “disengagement” at the other. More recent theorists say that balance of self-assertion and connection is achieved as a family explores and accepts differences in feelings and perceptions of the various family members. Family interactions represent both verbal and nonverbal exchanges that allow family members to

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<sup>190</sup> Granot, 151-153

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 126



communicate to each other ideas and emotions that do or do not threaten family stability. Interventions that address the interactional patterns of a family rather than a particular individual who is struggling are considered to be a more powerful means of addressing individual problems within the family system.<sup>192</sup>

Intergenerational family therapy focuses on the patterns of emotional relatedness that originate in families of origin and then are imposed onto current family situations. The interweavings of births and deaths over the course of a family's life suggests the impact that a death can have on family development. The more stress a family experiences, the more rigid their preservation of past images and patterns. Bowen (1976) in his work on family grief reactions immediately following a death incorporates intergenerational and structural dimensions of a family's grief experience. He says that anxiety and stress increase a family's fusion, emotional reactivity to one another's states, and reliance on rigid family structures such as triangulation for stability. He writes that relationships in families undergoing intense anxiety tend to shift from an open to a closed communication system as a means of protecting the self against anxiety that would be provoked by discussing the circumstance that is causing the anxiety. Moreover, when a family member is added or lost, the family has to establish a new equilibrium based on the new circumstances and changes in relationships. The level of emotional integration and the severity of the change determine how long it takes for the family to achieve the new equilibrium needed. He writes that a death is always a severe disruption but the history of previous adaptation of the family, the level of differentiation, and system of communication are important variables in determining the family's grief reaction.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 127-128

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 130-131

Bowen describes a phenomenon that he calls the "emotional shock wave" that is a series of disruptive family life events that often follows a death. He adds that the level of differentiation of the family as well as the importance of the individual who died to the family system determine the occurrence of the emotional shock wave. The death of a parent of young children, the elder head of a household, or the death of a child are all likely to be followed by an emotional shock wave. Bowen explains the difference between grief, which is characteristic of individuals and the emotional shock wave that is characteristic of family structure and organization. He adds that it is unlikely for a family to experience the emotional shock wave after the death of a dysfunctional family member.<sup>194</sup>

Herz (1989) uses Bowen's theories as well and adds that not all deaths have equal importance to the family system. She says that the emotional significance of a family member depends on his or her functional role in the family and on the level of emotional dependence the family has on this person. She says that an elderly family member's death is least disruptive because that person is perceived to have had a full life and is not as responsible in the care of other family members. On the other hand, the death of a parent of young children is most disruptive as is the death of a child. Regardless of the level of family fusion, any family death interrupts the ongoing tasks of that particular phase of the life cycle of the family. The circumstances of the death also play an important role in how the family reacts to the death.<sup>195</sup>

Bowlby-West writes that the death of a family member creates a structural void in a family that requires homeostatic adjustment. This adjustment may be accomplished by

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 132-133

means of displacement of feelings via triangulation or scapegoating; increase in enmeshment; creation of family secrets related to the death; idealization of the deceased; infantilization, parentification, and role reversals; and, attempts to replace the deceased. She writes that these tend to occur when family members have difficulty communicating their emotions about the death or if their emotions are repressed or misunderstood.<sup>196</sup> Parents often have difficulty perceiving their children's feelings for a variety of reasons: they are preoccupied with their own grief, sometimes children try to protect their parents by not showing everything they are feeling, and the surviving parent who is now suddenly a single parent may need to see the child as doing better than he actually is doing; this is a survival tactic for the overwhelmed parent. The suddenness of the death plays an important role in how parents cope. Bereaved parents often find it difficult to set limits and discipline their bereaved children because they feel sorry for them and perhaps lack the energy to enforce and maintain consistent discipline practices and repercussions for poor behavior. Paradoxically, however, this is the time at which the bereaved child needs the structure more than ever and wants the surviving parent to set limits. Over permissiveness tends to occur when parents are depressed and withdrawn but this results in confusion for the child even though he wants attention.<sup>197</sup> The child who has lost a parent needs the surviving parent to appear competent because when a parent cannot function the child gets scared and overwhelmed; his basic assumptions about the world are shattered, specifically, that his parents are all powerful: what has happened to change

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 135

<sup>197</sup> Worden, 79-83

this?<sup>198</sup> Children of parents who are not in tune with the needs of their grieving children tend to exhibit higher anxiety and less control with more external locus of control.<sup>199</sup>

Bereaved children are vulnerable to fears about losing the surviving parent as well as the possibility of their own death. Trozzi writes that parents need to prepare themselves and their children in very practical ways in the case of an expected death in the family. She says that they need to talk with their children about an anticipated death when applicable; parents need to grieve a spouse's death and to express their own grief with their children; they need to find nurturing people and ways to gain support for the hard work that lies ahead for both themselves and their children; and very critical to the child is the need for the parent to provide a routine of safety following the death.<sup>200</sup> In spite of the practical advice Trozzi offers, the reality is such that grieving families are faced with many stressors that ensue such as emotional problems in family members, the risk of alcohol and drug dependency, conflict among siblings, arguments between parents and children, many unresolved problems, chores that do not get done, and increased conflict with relatives and in-laws.<sup>201</sup>

Children who have lost a sibling risk losing not only the brother or sister but both parents as well who are devastated by their loss. Grieving families are vulnerable to isolation both physical and emotional and become a closed system when others stay away because they do not know what to say or how to deal with their own inadequacies around the sad family. These children are thus deprived of other influences besides those of their grieving parents whom they sometimes report as being neglectful, unavailable, and

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<sup>198</sup> Harris, 51

<sup>199</sup> Worden, 80

<sup>200</sup> Trozzi, 102

<sup>201</sup> Worden, 85

incapacitated. In some families that experience the loss of a child, there is a sense of suspended animation as the home becomes a memorial shrine especially the room of the child who died. Surviving children may feel that they cannot ask for the dead sibling's room or any of his or her possessions. For some families, happiness is forbidden and children need to find it elsewhere. Granot writes that children need happiness even if they are mourning a sibling. They often feel that they cannot invite friends over to their home and their own self-image runs the risk of damage.<sup>202</sup> Surviving siblings deal with a frenzy of emotions with the dominant issues of bewilderment, jealousy, guilt for surviving, fear of dying also, isolation, resentment for disruption in lifestyle and even anger at the sibling who may have been terminally ill and took all the attention of their parents and now has died. Sometimes extended family can be a support by redefining and reframing problems in a positive way but may also add to the tension in the home as they bring their own ideas about how to provide parenting.<sup>203</sup>

Serious concerns result when the bereaved family is faced with problems of solvency. Lack of economic resources is a huge stressor that a family faces with two major factors at play: income level and the parent's perception of the adequacy of income only to find out later that it is not sufficient. Similarly, socioeconomic status is a crucial factor in the ability of a family to cope when low socioeconomic status is threatened with the sudden loss of income due to the death of a parent. Worden observed in his research of bereaved children that these issues impacted the parents more directly than the children and interestingly enough, although he observed higher self-esteem in children of higher income families, the sense of self-efficacy (ability to effect change in their lives

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<sup>202</sup> Granot, 192

<sup>203</sup> Worden, 85

and their environment) was not better than those of lower income families. He found not surprisingly that newly widowed parents with more children in their family functioned less well and their children had fewer friends and cried more yet felt safer due to the security of their siblings.<sup>204</sup>

Dating and remarriage often pose a threat to bereaved children. Worden found that children of parents who started dating within the first year of the death of their parent had more emotional problems and a great deal of anxiety was expressed concerning parents remarrying. He found that in families that were enmeshed, mothers who survived rated their marriages as having been strong, they were better off financially, and they were less likely to be dating soon after the death. Children of these parents were noted to have fewer behavioral problems and higher self esteem, there was less conflict within the families and a better reported relationship with the surviving parent. Worden observed that these children tended to stay connected with their dead parent and kept mementos. Men started dating earlier than women especially those who had increased depression and lower self esteem following the death of their spouse. Although children generally exhibited anxiety about their parents dating and re-marrying, this anxiety decreased in the second year following the death of their parent.

Doka describes two types of grieving families: 1) parent-centered families center on the parents and their concerns about their reactions to their own pressure, the deficit in the family, and how the children behave. These parents may believe that the behavior of the bereaved child is related to his age rather than to the death. In some cases, these parents do not have a sense of how much the loss of the loved one means to the child. 2) Child-centered families focus on how the family had to change in order to cope with the

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 83-86

new situation and are proactive in terms of the needs of the children, recognizing that they need to talk about the deceased and their feelings that are new. These parents are well aware that they need to learn and change their ways of raising their children in light of the new crisis that is challenging their family.<sup>205</sup>

Whether the death was expected or not, bereaved families experience chaos in the face of death. Children struggle with their lack of cognitive development and magical thinking to make sense of what seems to make no sense whatsoever. Family members have difficulty supporting each other in their own personal grief while trying to establish the equilibrium needed to function on a daily basis. The child who is bereaved gets caught up in the upside down catastrophe that has caused his life to change dramatically. Parents have the overwhelming challenge of grieving themselves, caring for their bereaved children, and bringing their family through the stormy sea of bereavement.

McClowry et. al. conducted a study with forty-nine families that experienced a death following childhood cancer 7-9 years later. They describe a phenomenon called the “empty space” that occurs for surviving family members. They observed three patterns of grieving around this experience: getting over it – some families chose to put it in the past and move on; filling the emptiness – these families concentrated on keeping busy so as not to think about the death; and keeping the connection – these families got involved in activities to fill the emptiness such as group involvement or working for the cause that caused the death. All of these families still experienced pain and felt the re-emergence of the empty space at times such as birthdays and holidays. Those who focused on keeping the connection found that their emptiness evolved more than the families that exhibited other grieving patterns but reported more of a continuing sense of the empty space than

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<sup>205</sup> Silverman, 223-224

those who chose to put the loss behind them and move forward.<sup>206</sup> Bereaved children must be included in the grief of the family as the unit it is with all its complexities and pain. Families need the opportunities to share their emotions and feel freedom to be heard. Children grieve as much as adults but do so in their own way; it is incumbent upon the adults in their world to recognize when the family may be in need of allowing bereaved children the chances to grieve in as healthy a way as possible. Doka warns that coping and adapting are dynamic processes and families need help.<sup>207</sup> Families can obtain much needed help from the community, clergy, school, and mental health professionals but children need care, continuity, and connection as they struggle through the difficult experience of grief.

### **The Bereaved Child and the School**

The school is an important institution that along with the family inculcates learning, socialization, and identity within one's social milieu. Children learn social mores and values of the majority culture and surmise where they fit within the values of the culture they acquire at home. The ultimate goal in this respect is to adapt to a system that ideally facilitates the process for both cultures to dovetail in order to provide a meaning, value, and safety to their lives. Children spend a great deal of time in school and develop relationships with other children and adults alike that can have a profound influence on how they view life. When children who attend school experience the loss of a significant person, they eventually must return to their classroom, usually following a series of mourning rituals. Although the physical classroom and the people in the class are familiar, the child has changed and something catastrophic has occurred in his life.

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<sup>206</sup> McClowry, S.G., Davies E.B., May, K.A., Kulenkamp, E.J., and I.M. Martinson in Doka, Kenneth, Ed. *Children Mourning, Mourning Children*. Washington: Hospice Foundation of America, 1995, pp. 149-157

<sup>207</sup> Silverman, 225



The death-denying attitude of our western society transfers to the school. The school plays an extremely significant role not only in reintegrating the bereaved child back into the “community” but also in teaching other children and adults how to support someone who is grieving. Yet schools are often at a loss for what to do and how to help bereaved children. Indeed there are incidents at schools such as massacres and mass shootings in which students not only lose close peers and beloved teachers, but also are sometimes witnesses to trauma. The tragedies such as Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings are testaments to such horrors and raise the concern that schools need programs to help children deal with death and public catastrophe.

The teacher-student relationship is, for a child, an important one in which the student bonds with an important adult over an extended period of time. However, relationships for children in schools are not limited to teachers, principals, and guidance counselors alone. In religious schools, the rabbi, cantor, and Jewish education have relationships with students and their families as many belong to the religious congregation. We often underestimate the significance of the care taking staff, the office staff, the school nurse, and bus drivers who see the students on a regular basis. Schools also rely a great deal on volunteers from the community. The children they service often develop meaningful relationships with them that touch all these people. They have a role to play in caring for the bereaved student that begins with being aware of some behavior characteristics that should not be sloughed off and referred to simply as “behavior problems”.

In his book *A Student Dies, A School Mourns*, Klicker reports on the findings of Holland who observed in 1993 that 70% of the primary schools studied reported having

bereaved children many of whom present physical or psychological problems many of which were disruptive behaviors. Some of these included: violence, crying, anger, depression, lack of concentration, poor schoolwork, withdrawal, overattachment, and obsessive behavior. Some children try to be stoic or deny their grief. Holland and Ludford's study on secondary schools reported that 87% of the schools included in their research had bereaved students with similar behaviors. They observed that although students of this age group have a more sophisticated understanding of death, much like adults, they nevertheless often lack sympathetic support in schools that have a large student body.<sup>208</sup> Goldman reports additional behaviors at school in bereaved children such as: the need to retell events of the death and funeral; dreams of the dead person; the child looks for new friends who have had a similar loss rejecting old ones; requests to call home during the school day; inability to concentrate; spontaneous crying episodes; overly concern with caretaking needs at school; becoming the "class clown" to get attention; silence; absenteeism; daydreaming; difficulty adjusting to changes; and health concerns.<sup>209</sup> Given the concerns that the bereaved child has and the trauma of the loss, it is not surprising that these behaviors are exhibited. Bereaved children are confronted with their own mortality and that of their remaining family members. If their needs are overlooked at home, attention-seeking behaviors will allow other adults to focus on them. If their loved one died of an illness, it is a natural reaction to be concerned about health and sickness in others or themselves, and certainly, inability to concentrate on the lesson at hand will be a challenge when the child's world has become catastrophic.

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<sup>208</sup> Klicker, Ralph L. *A Student Dies, A School Mourns*. New York: Brunner-Routledge. 2000, p. 5

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 6

Bereaved children experience what Fogarty terms “commotion”. Commotion is behavior based on the combination of excessive energy, attention difficulties, tension, and fear, often resembling ADHD. He warns that sometimes posttraumatic stress disorder is mislabeled as ADHD and schools must be careful not to do so<sup>210</sup>. Commotion serves several purposes and these may be very apparent at school. Commotion calls attention to others that the bereaved child is mourning; because children often lack the cognitive equipment to verbalize their grief and fears as well as to express their vulnerability, their behaviors awaken the attention of adults as a means to gain assistance from them; and commotion serves as a means of empowerment for bereaved children to get the attention they require.<sup>211</sup> Such behaviors, however, are not always easy for schools to cope with. Acting out in class can be extremely disruptive and frustrating for the teacher who must handle multiple children and lessons at the same time that the bereaved child is crying for attention.

Sometimes a death occurs while the student is in school during the day. The question undoubtedly arises as to who should tell the child of the death. Stevenson writes that this requires extreme sensitivity. An announcement should not be made publicly over the PA system, but rather, a person in authority and in a private place should tell the child privately. A family member should ideally be present and the child should be told the truth in simple language. In the case of a community disaster, he advises against telling the student body in an assembly of what has happened; rather, the principal and

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<sup>210</sup> Fogarty, 9-11

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 13

counselors should go to individual classes.<sup>212</sup> Students need their routine to be kept as much as possible and a room should be set up in a community disaster that can serve as a forum for the expression of feelings and emotional support. Upon returning to school following a death, bereaved students do best with adults with whom they are familiar such as their teacher, principal, and class peers. Even prior to returning to school, having his teacher and/or classmates attend the funeral of his loved one can be a great source of comfort to the bereaved child. Doka offers guidelines for teachers in their desire to support bereaved children. She advises teachers to be simple and straightforward by telling the student "I'm sorry \_\_\_\_\_ died"; be patient and offer repetition; listen and respect the child's feelings and fears; be sensitive to the child's feeling of being different; give the student a sense of control – offering options will help; be open to the reality that grief can profoundly affect a child's schoolwork; and watch for manifestations of problems and refer if necessary.<sup>213</sup> Bringing in the school psychologist or nurse can offer support to both the student and the teacher alike. Good communication between the school and the family is crucial to the adjustment of the bereaved child to returning to school following a death in the family.

Children may be profoundly affected by the death of a teacher. Although not a "blood relative" or member of their immediate family, children are dramatically bereaved by the loss of someone with whom they spend so much time and usually admire and love. Several factors are important in the impact the death of a teacher can have on the school community such as: the age of the teacher; circumstances of the death; length of service

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<sup>212</sup> Stevenson, Robert G. "The Role of Death Education in Helping Students to Cope With Loss" in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Living with Grief. Children, Adolescents, and Loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000, pp. 198-199

<sup>213</sup> Doka, *Living with Grief*, 193-194

in the school; perception of teaching duties; degree of authority the teacher had; the quality of the relationship between the teacher and student(s); involvement in the community outside the school; and the role of the teacher as a parent of school-aged children.<sup>214</sup> Behaviors seen in children who have lost their teacher may be similar to those in children who have lost a family member. In such cases, the other teachers and staff in the school will be bereaved themselves and challenged to support their students while they are struggling with their own emotions. Anger, guilt, sadness, and confusion will cast a pall on the school in an intense way affecting the entire community.

Community disasters require school wide programs to defuse panic and offset rumors. Likewise, suicidal deaths can create frenzy in the school community. Students need to be told honest answers to questions they have. They need to hear words such as “death”, and “dead” rather than euphemisms. Students need to know that it is normal to have a variety of feelings that are important in their grieving process. Moreover, they must be given permission to grieve. Adults must be careful not to impose a timeline for students’ grief, deciding when it is time to “be over it”, nor should they say “I know how you feel”; each person grieves the deceased with whom they had a unique relationship. Teachers need to be flexible for a few days following a crisis, allowing students to verbalize and share together in their grief, write letters, real or symbolic, attend the funeral or memorial service if desired, and offer support. A major concern in a classroom that now has a desk that had been occupied by a student who died is what should happen to that desk. Students need to be involved in the decision concerning this.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Boyd-Webb, 216-217

<sup>215</sup> Klicker, 60-61

Suicidal death especially among adolescents is a difficult situation that challenges schools and families alike. Students and staff may experience guilt as they take in the shock and disbelief and then review in their minds what they might have done to recognize the situation and prevent the death from happening. Peers may be devastated by the news of the loss of a classmate and have physiological, emotional, and spiritual responses. A serious concern in schools following a suicidal death of a student is the fear of “copycat” behavior in which other adolescents may consider suicide themselves after recognizing the attention the deceased now receives. Schools require a plan in the event of the suicidal death of a student in order to support the other students and staff. This is a complicated situation and welcomes the support of professionals well equipped to handle the repercussions of such as situation.

Death education is an aspect of school curricula that has often been overlooked or neglected. Grollman writes that the question is not whether children and adolescents should receive death education but rather whether the education they receive is timely, helpful, and reliable.<sup>216</sup> Schools, as businesses, often expect grieving students to return to school with the expectation that it is “business as usual” but students and staff may not be aware of how their grief is affecting them. Holland writes that based on his research of schools in England, schools tended to have a reactive approach to bereavement dealing with death on an “ad-hoc basis” rather than having a systematic planned response.<sup>217</sup> Teachers often take it for granted that children will rebound and be resilient before they actually are ready. In addition to the necessity of a formal school-wide death education

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<sup>216</sup> Grollman, Rabbi Earl A. “To Everything There is a Season” in Doka, Kenneth. Ed. *Living with Grief: Children, Adolescents, and Loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation. 2000, p. 101

<sup>217</sup> Holland, John. *Understanding Children's Experiences of Parental Bereavement*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2001, p. 16

curriculum, teachers play a vital role in teaching their students about grief. Some teachers are very young and may not have experienced a loss themselves. As a result, teachers require intensive death education themselves in order to comfortably and confidently teach their students how to help a bereaved classmate adjust to being in school again. This can be done by discussing beforehand what to say and how to offer comfort, how to help their peer get caught up by sharing notes or calling to see how they are, offering to do homework together, and including the bereaved student in activities. Teachers may feel that they will be unable to control their own tears yet this would be an excellent opportunity for students to see the humanness of their teacher and offer their support. This is an invaluable lesson for everyone about the frailty and randomness of life.

In his study Project Iceberg (named to represent the large amount of unrecognized grief of bereaved children after the death of a parent) of 70 adult study volunteers who had been bereaved as children due to parental loss, Holland reports that one-fifth felt isolated upon returning to school. When asked how their schools helped them when they returned, 66% said their schools did nothing on their return after the death of their parent; 10% said that just one teacher spoke to them; and 10% said that teachers had talked with classmates and instructed them on how to behave and what to say. Four percent had no recollection. Ten percent of these respondents said that one teacher had spoken to them about the death and they considered this to be helpful to them. Special attention by the teacher at recess was important for some but others reported being criticized by the teacher for substandard work and even ridiculed in front of the class. The Iceberg volunteers were asked to rate their schools concerning the help they had received during their bereavement on a scale from 0 to 10 with 0 representing no help and 10 the highest

possible score. The results show that 57% rated their school at 0, indicating very little support for them from the school as bereaved children.

When asked how their school could have helped, over half said just listening would have helped immensely as would counseling. Other responses included: simply acknowledging the loss; teachers expressing regret; liaison with family; the class teacher telling peers as well as other teachers of the death of their parent; encouragement by the school to help them work through their feelings; death education; and training for teachers to become more confident in the area of death and loss.<sup>218</sup>

Isolation is a common experience among bereaved children and feeds into the notion of feeling different. Iceberg participants were asked to rate how isolated they felt during the first year after the death of their parent. Results indicate that 47% felt the most isolated with only 3% reporting the least isolated. Furthermore, 75% of them reported that their teachers were unapproachable during this time.<sup>219</sup> When reading these findings, it is important to bear in mind that this study was conducted with adults who had been bereaved as children, therefore, their experiences are representative of earlier times when awareness of the impact of childhood bereavement was not studied in the depth that it is today. Although schools still are faced with the challenge of providing death education and support for children who are grieving, these results must be considered within the context of their time. Moreover, the adult participants responded to the researcher's questions based on memory from many years earlier. Loss of a parent brings many complex issues that may have influenced their responses many years later.

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<sup>218</sup> Holland, 99-112

<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 118



It is essential that schools and families work together to provide the best possible support for bereaved children. Harris writes that after the death of a significant loved one especially a parent, children take the fragments of their lives that are left after an early loss has shattered their life experience and attempt to reconstruct themselves into a meaningful whole. Some do well enough but others remain too fragile to withstand the rigors of growing up and must re-create self as an adult sometimes many years following the loss.<sup>220</sup> Schools have a crucial role to play in the healing of bereaved children, as they face life no longer in the innocence that childhood once was for them and now no longer exists.

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<sup>220</sup> Harris, 230

## Chapter Two

### Jewish Tradition Concerning Grief and Mourning

#### **Background**

One of the basic tenets of Judaism is that of the sanctity of life. Life is considered to be a gift from God and as such is revered, upholding the belief that each individual is sacred, created in God's image. The human body is the vessel that houses the soul and is to be cared for in a holy way throughout a person's lifetime including at the time of his death. Jewish life is comprised of significant events and milestones that are marked by unique observances founded on rabbinic sources; in the same way death is considered to be a part of life that is observed by means of fundamental principles clearly established in Jewish texts. Isaacs writes that just as there is a Jewish way of life, so too is there a Jewish way of death, dying, and mourning.<sup>221</sup> This set of practices and rituals is so important in Judaism that Maurice Lamm who wrote the classic book outlining them chose to entitle his work *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. The Talmud speaks of an appropriate and honorary manner of mourning:

כל המוריד דמעות על אדם כשר הקדוש ברוך הוא סופרן ומניחן בבית גנוז<sup>222</sup>  
*If one sheds tears for a worthy person the Holy one Blessed Be He counts them and lays them up in His treasure chest*

Some of the Rabbis and scholars believed that death is a punishment for sinfulness based on the Biblical story of Adam disobeying God whereas others considered death to be part

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<sup>221</sup> Isaacs, Ronald H. *Every Person's Guide to Death and Dying in the Jewish Tradition*. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999. p.2

<sup>222</sup> Shabbat 105b

of the natural order of the world.<sup>223</sup> The Midrash on *Vayeshev* tells of the Angel of Death who was brought into the world on the first day of Creation, signifying that life and death are part of the same continuum.<sup>224</sup>

While joy and the importance of life are priorities, Judaism also stresses the importance of facing death. Every important life event needs some preparation, death included. A person should be prepared that death will ultimately happen and one's own preparation should be a part of the natural order of the living.<sup>225</sup> We read in the Bible that King Hezekiah fell ill:

בְּיָמִים הָהֵם חָלָה חֶזְקִיָּהוּ לָמוּת וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיו יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ  
בֶן-אֲמוּץ הַנָּבִיא וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה צִוּ לְבֵיתְךָ כִּי  
מֵת אַתָּה וְלֹא תַחְיֶה:

*In those days Hezekiah fell dangerously ill. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came and said to him, "Thus said the Lord: Set your affairs in order, for you are going to die; you will not get well."*<sup>226</sup>

In Jewish literature, death is the inevitable fate for each person since God decrees it but instead of hoping that death will not occur, Judaism asserts that life will yet continue but in another form.<sup>227</sup> However, facing the reality of one's own death is frightening:

Hezekiah pleaded with God and wept profusely:

אָנָּה יְהוָה זְכַרְנָא אֵת אֲשֶׁר תַּחֲלִיכְתִּי לִפְנֵיךָ בְּאַמַּת  
וּבְלִבָּב שָׁלֵם וְהַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ עָשִׂיתִי וַיִּבֶךְ חֶזְקִיָּהוּ בְּכִי  
גָדוֹל:

While death is feared and dreaded, there is honor allotted to the dead. *Kohellet* said:

<sup>223</sup> Kolatch, Alfred J. *The Jewish Mourner's Book of Why*. New York: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc. 1993, p.12.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid. Source for Midrash is Tanchuma on *Vayeshev* 4

<sup>225</sup> Spiro, Jack D. *A Time to Mourn. Judaism and the Psychology of Bereavement*. New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1967, p. 109

<sup>226</sup> 2 Kings 20:1

<sup>227</sup> Spiro, 110

טוֹב שֵׁם מִשְׁמָן טוֹב וַיּוֹם הַמּוֹת מִיּוֹם הַיּוֹלָדוֹ<sup>228</sup>

*A good name is better than fragrant oil, and the day of death than the day of birth.*

The Midrash on this verse explains that concerning birth, it is unknown what the newborn infant will achieve in his life, but upon death one's accomplishments and achievements are known to all and there will be rebirth in the World to Come.<sup>229</sup>

Respect for the dead **כבוד המת**, is a fundamental principle of Judaism.

Rabinowicz explains that the notion of **כבוד** is mentioned in the Bible with reference to the death of Hezekiah:<sup>230</sup>

כְּבוֹד עָשׂוּ-לּוֹ בְּמוֹתוֹ כָּל-יְהוּדָה וַיֵּשְׁבִי יְרוּשָׁלַם<sup>231</sup>

*All the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem accorded him much honor*

Grief is a reaction to love and an emotional response to a broken heart. The sudden absence of a loved one from an individual's world elicits many feelings arising from the intensity of missing the deceased and the fear of going on living without that person.<sup>232</sup> We read in Genesis 23:2 of Sarah's death and Abraham's response:

וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לִסְפֹּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ<sup>233</sup>

*Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her*

When Jacob died, Joseph "flung himself upon his father's face and wept over him and kissed him".<sup>234</sup> He ordered the physicians to care for his father's body so that he was

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<sup>228</sup> *Kohellet* 7:1

<sup>229</sup> Munk, Rabbi Meir. *Searching For Comfort*. New York: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2003, p. 85. From *Exodus Rabbah* 45

<sup>230</sup> Rabinowicz, Rabbi Tzvi. *A Guide to Life. Jewish Laws and Customs of Mourning*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1989, p. 10

<sup>231</sup> 2 Chronicles 32:33

<sup>232</sup> Spiro, xxviii

<sup>233</sup> Genesis 23:2

<sup>234</sup> Genesis 50:1

given the highest of honor and then the entire community along with Joseph bewailed Jacob.

Today we honor the dead by respectful care of the body, by accompanying the deceased to the burial place, by comforting the mourner, and by honoring the memory of the person and his/her achievements. Judaism recognizes the need for rituals and rites to help those who are bereaved to cope with the reality of the death of their loved one and to eventually return from their needed temporary withdrawal back to the community. The Rabbis understood that mourners undergo various stages of mourning. While the *halachah* around mourning is focused primarily on specific obligations and laws, many of these rites are coincidentally in complete consonance with the basic psychological roots of grief. Spiro writes that psychological concepts are not explicit in the Jewish sources but must be defined by the elucidation of the human motivation that he speculates may have served as the impetus for the creation of the laws.<sup>235</sup> Symbols help a person to maintain his tie to his sociocultural group and Judaism provides symbols during the mourning rituals that help the mourner to detach from the deceased, which is one of the tasks of mourning and in a prescribed time, to become part of the group once more.<sup>236</sup>

Spiro goes on to explain that the laws of mourning differ from other laws in Judaism in that they were not developed as religious discipline but rather to serve the needs of those who are bereaved by providing a “structured expression” to their deepest feelings. In cases of dispute among the Sages concerning the laws of *aveilut*, the more lenient opinion is followed. Spiro creatively interprets this to mean that the laws should not be burdensome; to support this view he cites the following Talmudic teaching:

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<sup>235</sup> Spiro, xix

<sup>236</sup> Spiro, 119

**הלכה כרבי עקיבא דאמר שמואל הלכה כדורבי המקיל באבל<sup>237</sup>**

*The law follows [the lenient view of] Rabbi Akiva. For Shmuel said: the halakha always follows the [more] lenient opinion in [issues of] mourning [law].*

Judaism maintains very realistic attitudes in the rites and rituals prescribed to guide the bereaved through the mourning process.<sup>238</sup> The study of the Jewish mourning process raises three important questions: 1) Is there a therapeutic significance to the laws and rituals around mourning in Judaism and is the cultural authority therapeutically beneficial? 2) Does bereavement as a communal activity have a therapeutic significance? and 3) Does bereavement represent a family as well as an individual and communal crisis in Jewish tradition and what significance does this have for the mourner's eventual recovery?<sup>239</sup> The goal is to help the bereaved face the reality of the death and to prevent its denial. To this end, the mourner is faced with rituals that bring him face to face with the actuality of the death such as witnessing the burial of his loved one and shovelling earth onto the coffin with the dreaded sound of the thud as it hits the coffin that has been lowered into the grave. These and many other Jewish laws of mourning provide opportunities for the mourner to vent feelings as well as face reality.

When an emotion is denied expression, it is not destroyed but rather pushed down into the unconscious only to be manifested later in a different form.<sup>240</sup> The Rabbis were well aware of the need to express one's grief and to experience various stages of mourning in order to do so and become whole once again, yet recognizing that wholeness will be in a different form. Rabbi Tsvi Schur explains that becoming whole again does not mean being perfect but complete. Happiness may not be achieved but mourning laws

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<sup>237</sup> Moed Katan 20a

<sup>238</sup> Spiro, 108

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 93

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 114

allow the bereaved to grow. Man, he writes, has a special gift - the ability to accept. This does not mean erasing the pain because the scars always remain, but it does enable the bereaved to continue living and to keep his loved one still within his life. He adds that life will send us not what we want but what we need in order to grow.<sup>241</sup>

Wolfson writes that grief is the way we mend our broken hearts and the process of mourning is the way the psyche that has been bruised by the pain of loss, heals itself. He emphasizes that there is no “right” way to mourn, nor is there a time limit.<sup>242</sup> Despite this however, Judaism recognizes that while there are various tasks incumbent upon the mourner, there is a time frame that provides temporal structure for grieving as well as a gradual weaning away from the trauma of the loss. This structure allows a “working through” of the acute grief and desperation toward normal living again and reintegration into society within the support and protection of the community and the traditions it espouses.<sup>243</sup>

In his work on how Judaism handles grief, Spiro presents the meaning of grief within a psychoanalytical framework. He writes that at all times the human psyche deals with the opposing forces of love and aggressiveness. In grief there are two reactions: frustration because the force of love is impeded as a result of the death of the loved one; and guilt that results from one’s aggressive impulses. The conflict between frustration and guilt give rise to a state of anxiety in the mourner who becomes overwhelmed by the conflict and attempts to protect himself from emotional collapse by the use of defences. These include such defences as denial, repression, regression, self-punishment, and

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<sup>241</sup> Schur, Rabbi Tsvi G. *Illness and Crisis. Coping the Jewish Way*. New York: Olivestone Print Communications, 1987, pp. 42-47

<sup>242</sup> Wolfson, Ron. *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. 1993, p. 54

<sup>243</sup> Levine, Rabbi Aaron. *To Comfort the Bereaved*. ספר חלכות נרחם אבליס. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc. 1994, p. 32

projection. While he feels somewhat “protected” by such defenses, they in fact only camouflage his feelings. The danger rests in the likelihood that the true feelings get directed in detrimental directions.<sup>244</sup>

The need for such defenses is not ignored or denied by Judaism but the concern is that they do not become pathological in the bereaved individual; death must be and is observed as a stark reality thereby ensuring that any repressed feelings are rechannelled by the active observance and participation in ceremonials of mourning. Examples include the rechanneling of regression as Judaism allows the mourner to feel his sense of helplessness at the time of the death and shortly thereafter but is gradually expected to assume more responsibility concerning daily life facilitating the disappearance of regressive behaviors. The defense of self-punishment is channelled into abstention of certain activities in honor of, and in memory, of the deceased. Whether realistic or not, mourners often experience feelings of guilt that they could have done something to prevent the death of their loved one. Judaism rechannels loves impulses and alleviates feelings of guilt by ensuring that the mourner may not disguise the reality that the “loved object”, that is, his loved one is really dead. By observing and taking part in mourning rituals and ceremonies, he is allowed to lean on his sociocultural group that ensures him that he is doing the correct and appropriate thing at this confusing time in his life. The system upon which he depends has cultural authority and divine sanction, aimed at reducing his confusion and guiding him through this difficult time. Moreover, the mourner has both the freedom and the right to express his deepest feelings of grief; this minimizes the denial of the death as well as the emotions that the loss evokes. By expressing his grief and having the sanction by the group to do so, the mourner gradually

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<sup>244</sup> Spiro, xix-xx



learns to detach himself from the deceased and in time, develop new relationships and interests.<sup>245</sup>

Most Jewish laws and rituals are developed on the basis of a communal structure; the laws of mourning are no exception to this rule. Judaism emphasizes that the mourner must continue relating to others throughout the process of mourning. For mourning to be of therapeutic benefit, the mourner needs to be able to transfer his dependency needs and love impulses to other persons and objects. The communal structure of Judaism is well suited to this goal. The Jewish mourner does not grieve alone nor does he perform rites of mourning in isolation. Functioning as an active member of the community allows him ultimately to detach from the deceased and experience acceptance by the group, thereby transferring his ties of love and alleviating guilt feelings.

The bereaved tends to isolate himself with his personal pain and is incapable of reaching out and feeling close to others due to his own personal anguish.<sup>246</sup> This is well represented in the Biblical story of Job as well as in Lamentations as Jerusalem mourns in solitude:

אֵיכָה יֹשְׁבָה בְדָרַד הָעִיר רַבְתִּי עִם הַיְחָה כְּאַלְמָנָה רַבְתִּי  
בְּגוֹיִם<sup>247</sup>

*Alas! Lonely sits the city once great with people! She that was great among the nations is become like a widow*

A mourner often feels isolated, neglected, and not wanted. Judaism ensures that he is included in the group by handling the issues of bereavement through a social experience.

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., xxii

<sup>246</sup> Munk, 36

<sup>247</sup> Lamentations 1:1

Surrounded by others, the mourner is aided in accepting the challenge of life without his loved one and finding a way to live a healthy life once more.<sup>248</sup>

The bereaved individual is faced with handling a multitude of emotions and becomes concerned with himself. The painful emotions experienced result in an egocentric response. Judaism recognizes this disorientation and encourages the bereaved to return to reality and relate to others even from the very beginning of the mourning process. The sense of helplessness and despair experienced by the mourner is a very real feeling of anxiety as the total self is threatened by the loss of the significant person in his life.<sup>249</sup> Levine reminds us that everyone mourns differently and it is imperative to keep in mind several factors that contribute to this diversity including: religious makeup and orientation of the mourner as well as integration of Torah attitudes and teachings; the mourner's personal family makeup and his position in it; his relationship with the deceased; the status of the mourner's experiences leading up to the time of death; and, the mourner's unique personality.<sup>250</sup> The pain of separation is intense and the mourner's response is complex incorporating various components. In addition to the intense emotional reaction, he may experience somatic responses such as cardiac and gastrointestinal difficulties and even the most devout mourner may experience a spiritual crisis and be angry with God.

The person who is bereaved is weak and confused and is willing to abide by what the sociocultural group prescribes because he does not know what else to do. He is generally willing to accept the cultural authority as it offers a structure and provisions for dealing with the death that has occurred. If acceptance does not take place by the mourner

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., xiii

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>250</sup> Levine, 27

because the customs conflict with his feelings, the inability to adapt to the role of mourner within the context of the group can prove to be as painful as the loss itself as he feels isolated in his grief.

The Jewish response to death and mourning is governed by respect for the dead and concern for the living. The framework is structured such that there is the utmost of respect in the care for the body from the time of death until burial while the mourner prepares for the mourning process. Immediately following burial of the dead, the focus shifts to caring for the mourners and enabling them to mourn according to *halachah* and to eventually return to society. To this end, there is a highly structured framework that facilitates the process of mourning. The work however is not incumbent upon the mourner alone; the community and indeed each individual have a role to play. Respect for the dead, specific death rituals and ceremonies, the time-bound process of mourning, and the obligation of each person in the community to console the bereaved all play a critical role in the healing of the bereaved individual.

### **Stages of Jewish Mourning**

Theorists and clinicians have formulated many theories of grief and mourning. Lindemann in his seminal paper on grief known as *Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief* used the term “grief work”. This was an important early paper (1944) that examined grief reactions. Other important clinicians and theorists include Freud, Kubler-Ross, Rando, Worden, Bowlby and many others who have attempted to study normal grief reactions as they differ from those that are pathological. Moreover, they have each attempted to understand the mourning process as it affects the mourner over time. Some have outlined stages, tasks, or phases. Yet long before these modern psychologists

presented their theories, the Rabbis of the Talmud had established six phases of mourning each with a specific time period to help the bereaved: 1) *Aninut* – the period from the time of death until burial; 2) *Aveilut* – from the time of burial until six days later; 3) *Shloshim* – the thirty day period from the day of burial; 4) *Shanah* – the one year period following the death; 5) *Yahrzeit* – the anniversary of the death; and 6) *Yiskor* – the memorial communal service held on Yom Kippur and each of the three Festivals.<sup>251</sup> Furthermore, throughout these phases, Judaism encourages talking about the deceased, weeping, and public display of emotions at the funeral and house of mourning. Since facing and coping with the reality of the death are critical factors in mourning, these attitudes and outward expressions of grief enable the Jewish mourner to do exactly that. Spiro says that the daily acts of mourning are always in front of him and thus, the mourner cannot deny his loss. Judaism encourages such behaviors with the ultimate goal of reconciling one's loss, and the mourner is thus aided in successfully achieving the three phases of successful mourning, those of acceptance, detachment, and new relationship development.<sup>252</sup>

### **1. Aninut**

Immediately upon hearing of the death until the end of burial of the deceased, each immediate relative is known as an *onen*. The *onen*, distressed by the death, undergoes a roller coaster of emotions that leaves him disoriented and numb. The Sages said that the deceased lies *before* him<sup>253</sup> and Lamm adds that psychologically, he relives

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<sup>251</sup> Wolfson, 62

<sup>252</sup> Spiro, 122

<sup>253</sup> Moed Katan 23b

the moment of death of his loved one every instant during this period.<sup>254</sup> The Rabbis also knew that it was quite impossible to console mourners at this time due to the numbness so they instructed the *onen* to keep busy with details such as funeral arrangements and informing other family members of the death.<sup>255</sup> In fact, the *onen* is exempted from religious duties<sup>256</sup> such as reciting prayers and the wearing of tefillin in order to devote his attention to the needs of the dead as burial preparations have priority.<sup>257</sup> The Talmud says: "he who is engaged in a religious act is exempt from performing other religious duties."<sup>258</sup> In keeping with this state of mind, the *onen* is absolved from the performance of *mitzvot* during this period in order to enable him to attend to the needs of the dead, which is a religious act itself. Furthermore, according to the Talmud there must be no lessening of the honor and respect accorded to the deceased, **הרי זה לא יחמיר מפני כבוד המת**<sup>259</sup> therefore the mourner is exempted because our commitment to God is rooted in the awareness of human dignity and sanctity.<sup>260</sup> Rashi taught that people take oaths during moments of distress without thinking it through; questioning such an oath might cause them to commit further to the vow.<sup>261</sup> Levine extrapolates Rashi's view and adds that the mourner cannot accept words of comfort at this time so He will not accept words of comfort and Rabbi Yonah adds that words of comfort may anger the mourner and cause him to say inappropriate words.<sup>262</sup> In Mishnah

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<sup>254</sup> Lamm, Maurice. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. New York: Jonathan David Publishers Inc., 1969, p.24

<sup>255</sup> Wolfson, 55

<sup>256</sup> Moed Katan 23b; Yoreh Deah 341.1

<sup>257</sup> Rabinowicz, 20

<sup>258</sup> Sukkah 25a

<sup>259</sup> Semachot 10:1

<sup>260</sup> Rabinowicz, 20

<sup>261</sup> Kravitz, Leonard and Kerry Olitzky. *Pirke Avot*. New York: UAHC Press. 1993, p. 66

<sup>262</sup> Levine, 175, footnote 1

Avot, Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar teaches “do not comfort your friend at a time when his deceased lies before him”.<sup>263</sup>

Jewish law dictates that one is obligated to mourn for a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, husband, or wife. This is based on the verses in Leviticus that state explicitly for whom a Kohen is obligated to mourn and thereby become ritually impure:

פִּי אִם-לִשְׂאֵרֹוֹ הִקְרֵב אֵלָיו לְאִמּוֹ וּלְאָבִיו וּלְבָנֹו וּלְבָתֹו  
וּלְאָחִיו<sup>264</sup>

*The relatives that are closest to him: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, and his brother*

The Talmud states about whom it is stated in the passage regarding the Kohanim – that a Kohen must contaminate himself for them **אבל מתאבל עליהן** - a mourner mourns for them as well and these are they (with some additions added by the Talmud): his wife, his father, his mother, his [paternal] brother, his [paternal virgin] sister, his son, and his daughter. The Rabbis added his maternal brother and maternal virgin sister and his married sister, either paternal or maternal.<sup>265</sup>

Judaism does not limit mourning to only these relatives; one may mourn for whomever one wishes.<sup>266</sup> The obligation to mourn, however, rests upon the relatives who have lost family members as cited in the Talmud. Traditional *halachah* stipulates that males from the age of thirteen years plus one day and females from twelve years of age plus one day are considered *onenim*; otherwise they are minors and not obligated to observe the laws of mourning and are required only to rend their clothes (as will be

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<sup>263</sup> M. Avot 4:18

<sup>264</sup> Leviticus 21:2

<sup>265</sup> Moed Katan 20b; Shulchan Aruch 374:4; Rambam Hilchot Aveilut 2:1

<sup>266</sup> Isaacs, 15

discussed later).<sup>267</sup> Felder says if they are younger and become of age during the time of *aninut*, then the mourning stage of *aninut* begins for them from the day they become of age.<sup>268</sup> On the other hand, Goldberg writes that a minor who becomes bar- or bat mitzvah is not required to observe because the *Shulchan Aruch* (396:3) rules that he or she is exempt from all laws of mourning. However, in the case of mourning for a parent, mourning practices applicable to those that apply following *shloshim* until the end of the first twelve months must be observed, since these stem from the *mitzvah* of honoring one's parents. Still others stipulate that if a boy became bar mitzvah during the *shivah*, he must observe mourning for the remainder of the *shivah* period.<sup>269</sup> Spiro states that minors do not engage in mourning rites nor in *chinuch* for mourning because the Rabbis did not consider it appropriate for anyone to engage in limited mourning. His psychoanalytic reason for this is because the child is considered less capable of the deep feelings which overcome someone older concerning the loss of a love object.<sup>270</sup> Assuming a more liberal stand on this issue, Isaacs is of the personal opinion to allow boys and girls under the ages of 13 years and 12 years respectively, while not considered to be mourners, to engage in some of the mourning customs and traditions if they choose to do so.<sup>271</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Yamin Levy in his book on Sephardic mourning customs writes of his opinion, that although children under the age of bar or bat mitzvah are not required to

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<sup>267</sup> Shulchan Aruch 340:27

<sup>268</sup> Shulchan Aruch 396:3; Chochmas Adam 168:6; Aruch HaShulchan 396:5; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 216:2

<sup>269</sup> Goldberg, Rabbi Chaim Binyamin. *Mourning in Halachah. The Laws and Customs of the Year of Mourning*. New York: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1991, pp. 283-284. Some authorities rule that not only is a minor not obligated to observe mourning but the *mitzvah* of *chinuch* also not apply because it would prevent the child from studying Torah. However, other authorities rule that one must train the child in the *mitzvah* of mourning as in other *mitzvot*, even if Torah study is interrupted.

<sup>270</sup> Spiro, 37

<sup>271</sup> Isaacs, 14. Rabbinic source for ages is found in Kol Bo Aveilut p. 272; Yoreh Deah 172; Shulchan Aruch 396:3

observe *mitzvo*t, regarding mourning, if they are capable of understanding the situation, they should be encouraged to observe the laws of mourning.<sup>272</sup>

In addition to recognizing the initial reaction of the mourner, Judaism also acknowledges the difference in the emotional responses that follow during the period of *aveilut* once the shock has subsided. Spiro explains the psychological reason that grief is so intense during *aninut* is that the deceased lies before the bereaved but once buried and out of sight of the mourner, the death is more acceptable. While the loved one is still present the mourner is likely to deny the death and cannot fully express or even feel his grief. As a result, the Rabbis decreed that while the state of bewilderment and trauma is to be expected, it must not be prolonged for too long a period of time in order to prevent, according to Spiro, perverted clinging to the dead.<sup>273</sup> This is based on the teaching by Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav:

**כל המתקשה על מנו יותר מדאי על מת אחר הוא בוכה**<sup>274</sup>  
*Anyone who grieves over his dead to excess will [ultimately] weep for another deceased*

Bar Kappara said that on the third day mourning “is at its height” and the mourner feels the intensity of his loss; the shock had not yet been fully comprehended but after the numbness wears off, he realizes the depth of the loss.<sup>275</sup> It is precisely at this time that the mourner begins the next phase of mourning, that of *aveilut*. The periodization scheme for mourning established by the Rabbis was based on the verse in Deuteronomy:

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<sup>272</sup> Levy, Rabbi Yamin. *Journey Through Grief. A Sephardic Manual for the Bereaved and Their Community*. New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House Inc. 2003, p. 81

<sup>273</sup> Spiro, 44

<sup>274</sup> Moed Katan 27b. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999. Whoever chooses to mourn excessively will suffer another bereavement. According to R' Shlomo ben HaYasom, the mourner magnifies the pain beyond its true extent by prolonged grieving

<sup>275</sup> Spiro, 44 From Genesis Rabbah 100:7



יָבְכוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם  
וַיָּחֲמוּ יָמֵי בְכִי אֶבֶל מֹשֶׁה<sup>276</sup>

*And the Israelites bewailed Moses in the steppes of Moab for thirty days. The period of wailing and mourning for Moses came to an end.*

Genesis *Rabbah* explains the word יָמֵי implies “two”, בְּכִי implies “seven”, and אֶבֶל implies “thirty”. Others reversed it saying יָמֵי implies “seven”, בְּכִי implies “two”, and אֶבֶל implies “thirty”. While seven and thirty are well understood, the Midrash explains the two days apply to the mourner who is extremely poor and he must not work on the first and second days of his mourning but may work on the third to seventh days but must do so in private. Bar Kapparah disagreed, emphasizing that he must not work because his mourning is then at its height.<sup>277</sup>

## 2. Aveilut

Levine outlines three aspects of emotions that change during the early process of mourning: 1) the feeling of pain occurs as the ego feels part of it is turned away and hurts intensively; during *aninut* one’s personality is outraged by the extreme sense of loss 2) the severance from the loved one recedes into the past and one’s ego feels only the after-effects of a loss that is now over resulting in a pain that is more mental now than emotional or physical because the loss exists only in the mourner’s mind following the burial of the deceased; the period of *aveilut* represents the shriveling of one’s “mortified” personality, and 3) the pain is eventually overcome and the mourner’s ego raises itself up but has not yet regained self-confidence so neglects its outward appearance; this is known as *nivvul*, the inward personality which contemns outward appearance. It is after this

<sup>276</sup> Deuteronomy 34:8

<sup>277</sup> Genesis *Rabbah* 100:7

stage that the mourner comes into contact with his group and eventually returns to society. The Sages gave latitude to each of these phases of the mourning process so that the mourner who was once self-absorbed can gradually be presented once again to life and society.<sup>278</sup> It is during the period of *aveilut* that the community plays a crucial role in the return of the mourner to society by the obligation of all to console the bereaved beginning with *shivah*.

### Shivah

Lamm writes that it is necessary to observe a distinctive time to express one's grief in the loss of a close relative. In addition, he indicates that the Sages noted that it was the custom even in ancient times, even before revelation at Sinai, to mourn heavily for a period of one week – *shivah*.<sup>279</sup> Spiro says that the real work of mourning and comforting comes together during *shivah* through prayer, reflection, and memory. The mourner moves from the status of *onen* to *aveil*. Whereas earlier he was not able to focus on his grief work due to the need to honor his deceased, now *shivah* focuses on the bereaved.<sup>280</sup> Wolfson writes that experiencing the pain is the most difficult part of mourning. In traditional Jewish mourning grief reaches the heart at the time of the funeral and burial when the reality of the death truly occurs. This happens as the mourner hears his loved one eulogized, witnesses the burial, and hears the thud of earth that he personally shovels and drops onto the casket. Many emotions are at play at this time including pining for the deceased as the mourner enters a new phase of mourning and the community comes to him during the time of *shivah* supporting him and slowly

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<sup>278</sup> Levine, 33

<sup>279</sup> Lamm, 81

<sup>280</sup> Spiro, 160

welcoming him back. The community allows the mourner to pine because Judaism teaches that we do not want to forget and memories are forever.<sup>281</sup>

According to the Talmud, under Biblical law one mourned for a parent or other immediate relative who died for that day only until nightfall and the Rabbis extended the period of mourning to seven days from the time of burial.<sup>282</sup> Sephardic Jews call this period *siete*, the Spanish and Ladino word for “seven”.<sup>283</sup> At this time mourners are highly protected by a supportive community that protects and comforts them.

A personal interpretation of the story we read in the Torah portion *Shemini* of the terrible and traumatic incident that occurred during Aaron’s ordination as High Priest when his two sons suddenly died in the fire is presented here. Aaron was instantly bereaved and could not eat the sacrificial meal as he was commanded to do as the High Priest. Even in this exalted position, he was overcome by his losses and had difficulty functioning. “Aaron was silent”. He had to be silent in his grief until the completion of the ritual. Moses attempted to console his brother and offer his sympathy by telling him that he should not openly grieve, that the community would do so for him. He explained to Aaron and his two remaining sons that those in positions of leadership suffer more difficult and painful consequences. Aaron was told to eat the sacrificial meal as part of his priestly duties but he could not eat and when questioned by Moses, he replied “When such things have befallen me, if I had eaten a sin offering today would the Lord have approved?” And when Moses heard this he understood; he had to hear from Aaron that, now bereaved, his brother needed to mourn. Despite the reality that he was the High

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<sup>281</sup> Wolfson, 56-59

<sup>282</sup> Moed Katan 8a. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999.

<sup>283</sup> Brener, Anne. *Mourning & Mitzvah. A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner’s Path Through Grief to Healing*. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001, p.88

Priest, Aaron recognized that time to grieve was needed. He realized the necessity to remove himself from his priestly duties during this time. Aaron needed to honor his losses and to feel his pain. It was not enough for Aaron that the community mourns his sons; he knew that he must mourn himself for his children despite the societal pressures on him. Moses came to understand and approved. As a result of his personal grieving and ultimate healing, Aaron with support from the sociocultural group eventually was able to lead his community once again. The Rabbis knew that we must allow ourselves and others to experience the feelings of loss and to know that it is imperative to take the time to do so. Aaron permitted himself to be seen as vulnerable by his community that respected him. By sharing with our community, we connect and ultimately can give of ourselves to others in their time of need. It seems to me that this is the import of this story we read in Leviticus.

Aaron's bereavement well illustrates both the need for the mourner to feel his grief during a time set aside for that purpose alone and the importance of the community to offer comfort. Gorer found a direct correlation between *shivah* and support for people who are grieving leading to the conclusion of his study that the concentrated and overt mourning that takes place during *shivah* is of therapeutic value.<sup>284</sup> The first three days are characterized by intense grief and traditional Judaism encourages the mourner to stay home in his grief and discourages friends from visiting.<sup>285</sup> The community is advised to visit after the fourth day after he has dealt privately with his grief. In modern practice however, visitors attend the house of mourning immediately following burial. While the traditional length of *shivah* is for seven days, some Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis

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<sup>284</sup> Munk, 36

<sup>285</sup> Lamm, 75

have recommended shortening the time period to the first three days and some mourners choose to have a shorter length of time for *shivah*.<sup>286</sup> Wolfson and his colleagues feel that shortening the length of *shivah* is not therapeutic. Although some people watch their loved one struggle with an illness and experience “anticipatory bereavement” and feel they have already grieved to some extent, Wolfson argues that the phased and necessary pattern of mourning gets lost. Furthermore, some people do not have knowledge of mourning practices and their meaning so choose to minimize the time of *shivah*. This lends itself to important teaching on the part of the rabbi and the community. In cases where *shivah* is annulled or shortened due to a holiday or festival occurring during that week, the community is still obligated to extend comfort to the bereaved.<sup>287</sup> Private *shivah* is neither customary in Judaism nor recommended because mourning customs can help to articulate grief within the circumscribed and recognized period of social withdrawal. This helps the mourner on the path to resolution and continuing a relationship with the deceased while still living in the world where that person no longer does.<sup>288</sup>

It is recommended that the practice of *shivah* take place ideally at the home of the deceased but it may also be observed at the home of one of the mourners. The week of *shivah* entails many mourning practices at the house of mourning a few of which are the washing of one’s hands upon arrival from the cemetery to rid oneself of spiritual impurities, sitting on low stools, not wearing leather shoes<sup>289</sup>, covering mirrors, lighting a

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<sup>286</sup> Isaacs, 28

<sup>287</sup> Wolfson, 161-164

<sup>288</sup> Levine, 72-73

<sup>289</sup> Moed Katan 15b

candle that lasts for the seven days of *shivah*, abstaining from work<sup>290</sup>, bathing<sup>291</sup>, cutting hair and nails<sup>292</sup>, washing one's clothing<sup>293</sup> and marital relations<sup>294</sup>, and assembling as a *minyan* for prayers and the recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish in honor of the deceased.<sup>295</sup> Even the study of Torah is prohibited as this brings joy; only the study of Job, Lamentations, the sad parts of Jeremiah, *Eilu Megalchin* (this deals with laws of mourning and excommunication), *Semachot*, and *Menorat Ha-Maor* written by Rabbi Isaac Aboab the Elder of the fourteenth century are allowed<sup>296</sup> due to the subject of loss inherent in them. This period of time is marked by a range of emotions varying in intensity including sadness, anger, bitterness, relief, and even happiness when conversations with visitors allows nice memories of the deceased to be recalled. Although the traditional view concerning children as already outlined is that they are not obligated to observe mourning rituals, the more liberal view is to offer them a choice. Recognizing that *shivah* is very disruptive in the normal schedule and routine of a family, depending on the age of a child, this disruption can indeed upset the child even more. It is not easy for children to see adults struggling with grief and painful emotions. It is important for adults to be flexible, allow children some choices, and watch the impact that the intensity of *shivah* and mourning has on them.<sup>297</sup> Traditionally children who are bereaved and not of age are not obligated to observe laws of mourning but if they do come of age during the mourning period for parents they do not have to start the entire

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<sup>290</sup> Moed Katan 15b

<sup>291</sup> Ibid

<sup>292</sup> Moed Katan 14b; Moed Katan 18a; Shulchan Aruch 390:1; 390:7

<sup>293</sup> Moed Katan 15a

<sup>294</sup> Moed Katan 15b

<sup>295</sup> Moed Katan 21a; Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 381:1; Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 55:1,4; Rambam Hilchot Aveilut chapter 5

<sup>296</sup> Shulchan Aruch 384:4

<sup>297</sup> Wolfson, 188

*shivah* from the beginning; they must observe only the remaining time of the mourning period. Lamm writes that children just prior to becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah should be taught the mourning laws but without the full strictness of adult observance. He adds that although people are concerned with the effect of mourning on children, psychologists recommend having the child face the unpleasant fact than to have it masked and to repress it.<sup>298</sup>

“Getting up” from *shivah* marks the end of this stage of the mourning process symbolizing the necessity of returning to “normal” everyday life. Since life will never be the same “normal” again, the mourner must assume the painful and challenging tasks of returning to work, caring for one’s family, and observing different practices of mourning without the safety net of the community right there as during the week of *shivah*. There are many conflicting emotions, as the mourner must learn to live without the deceased. The traditional practice for Ashkenazic Jews is a walk around the block symbolizing this return to the normal world. There are not specific prayers to be said during this walk but the opportunity to reflect on the dead loved one with family members is therapeutic and can offer great comfort. Some people go to the cemetery “to escort the *neshamah* on its way to the grave.”<sup>299</sup> Sephardic Jews recite the *Hashkevah* (laying to rest) prayer following the morning service. Before “getting up” from *shivah*, everyone present gathers around the mourners and recites: “Thy sun shall no more go down, nor thy moon wane. For the Lord shall be thy everlasting light and the days of thy mourning ended. As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you, and through Jerusalem shall you be comforted.” The mourners are then physically lifted to help them differentiate between

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<sup>298</sup> Lamm, 86

<sup>299</sup> Levine, 149

the period of grief and that of healing (post-*shivah*). Some Sephardim take the short walk as well to symbolize returning to society. It is also the custom of Sephardim to permit bathing immediately after *shivah* is over.<sup>300</sup>

### **3. Shloshim**

The stage of *shloshim* constitutes the thirty days following burial unless shortened by a festival and is observed for all relatives other than one's father or mother for whom mourning is observed for a period of one year.<sup>301</sup> The week of *shivah* is included in the thirty days. While most mourning practices observed during *shivah* are ended during *shloshim*, men do not shave and all mourners attend synagogue services to recite Mourner's *Kaddish* and do not attend parties or celebrations or get married during this time; the Rabbis knew that celebrations would be difficult at this time so they designed measures to protect the bereaved from being in situations that would be psychologically trying.<sup>302</sup> Although the mourner returns to work and usual routines, it is normal to experience waves of varying emotions, especially sadness and loneliness. The conclusion of *shloshim* brings the mourner to yet another phase of mourning and may be marked by the giving of *tzedaka* in memory of the deceased, a visit to the cemetery, and/or dedicating Torah study to the memory of the lost loved one. The various Sephardic communities have many practices including a memorial service at the home of the mourner followed by a meal and study of *Torah*, *Mishnah*, and *Zohar*. The *Hashkavah* (laying to rest) prayer is recited at the conclusion of the service and a visit to the cemetery the following day takes place.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Levy, p. 113

<sup>301</sup> Lamm, 140; Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 399:7-10; Orach Chaim 548:12-15

<sup>302</sup> Wolfson, 244

<sup>303</sup> Levy, 135



#### 4. Shanah – The Year of Mourning

Judaism regards **כבוד אב ואם** respect and honor for one's parents as an obligation of utmost importance. To avoid mourning parents too little, the Rabbis instituted a twelve-month period of mourning.<sup>304</sup> Rabinowicz outlines some of the reasons for this length of time. The Zohar explains that the soul clings to the body for twelve months, while the Talmud says:

**כל שנים עשר חדש גופו קיים ונשמתו עולה ויורדת לאחר שנים עשר חדש  
הגוף בטל ונשמתו עולה ושוב אינה יורדת**<sup>305</sup>

*For twelve months the body is in existence and the soul ascends and descends; after twelve months the body ceases to exist and the soul ascends but descends no more*

The Rabbis also believed that purification of the soul in the afterlife takes place in the first twelve months. They also held that after a year the memory of the deceased fades.<sup>306</sup> This period of mourning is marked by the daily recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish* and further avoidance of celebrations although attendance at religious events such as the *chuppah* of a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah service is allowed.<sup>307</sup> Attendance at the festive meal where music and dancing take place is prohibited. There is no established regulation regarding visiting the grave during the twelve month period. Although some believe that one should not visit the grave in the first year, this has little support in rabbinic sources. It is traditional to go to the cemetery on *Tisha Ba'av*, during *Elul*, on the eve of the High Holidays, and on *yahrzeit* or the day before. People who observe mystical traditions "invite" dead parents to take part at a *simchah*, believing that even in the world of eternity, their souls derive pleasure on hearing good news. Traditional Jews do not light Chanukah lights, officiate as a reader on Shabbat, festivals, Purim, or the first night of

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<sup>304</sup> Wolfson 245; Moed Katan 22b

<sup>305</sup> Shabbat 152b – 153a

<sup>306</sup> Rabinowicz, 86

<sup>307</sup> Moed Katan 22b; Shulchan Aruch 380:25; Rambam Hilchot Aveilut 6

Chanukah, or receive gifts on Purim although they are obligated to send gifts to the needy.<sup>308</sup>

Judaism traditionally indicates that minors are not obligated to observe mourning rituals for the yearlong period. However Lamm stresses that the obligation to recite *Kaddish* is required even if the child is a minor and especially so if he is. He emphasizes that the *Kaddish* is easy to learn and the child thereby aids the congregation in sanctifying the name of God. Moreover, the *Kaddish* is an appropriate psychological method for him to express his grief and receive comfort in a way that brings him closer to his community. While traditional Judaism stipulates that a *minyan* of ten males is required for *Kaddish* to be recited, Lamm writes that many rabbis will allow a male minor who is himself a mourner, to be counted toward fulfilling the requirement of a *minyan* if only nine men are present.<sup>309</sup> Women are not obligated to say *Kaddish* nor do some rabbis discourage them; this however is not unanimous among Orthodox rabbis. Some traditional authorities indicate that converts are forbidden to recite *Kaddish* for their parents. Reform Judaism on the other hand encourages the convert to do so and to observe Jewish mourning practices as this is in keeping with the *mitzvot* of honouring one's parents and of mourning and memory.<sup>310</sup>

Sephardim commemorate the end of the twelve-month period of mourning with a final memorial service known as *Hazkarah* held in many communities on the anniversary of the burial and in subsequent years on the anniversary of the death. Mystic teachers

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 87-88

<sup>309</sup> Lamm, 156-158; Kol Bo Aveilut p. 373 note 29; Goldberg, 369 citing Be'ur Halachah

<sup>310</sup> Washofsky, Mark. *Jewish Living. A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*. New York: UAHC Press. 2001, p. 202 citing American Reform Responsa, 123-23; Contemporary American Reform Responsa no. 121. Responsum 5766.1 section 1 indicates that a Jew by choice observes the rites of mourning for his or her non-Jewish relatives in the same way that a born Jew would mourn his or her loved ones. This includes the obligation to recite *Kaddish* for them. This is in contrast to the Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 374:5 that exempts the convert from mourning for a loved one, including parents

instructed observance of the anniversary of the death of a parent even for one hundred years because of the benefit the soul derives. The service includes the recitation of *Kaddish* beginning on the Shabbat before the *Hazkarah*. On the actual day, some people fast the entire day. A candle is lit and one studies psalms, mishnayot and *Zohar*, and recites the *Hashkavah* prayer. Abstention from attendance at celebrations is observed and relatives visit the cemetery and recite Psalm 119. Upon leaving the cemetery, one washes the hands without saying a blessing and without drying them with a towel.<sup>311</sup>

### 5. Yahrzeit

The observance of *yahrzeit* (known among the Sephardim as *nachalah meldado* or *Annos*) was practiced in Talmudic times based on its first Biblical reference in the Bible that occurs in the book of Judges<sup>312</sup>: “And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Isreal went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah, the Gileadite, four days in a year.”<sup>313</sup> The concept of *Jahrzeit* (Memorial Day), the commemoration of the anniversary of the death of a parent by the recitation of *Kaddish* was seen in the fourteenth century in writings of Rabbi Jacob Mollen.<sup>314</sup> Memorializing the deceased on the anniversary of the death is an important component of the Jewish mourning process. It is a day characterized by memory and reflection, sadness and fondness for the deceased, and commemorated by means of Jewish symbols. Judaism added a special ritual to help the mourner at this crucial milestone of mourning. The most common

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<sup>311</sup> Levy, 139-142

<sup>312</sup> Rabinowicz, 90

<sup>313</sup> Judges 11:40

<sup>314</sup> Elbogen, Ismar. *Jewish Liturgy. A Comprehensive History*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. 1993, p. 82

custom is the lighting of a *yahrzeit* candle on the eve of the anniversary. Isaacs writes that light is symbolic of a person's soul<sup>315</sup> as we read in Proverbs:

נֵר יְהוָה נְשִׁמַת אָדָם חֵפֶז כָּל-חַדְרֵי-בֵּטָן<sup>316</sup>

*The lifebreath of man is the lamp of Adonai*

We read in *Genesis Rabbah*: “Now the earth was unformed and void” (Genesis 1:2); this alludes to deeds of the wicked. “And God said: ‘Let there be light’ (Genesis 1:2); this alludes to deeds of the righteous.<sup>317</sup> There is no established *brachah* that is recited on lighting the candle but each person's personal reflection and memory of the deceased lends itself to the creation of a personal prayer.

Some traditional Jews fast on the *yahrzeit* from the time of the *Minchah* service of the previous day until dark on the day of *yahrzeit*. It is customary to give *tzedaka* in honor of the deceased as well as to study Torah or *mishnah*.<sup>318</sup> Receiving an *aliyah*, reading Torah, or leading synagogue services are encouraged<sup>319</sup>; if the individual cannot do so, then attendance at services is customary. It is also traditional practice among all Jews to visit the grave at this time.<sup>320</sup>

## 6. Yizkor

The notion of memory plays an important role in Jewish mourning. The word “*yizkor*” is derived from “*zachor*”, the verb “to remember”. Lamm writes that the *Yizkor* service in the synagogue serves several functions: it allows for a mode of emotional release and at the same time is an act of piety and an expression of the utmost of respect.

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<sup>315</sup> Isaacs, 38

<sup>316</sup> Proverbs 20:27

<sup>317</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 2:5 (Book of Legends 547:107)

<sup>318</sup> Yevamot 122a

<sup>319</sup> *Mishmeret Shalom*, Os Yud 16

<sup>320</sup> *Shulchan Aruch* 344:20; Lamm, 200-202

This service allows Jewish mourners to recall the lives and precious moments of their deceased loved ones while honoring the sanctity of the individuals they were. Judaism holds sacred the belief that children bring honor to a parent because the merit of the children reflects the value of parents therefore it is a *mitzvah* to attend a *Yizkor* service and recite the Mourner's *Kaddish*.<sup>321</sup> The observance of *Yizkor*, however, is not limited to parents alone but is observed for all Jewish dead. The *Yizkor* service is held on *Yom Kippur* and on all festivals reminding the Jewish mourner that one's deceased loved ones are to be remembered throughout the annual cycle at the most solemn time as well as the most joyous.

Evidence of *Yizkor* appears during the Middle Ages when the martyrs of the Crusades were remembered on *Yom Kippur* in Europe. In Nuremberg in 1295 a list of names was recited and the custom spread from there. In time, it became customary to hold a *Yizkor* service on festivals as well. This was met with mixed reactions because some felt that the festivals were to be observed in joy and grieving the dead was counter to this approach, however, it became a desired service and it became accepted.<sup>322</sup> The precise time that *Yizkor* became customary in the synagogue is not known. Rabbi Joseph Caro, Rabbi Moses Isserles, and Rabbi Simchah ben Samuel of Vitry all refer to the pledging of alms on *Yom Kippur*. "On *Yom Kippur* the names of the dead should be mentioned, for they too may obtain atonement". Furthermore, the plural term *kippurim* is taught by some as representing atonement for both the living and the dead. Still others instructed that mentioning the names of those who have died makes a person humble. The recitation of the names of the dead in the synagogue is believed to have begun at the

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<sup>321</sup> Lamm, 196

<sup>322</sup> Hammer, Reuven. *Entering Jewish Prayer*. New York: Schocken Books. 1994, p. 285.

time of the Crusades when so many Jews were brutally murdered. The names of the martyrs were inscribed in special books known as *Memorbuecher* (Memorial Books), *Sefer Zikaron* (Book of Remembrance), or *Sefer Zikronot Neshamot* (Memorial Book of the Souls) and were read aloud during the *omer* period and on the *Shabbat* before *Tisha Ba'av*.<sup>323</sup>

The *Yizkor* service is comprised of the reading of Biblical passages and psalms, Psalm 23 in particular, the chanting of *El Malei Rachamim*, the reading of the names of the dead, and the recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish*. It is customary to light a *yahrzeit* candle as well. Traditional thought is that children whose parents are alive should not attend a *Yizkor* service; the Reform movement holds the opposite view and encourages children to be instructed in how to remember and honor their dead loved ones irrespective of whether their own parents are alive or dead.<sup>324</sup> Schur writes that whether one leaves or stays in the sanctuary during *Yizkor*, one realizes the awesomeness of the moment for *Yizkor* is not only a service of grieving and remembrance; it is also a realization for those not saying *Yizkor* that they too will be reciting this prayer and someone will ultimately recite it for them.<sup>325</sup> The four times each year that *Yizkor* services are held allows Jews to keep their deceased very much in their lives and helps to fulfill the task of mourning of finding a new relationship with the "lost object", that is, the loved one who died.

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<sup>323</sup> Rabinowicz, 96-97. One of the earliest of these books was begun in Nuremberg in 1296 and served as a model for other communities

<sup>324</sup> Washofsky, 204

<sup>325</sup> Schur, 74

## Jewish Mourning Practices

### Keriah

*Keriah*, the rending of the garment above the heart, is based on Biblical sources.

We read in Genesis <sup>326</sup>וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שָׁמַלְתָּיו Jacob rent his clothes upon hearing of the “death” of his son Joseph. In 2 Samuel we read that David rent his clothes and so did all the men with him upon the death of Saul and Jonathan

וַיִּחַזַק דָּוִד (בְּבִגְדוֹ) [בְּבִגְדֵיהֶם וְגַם כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ] <sup>327</sup>

The Talmud teaches the position of R'Shimon ben Elazar who says:

הַעוֹמֵד עַל הַמֵּת בְּשַׁעַת יְצִיאַת נִשְׁמָה חַיִּיב לִקְרֹעַ <sup>328</sup>

*All who are present at the time of the departure of the soul is obligated to rend his clothing.*

Indeed this *mitzvah* is so important that the Talmud compares it to the obligation to rend one's garment upon witnessing the burning of a Torah scroll because the soul of a good Jew is analogous to the Torah. <sup>329</sup>

*Keriah* is a public sign of mourning and the required acceptance of the death. The *Shulchan Aruch* specifies that it should be done at the “moment of greatest suffering” <sup>330</sup> and so is usually done for Ashenazi Jews just prior to the funeral or at the cemetery although tradition stipulates that the rending of the garment be done by the mourner upon hearing of the death. The Sephardic custom is to perform *keriah* in the *shiva* house after the burial except for the Spanish-Portuguese community that follows the same practice as the Ashkenazim. The mourner is considered an *onen* until the burial and as such is not

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<sup>326</sup> Genesis 37:34

<sup>327</sup> 2 Samuel 1:11

<sup>328</sup> Moed Katan 25a

<sup>329</sup> Moed Katan 25a note 6. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999

<sup>330</sup> Sulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 396:1

obligated to pray or recite blessings but may do so once burial has been completed because he begins the next stage of mourning. It is also customary that women do not attend funerals so performing *keriah* takes place when the entire family is together again.<sup>331</sup> Spiro explains that this practice developed as a substitute to satisfy the mourner's need to punish himself.<sup>332</sup> Reference to self-mutilation that was practiced among pagans<sup>333</sup> in biblical times is made in several Biblical passages as in:

בָּנִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לֹא תַחַדְדוּ וְלֹא-תִשְׂמוּ  
קָרְחָה בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם לַמֵּת<sup>334</sup>

*You are children of the Lord your God. You shall not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads because of the dead.*

The Mishnah states “if a man made a baldness on his head or rounded the corners of his head or marred the corners of his beard or made any cuttings for the dead, he is liable to the Forty Stripes. If he made one cutting for five that were dead, or five cuttings for one that was dead, he is liable on each count.”<sup>335</sup>

The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (195:3-4) says “all garments must be rent opposite the heart...for the mourner has to expose the heart.” The tear in the clothing or ribbon as commonly used by many today, representing the requirement to “expose the heart” is symbolic of the torn heart of the mourner. The prophet Joel said “rend your hearts rather than your garments” indicating that heart itself is rent as well as the garment representing the external tear as a symbol of the broken heart within. The Jerusalem Talmud (Moed Katan 3:5) says the “exposing of the heart” is done because the mourner can no longer

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<sup>331</sup> Kolatch, 60

<sup>332</sup> Spiro, 69

<sup>333</sup> Lamm, 41

<sup>334</sup> Deuteronomy 14:1

<sup>335</sup> M. Makkot 5:3 (Danby 406)



fulfill the mitzvah of honoring his parent who died, forcing him to face the reality of the painful finality of the separation of this sacred relationship.<sup>336</sup>

When a mourner observes *keriah* for a parent the garment or ribbon is rent on the left side close to the heart and on the right side for all other relatives for Ashkenazi mourners. In most Sephardic communities, however, the *keriah* is done on the left side for all relatives representing the broken heart over the loss of anyone significant.<sup>337</sup> A small cut is made in the fabric with a knife by the rabbi or other officiant and the mourner then rips it vertically in a downward motion to at least one *tefach* (hand-breadth)<sup>338</sup> but when mourning for one's mother or father, one rends his garment until he exposes his heart:

על כל המתים כולן קורע טפח על אביו ועל אמו עד שיגלה את לבו<sup>339</sup>

The length of the *tefach* must be such that the rent is required to reach the place of the heart.<sup>340</sup> Although the Talmud specifies that a mourner must make his own tear, later authorities allowed a stranger to do so in order to minimize the suffering of the mourner (*agmat nefesh*).<sup>341</sup>

While Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis permit the use of a ribbon, many Orthodox and Sephardic rabbis hold that the custom of tearing a ribbon does not fulfill the mitzvah of *keriah* and is discouraged, recommending the rending of an

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<sup>336</sup> Lamm, 40-41

<sup>337</sup> Levy, 87

<sup>338</sup> Kolatch, 54. The *tefach* is the width of the average palm (three to four inches). The measure is based on the verse "David took hold of his clothes and rent them" (2 Samuel 1:10) as this is the length of measure a man can grab in his hand; breadth of four fingers raised (Jastrow)

<sup>339</sup> Moed Katan 22b

<sup>340</sup> Moed Katan 22b Note 14. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999

<sup>341</sup> Kolatch, 57

outer garment instead.<sup>342</sup> The garment is rent while standing assuming the posture as Job when he heard that his children had died: "Job stood up and rent his clothes" (Job 1:20) and at the time of *keriah*, the mourner recites *Dayan ha-Emet*, reaffirming his faith in God even in sorrow. Thus *keriah* allows the mourners an opportunity for psychological relief and the expression of anger and despair through an "act of destruction made sacred by Jewish tradition."<sup>343</sup>

Unlike some other mourning rites that children are not obligated to observe, because mourners are encouraged to express their grief, it is expected that children also rend their garments on the occasion of a death according to the Talmud to stir up sadness:

ומקרעין לקטן מפני עגמת נפש<sup>344</sup>

*We rend [the garment] for a minor [whose relative has died] because of grief.*

Rashi's commentary on this is that we rend the garment of a child so that others will cry when they see the child with the rent clothing but not because the child is obligated to mourn. Another interpretation is that if the minor is old enough to be trained in the observant of *mitzvot*, then there is an obligation for others to have him rend his garment.<sup>345</sup> Further to this, the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* says the garment of a child "should be slightly rent for him to manifest his grief and to mark his mourning."<sup>346</sup> The Talmudic Encyclopedia, in its discussion of *chinuch* concerning mourning practices, says that a child's garment should be rent by an adult in order to elicit the sympathy of adults and thereby increase the honor given to the deceased.<sup>347</sup> Increased honor to the deceased is achieved as the adults watch the heartbroken child and feel the pangs of loss for him.

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<sup>342</sup> Levy, 87

<sup>343</sup> Wolfson, 19

<sup>344</sup> Moed Katan 26b

<sup>345</sup> Moed Katan 26b Note 40. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999

<sup>346</sup> *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 195:11

<sup>347</sup> *Chinuch*, Section 161 Aveilut 11. *Encyclopedia Talmudit*. Jerusalem, 1980

Goldberg specifies that if a child is capable of understanding that a family member died and that people tear their clothing as a sign of grief, he is said to be of *gil chinuch* “educable age” and the garment should be rent for him. Others disagree saying he should be allowed to rent the garment himself whereas Rabbi Akiva Eiger specifies that the Tur wrote *ומקרעין* “tear for them” and not *קורעין* “they tear”.<sup>348</sup> Thus it is obligatory for an adult to perform *keriah* on behalf of children under the ages of thirteen and twelve years.<sup>349</sup>

### The Meal of Condolence

The first meal that is eaten by the mourners upon returning from the cemetery is known as the meal of condolence or *Seudat Havra'a* and is based on a verse in 2 Samuel when David grieved over the death of Abner and the people came to urge him to eat:

וַיָּבֹא כָל-הָעָם לְהַבְרִית אֶת-דָּוִד לֶחֶם<sup>350</sup>

*And all the troops came to urge David to eat bread*

The Hebrew word *לְהַבְרִית* is the *hiphil* form of the verb that means to “cause to eat” and *havra'a* is derived from it.<sup>351</sup> It is obligatory that neighbors or members of the community prepare this first meal; a mourner may not prepare his own meal of condolence but may prepare his second meal<sup>352</sup>. Jeremiah refers to this custom

לֹא-יִפְרֹסוּ לָהֶם עַל-אֲבִל לִנְחָמוֹ עַל-מָוֶת וְלֹא-יִשְׁקוּ אוֹתָם  
כֹּס תַנְחֻמִּים עַל-אֲבִיו וְעַל-אִמּוֹ<sup>353</sup>

*They shall not break bread for a mourner To comfort him for a bereavement, Nor offer one a cup of consolation For the loss of his father or mother.*

<sup>348</sup> Goldberg, 99

<sup>349</sup> Rabinowicz, 27

<sup>350</sup> 2 Samuel 3:35

<sup>351</sup> Kolatch, 194

<sup>352</sup> Spiro, 59. Shulchan Aruch 378:1-3

<sup>353</sup> Jeremiah 16:7

Concerning the obligation of providing the meal of consolation, the Talmud speaks of Rav Yehuda who said in the name of Rav:

אבל יום ראשון אסור לאכול לחם משלו<sup>354</sup>

*A mourner [on] his first day [of mourning] is forbidden to eat of his own bread*

However, if the community does not provide the meal of consolation for a mourner or if he lives where there are no other Jews, he may eat his own food and he does not have to fast because of the prohibition of eating one's own food.<sup>355</sup> It is so important that the Sages of the Middle Ages cursed those who did not partake in preparing a meal of condolence for mourners.<sup>356</sup>

The Rabbis recognized the importance of eating and were cognizant of the reality that a mourner may want to die in order to be with the deceased and thus would not want to eat or do anything life sustaining, therefore, in order to ensure the health of the mourner, the community was forced to provide the first meal and ensure that the mourners ate it.<sup>357</sup> This practice also informs the mourners that they are not alone or forgotten now that the burial of the deceased is over.<sup>358</sup> Sometimes the mourner does not want any food at all or may have difficulty eating but the community must ensure that the mourner does not collapse or have health problems as a result of not eating. There is also

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<sup>354</sup> Moed Katan 27b; Yoreh Deah 378.1

<sup>355</sup> Goldberg, 167

<sup>356</sup> Lamm, 95

<sup>357</sup> *Ateret Zekeinim* 378 citing *Rabbeinu Yeruchum*. *Ateret Zekeinim* says providing the first meal is part of the mitzvah of consolation of the bereaved. Sheivet Yehuda has a different view still and says if the mourner is left alone on such a sad day, he might drown himself in grief by overeating and overdrinking and may even become intoxicated, thereby dishonouring the deceased. If others feed him however, he would show more respect. If a mourner wishes to fast on that day, he may do so.

<sup>358</sup> Levine, 46-47 citing Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe, *Levush* (Lublin 1590), *Hilchot Aveilut* 378,1

the possibility that mourners could overindulge in eating and drinking; having others prepare the first meal helps to safeguard against this danger.<sup>359</sup>

Specific foods are to be considered in the meal of condolence. The most common food noted in the Bible is bread and there is a midrash concerning two round loaves of bread brought to women in mourning.<sup>360</sup> Bread did not symbolize the body of God as in Christianity but it was believed to possess supernatural qualities and represented the deceased person. Spiro writes that once dead, the deceased was considered to be supernatural and eating bread was therefore highly significant.<sup>361</sup> The meal must be comprised of foods that are circular and represent eternal life such as bagels, eggs, and lentils. The Talmud says that lentils are a symbol of death and mourning:

**מה עדשה זו אין לה פה אף אבל אין לו פה**<sup>362</sup>  
*Just as a lentil has no "mouth", so too a mourner has no mouth (he sits in silence)*

Furthermore, the Talmud offers yet another explanation:

**מה עדשה זו מגולגלת אבילות מגולגלת ומחזרת על באי העולם**<sup>363</sup>  
*Just as a lentil is round, so too, mourning goes around, befalling the inhabitants of the world*

Eggs represent supernatural and the dead in other cultures as well. Both are round, smooth, and have no openings, representative of life, the continuum of death, and the mourner who is in shock and cannot speak.<sup>364</sup> Levy adds that foods with no openings symbolize how the mourner must respond to the tragedy of death by not questioning

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid

<sup>360</sup> Ezekiel 24:17, Hosea 9:4; Leviticus *Rabbah* 6:3

<sup>361</sup> Spiro, 58. Unfortunately, Spiro does not provide a primary rabbinic source

<sup>362</sup> Bava Batra 16b

<sup>363</sup> Ibid

<sup>364</sup> Kolatch, 194

God's will.<sup>365</sup> Rabinowicz teaches that because the egg is completely sealed inside an intact shell it symbolizes the requirement for mourners to remain silent and refrain from casual talk.<sup>366</sup> Salt is not to be placed on the table because the table is compared to a sacrificial altar. It is stipulated in Leviticus that:

וְכָל-קָרְבָּן מִנְחָתְךָ בַּמֶּלַח תִּמְלַח וְלֹא תִשְׁכִּיחַ מֶלַח בְּרִית  
 אֱלֹהֶיךָ מֵעַל מִנְחָתְךָ עַל כָּל-קָרְבָּנְךָ תִּקְרִיב מֶלַח<sup>367</sup>

*You shall season your every offering of meal with salt; you shall not omit from your meal offering the salt of your covenant with God; with all your offerings you must offer salt.*

Rabinowicz explains that a mourner is not allowed to offer a sacrifice and salt therefore is not to be on the "altar" (table).<sup>368</sup> A form of bread is part of the meal of consolation because bread is the staple of life as written in Psalm 104:

וְלֶחֶם לִבֵּב-אָנוּשׁ יִסְעֵר<sup>369</sup>

*And bread supports the heart of man*

The Talmud mentions a "cup of mourners" and a custom of ten cups of wine drunk in the house of mourning (Semachot 14:14). In Talmudic times, wine was considered to have supernatural qualities.<sup>370</sup> Rabbi Chanan who interpreted the verse in Proverbs:

תַּנוּ-שִׂכָּר לְאוֹכֵל וַיֵּין לְמָרִי נַפֶּשׁ<sup>371</sup>

*Give strong drink to the hapless And wine to the embittered*

He taught that this verse specifically means that the purpose of wine was for comforting mourners. This is not a common practice in contemporary society although some Sephardic communities do use wine.<sup>372</sup>

<sup>365</sup> Levy, 90

<sup>366</sup> Rabinowicz, 48

<sup>367</sup> Leviticus 2:13

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 49

<sup>369</sup> Psalm 104:15

<sup>370</sup> Spiro, 58

<sup>371</sup> Proverbs 31:6

Sephardic Jews of Spanish origin and those in Turkey and Greece sit on the floor while they eat their meal of condolence that consists of eggs, bread, and olives. The custom of Ethiopian Jews is that those who lay the body of the deceased into the grave and bury it return to the house of mourning and eat peas and drink coffee.<sup>373</sup> Some other groups include raisins and wine. The hard-boiled egg is not served whole but cut up symbolizing that whatever decrees the mourner must contend with should be cut and severed.<sup>374</sup> Traditionally, a male may not serve a female nor may a female serve a male the meal unless men and women mourners who are eating the meal together, nor can a spouse prepare the meal for the other. The obligation to serve mourners the meal of condolence applies to *Erev Shabbat* and *Erev Yom Tov* but not on *Shabbat* or *Yom Tov* or *Pesach*.<sup>375</sup>

The meal of condolence serves several purposes. Preparing and serving a meal to mourners is part of the *mitzvah* for members of the community of comforting the bereaved. It ensures that the mourners have a meal prepared for them at a time when planning and cooking something to eat is the furthest idea from their minds. Moreover, in addition to meeting the physical needs of the mourners, the meal of consolation seeks to fulfill psychological and spiritual needs as they realize that they are being cared for in a holistic sense. Levy explains that being required to eat a prepared meal is an “affirmation of life”. The community takes care of their physical needs while they allow themselves to grieve and observe *shivah*. The community usually assumes responsibility for providing other meals as well. Bulka writes that this is done because members of the group often do

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<sup>372</sup> Kolatch, 193

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 195

<sup>374</sup> Levy, 91

<sup>375</sup> Felder Rabbi Aaron. *Yesodai Smoochos*. New York: CIS Publishers, p. 79

not know what to say to the mourners and “doing” is a way of helping.<sup>376</sup> The community’s presence at this time ensures them that death is not the end of life and although individuals live and die, the Jewish community itself endures forever by virtue of the beautiful *mitzvah* it provides in this time of need.<sup>377</sup>

### **Kavod Hamet – Honoring the Dead**

The notion of sanctity of life includes the recognition of respect for the body after death because it has housed the soul and the spirit of God. Furthermore, a lifeless human body is like a Torah that has been deemed unusable. Therefore Judaism has specific ways of treating the body of each individual who dies. Prior to the funeral and burial, the body may not be left alone and the eyes and mouth must be closed. Fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *shomerim*, a *shomer* (watcher) stays with the body from the time of death until the funeral and recites psalms.<sup>378</sup> This tradition was instituted initially to guard the body from rodents. Even though that need no longer exists, the tradition is maintained as a measure of overprotection of the dead and as a means to provide guardianship for the deceased. There is no gender restriction concerning who may be a *shomer*.<sup>379</sup>

The feet should face the doorway and the body not be touched or moved. Some Orthodox Jews place the body on the floor and pour water on the floor as a sign to others that a death has occurred. Some families have the custom of asking forgiveness of the deceased for any upset they may have caused during his lifetime. A candle is traditionally lit near the head of the person who died. If death takes place on Shabbat, neither a Jew nor a Gentile should move the body and funeral arrangements should be initiated only

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<sup>376</sup> Bulka, Rabbi Dr. Reuven P. *Turning Grief Into Gratitude*. Ottawa: PaperSpider, 2007, p. 121

<sup>377</sup> Levy, 90

<sup>378</sup> Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 341 and 403

<sup>379</sup> Lamm, 5; Wolfson, 84-85



after Shabbat is over. If the death occurs in a hospital, some of the traditions may not be feasible.<sup>380</sup>

According to Jewish law, the body must be buried as early as possible.

Rabinowicz writes that this practice was instituted not only because of the hot climate in which Jews originally lived but rather it was deemed a humiliation to the dead to leave them unburied. The Mishnah states “whoever leaves his dead lie overnight transgresses both a positive command (you shall surely bury him the same day) and a negative command (his body shall not remain all night upon the tree).<sup>381</sup> The Talmud states that early burial is required:

על כל המתים מדחה מטתו הרי זה משובח<sup>382</sup>  
*[When mourning] for all deceased [relatives (other than one's father or mother)], if one expedites taking [the hier] out to the burial site [he is praiseworthy]*

על אביו ועל אמו הרי זה מגונה<sup>383</sup>  
*[But when mourning] for one's father or mother, if one expedites the burial [he is condemned]*

Spiro adds two insights into early burial: he writes that delayed burial was a curse not only to the dead but also to the living who would have difficulty accepting the Divine decree that their loved one has died; additionally, it was believed that process of bodily

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<sup>380</sup> Lamm, 3-5

<sup>381</sup> Rabinowicz, 192. Mishnah Sanhedrin 46b; Deuteronomy 23

<sup>382</sup> *Moed Katan* 22a. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999. Notes 22-24. One does not mourn or eulogize as much for relatives other than parents as much therefore it is an honor for their bodies to be buried as quickly as possible. Others say it is better to bury the dead quickly as it demonstrates that the mourner has accepted the death as God's decree. Parents are to mourned and eulogized more intensely so the burial should be delayed and the mourners eulogize and mourn for them while awaiting burial

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid*

decay in the grave painful to the deceased and considered atonement for sins committed so early burial would hasten this process.<sup>384</sup>

Preparation of the body for burial is a sacred act and is performed by a group known as the *Chevrah Kaddisha*. Rashi comments on the following verse from Genesis:

וַיִּקְרָבוּ יְמֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת וַיִּקְרָא לְבָנוֹ לְיוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ  
אֲסֵנָא מֵצְאָתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ שִׁים־נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יָרְכִי וְעָשִׂיתָ  
עִמָּדִי

*The days of Israel's death drew near, and he called for his son Joseph and said to him "If I have found favor in your eyes, please, place your hand under my thigh; that you will deal kindly and truthfully with me*

Rashi comments on the words *וְאָמַת הַסֵּד*, kindness that is done with the dead is considered true kindness because one does not anticipate remuneration.<sup>385</sup> This ritual known as *tahara* is comprised of a set of structured guidelines for washing and dressing the body with prayers recited at specific intervals. The body is dressed in clean, white linen shrouds that have no knots and no pockets; this indicates that they cannot hold any wealth.<sup>386</sup> The body is wrapped in one's *tallit* (where applicable for males and females who do so) and one fringe is cut; this makes it unfit for further use.<sup>387</sup> The shrouds are the same for Jews in order to avoid embarrassment. There was once a law that the rich would be placed on a fancy bed while the poor would be placed on a plain platform. However, the poor felt ashamed at not being to provide shrouds for their dead and they would flee out of shame. This interfered with the *mitzvah* of burying their dead. Rabban Gamliel

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<sup>384</sup> Spiro, 54

<sup>385</sup> Davis, Rabbi Avrohom. *The Metsudah Chumash/Rashi*. New York: The Ellen & David Scheinfeld Edition. 2004, p. 528.

<sup>386</sup> Lamm, 11

<sup>387</sup> Isaacs, 16

changed this practice and insisted that upon his death, he be dressed in plain linen shrouds and this became the accepted practice.<sup>388</sup>

Embalming is not practiced in Judaism nor is the body preserved with chemicals or perfumes. Embalming is considered a foreign custom and moreover interferes with the decomposition of the body that must return to the earth.<sup>389</sup> This is based on words spoken by God to Adam and Eve upon expulsion from the Garden of Eden:

עַד שׁוֹבֶהָ אֶל-הָאֲדָמָה כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָקַחְתָּ כִּי-עָפָר אָתָּה  
וְאֶל-עָפָר תָּשׁוּב<sup>390</sup>

*...Until you return to the ground-for from it you were taken. For dust you are and to dust you shall return.*

The Rabbis of the Talmud were opposed to embalming because they believed it was disrespectful and represented desecration of the body **גבול המת** and was not only disrespectful but unnecessary in most cases unless transportation of the corpse was indicated. Moreover, embalming delayed quick decomposition of the body, thus delaying its return to the earth.<sup>391</sup> The Talmud Yerushalmi says a soul's atonement is completed once the body is fully decomposed.<sup>392</sup> This was motivation for the ruling for prompt decomposition and thus the prohibition of embalming which would delay that process.

There had been disagreement on preservation of the body: Akiva said to sprinkle the dead body with wine and oil whereas Simeon bar Nanon said that wine was prohibited because it causes deterioration of the body. The Sages said that neither oil nor wine may be used because they breed wood worms and dry earth must be used instead.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Moed Katan 27b. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999. Notes 7 & 8

<sup>389</sup> Kol Bo 19

<sup>390</sup> Genesis 3:19

<sup>391</sup> Kolatch, 22

<sup>392</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi Moed Katan 1:5

<sup>393</sup> Spiro, 55 Semachot 12:9

Some funeral homes provide a small bag of earth from Israel that is placed in the coffin. In this way the deceased will always be touching earth from the land of the Jewish people.<sup>394</sup> Viewing of the dead body is traditionally frowned upon in Judaism although is done by some as psychosocial research has indicated the importance it offers in “providing closure”. Judaism aims to ensure memories of the deceased in the minds and hearts of the mourners as they were in life rather than in death. Once the lid of the coffin is lowered, it remains closed.

### **Levayat Ha-Met - Escorting the Dead**

The Hebrew word *levayah* means “to accompany”, and stresses the importance of communal involvement.<sup>395</sup> While it is a *mitzvah* to attend a funeral, it is even more so to accompany the dead to the cemetery for burial. This *mitzvah* is so important the Sages permitted a man who was immersed in Torah study to suspend it in order to fulfill it:

**מבטלין תלמוד תורה להוצאת המת<sup>396</sup>**

*The study of Torah should be interrupted to carry the dead out [to burial]*

Furthermore, it is stated in the Talmud that one who sees a funeral procession and does not accompany it transgresses thereby:

**כל הרואת המת ואינו מלווה עובר<sup>397</sup>**

*Anyone who sees a dead [body being transported from place to place] and does not escort it transgresses*

Josephus wrote that it is forbidden to let anyone die unburied even a criminal, therefore the burial of a corpse is a sacred duty of every Jew.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Isaacs, 16

<sup>395</sup> Isaacs, 18

<sup>396</sup> Ketubot 17a, Yoreh Deah 361.1

<sup>397</sup> Berakhot 18a

<sup>398</sup> Rabinowicz, 37 citing Josephus, *Contra Apion* 2

The Jewish funeral is kept simple and respectful. Flowers are not utilized and the coffin is plain with no metal nails or adornments. The *hesped* (eulogy) focuses on the deceased highlighting his or her admirable characteristics, good deeds, and celebration of the person's life, however it is forbidden to praise the dead for qualities not possessed.<sup>399</sup> The eulogy brings comfort to the mourners who have the opportunity to hear about their loved one in this context. Psalms, especially Psalm 23 and Psalm 16 and reflective readings are rendered and *El Male Rachamim*, the memorial prayer is chanted or read. Sometimes family members may wish to deliver a eulogy in addition to that offered by the officiating rabbi. For some mourners this provides a great deal of comfort. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik said the *hesped* has two objectives: to make people weep and to teach people who the deceased was. He wrote: "only at the end of the *Davar*, the human career, only at the end of the life story of man or woman, do people become inquisitive. Only then do they begin to inquire about him or her. Who was he or she? Only then *Hakol Nishma* – all kinds of questions are asked."<sup>400</sup>

Spiro writes that the funeral is both necessary and beneficial; to be therapeutic it is important that the funeral not have an artificial atmosphere or deny death but must encourage the reality of death and help people to accept the pain of loss. The one fundamental purpose he emphasizes, is to encourage the mourner to face the reality of death. It is important for mourners to have seen the face of their loved one as he or she was dying; when this is not witnessed, it is easier for mourners to convert grief into

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<sup>399</sup> Shulchan Aruch 344:1 *Sheivat Yehuda* said one may slightly exaggerate a trait the deceased actually possessed but if the deceased did not possess a certain trait at all, one is forbidden to attribute it to him (Goldberg, 111)

<sup>400</sup> Levy, 65 citing Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Tradition 17, no. 2 (Spring 1978):73

disbelief.<sup>401</sup> Rabinowicz writes that it is considered unnatural for mourners not to cry over their dead and professional mourners used to be hired as the Sages emphasized the importance of lamenting at funerals.<sup>402</sup> This raises concerns about whether children should attend a funeral. As discussed in the earlier chapter, children can benefit from participating in some death rituals as long as they are well prepared and have adults who can attend to them at the time. Saying goodbye to a significant person in their life is important and healthy and should be allowed and encouraged.

The practice of carrying a loved one to the grave is a practice that dates back to Biblical times when Jacob's sons carried him into the land of Canaan and buried him there.

<sup>403</sup> וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֹתוֹ בָּנָיו אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ

*His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him*

It is considered a great honor to be a pallbearer and carry the deceased to the grave. All others in attendance, except for the rabbi, follow behind the coffin. In Talmudic times it was the custom to stop seven times on the way to the grave and make lamentations over the dead at each stop:

<sup>404</sup> אין פוחתין משבעה מעמדות ומושבות למת

*We do not perform less than seven standing and sitting tributes for a deceased person*

This is still the practice of some Jews. The body is traditionally buried with feet facing east in the presence of the community. After prayers are recited the grave is filled. It is a *mitzvah* for relatives and friends to shovel earth. While this is difficult it helps the

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<sup>401</sup> Spiro, 111

<sup>402</sup> Rabinowicz, 42; Moed Katan 8a; Shabbat 153a

<sup>403</sup> Genesis 50:13

<sup>404</sup> Bava Batra 100b Upon returning from the grave following burial the procession would stop to bewail the deceased and hear eulogies. The leader would tell the people to sit or stand and attempt to comfort the mourners. Note 11; M. Ketubot 2:10

mourners begin the difficult journey of facing reality and accepting the death. There are two customs for filling the grave: 1) the convex side of the shovel is used and 2) the shovel is not passed from person to person but planted back into the mound of earth for the next individual to use because of the belief "lest death be contagious". At the time of burial some families ask the deceased for forgiveness and some pluck grass and throw it behind them as a sign of their renewed awareness of human mortality.<sup>405</sup> Some rabbis encourage each person to shovel three spades full of earth to represent the threefold composition of man: soul, spirit, and breath.<sup>406</sup> Sephardim recite the *Hashkavah* prayer when the entire coffin is covered with earth

Two powerful prayers are recited at the graveside. The prayer *Tzidduk Ha-Din* is recited as resignation and submission to God emphasizing belief in the immortality of the soul, acknowledging that God is the heavenly judge who rewards everyone accordingly.<sup>407</sup> The Mourner's *Kaddish* speaks not of death but of praise for God reminding everyone present that even in times of sorrow, God is extolled. At the completion of the burial service, friends and relatives form two parallel lines through which the mourners pass as they begin the task of mourning and return to the house of mourning. As the mourners pass by, the comforters say:

הַמָּקוֹם יִנְחֵם אוֹתָךְ (אֲתֵבְסָ) בְּתוֹךְ שָׂאֵר אַבְלֵי צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם  
*May God console you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem*

The emphasis now shifts from honoring the deceased to comforting the mourners. The custom of washing one's hands upon leaving the cemetery is a rite of purification after

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<sup>405</sup> Wolfson, 127

<sup>406</sup> Rabinowicz, 40

<sup>407</sup> Ibid

being in contact with the deceased.<sup>408</sup> The practice is to accompany the mourners back to their home.<sup>409</sup>

Over the years, controversy existed concerning the place for children at funerals and burials and whether they should be present. Isaacs presents the view that we should not assume the burial is too traumatic for children especially since accompanying the dead to the grave is one of the highest forms of *gemilut chasidim*, loving-kindness. Children should be well prepared and he warns that theological abstractions should be avoided. Rabbi Earl Grollman writes if a child has loved, that child will grieve and any efforts to protect a child from the pain of loss and the expression of that pain can result in the inhibition of what is a healthy and necessary expression. Moreover, he adds that children's attendance at the cemetery may help them learn the importance of leave-taking. Children will see adults experiencing difficult emotions that reflect how they are feeling themselves. It is important for children to know that the community reaches out to the bereaved family to let them know they are not alone.<sup>410</sup> This is very evident at a funeral and cemetery especially for a child who loses parents in the teen years or before because "orphanhood" is associated with the feeling of being alone with no one to care for you and being disconnected from the world.<sup>411</sup> The trend is to recommend attendance but to give the child a choice; there is mixed opinion as to attendance of pre-school children.

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<sup>408</sup> Isaacs, 24

<sup>409</sup> Goldberg, 139. As taught by Rosh - Goldberg does not specify where; and Beit Yosef 378

<sup>410</sup> Isaacs, 51-54

<sup>411</sup> Bulka, 92



## **Death and the Mourner's Kaddish**

The first reference to the *Kaddish* as a "Mourner's Prayer" was in the thirteenth century by Rabbi Isaac ben Moses of Vienna and since that time both Ashkenazi and Sephardic mourners have recited it with minor textual variants.<sup>412</sup> Leon Wieseltier wrote a book on the history of this prayer when his father died and he realized that he knew little about a prayer that "used to be the least important part of the prayer service. I mean for me. It was the small print in the liturgy, a morbid recitation in the interstices of the worship. But no more. Now I inhabit interstices".<sup>413</sup> The power of saying the Mourner's Kaddish for the year brought new insight and meaning for him.

The word *kaddish* means "sanctification" and while many believe that reciting the Mourner's *Kaddish* is an act of sanctifying the deceased, this is an incorrect assumption; rather, it is a sanctification of God's name. The mourner does not pray to his dead relative but to God to bestow mercy upon God. The traditional belief is that when a son recites the Mourner's *Kaddish* for a parent he reflects the merit of that parent and by glorifying God's name that person's soul is worthy of being elevated.<sup>414</sup> The Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements recognize that the obligation of reciting Mourner's *Kaddish* is binding on daughters as well as on sons and this obligation cannot be transferred to another person. In liberal settings, the notion of paying another person or organization to say *Kaddish* is discouraged.<sup>415</sup> Moreover, in many Reform congregations, the entire community rises in union to support each other as well as to say *Kaddish* for

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<sup>412</sup> Rabinowicz, 71. The reference appeared in his book *Or Zarua*: It is our custom in the land of Canaan and it is the custom in the land of *Benei Rinus* that after the community recites *Ein Keloheinu*, the orphan recites *Kaddish*, p. 204

<sup>413</sup> Wieseltier, Leon. *Kaddish*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1998, p. 28

<sup>414</sup> Munk, 25

<sup>415</sup> Isaacs, 35

those who have no survivors to do so such as for victims of the Holocaust.<sup>416</sup> The sense of a supportive community and regular attendance at services to recite *Kaddish* has the value of Judaism becoming meaningful even to many who were previously largely non observant and people who assume this beautiful mitzvah often find themselves reconnected to Jewish life. The presence of a *minyan* of ten people is required for the recitation of *Kaddish*; it states explicitly no less than ten people are required:

**שאין נאמרין בפחות מעשרה**<sup>417</sup> This often is a catalyst for bringing a mourner into the community as he heals and recognizes the need for others to be able to recite this powerful prayer; his presence is significant for others. A mourner recites *Kaddish* for one's parents for the yearlong period and for the *shloshim* period of thirty days for all other relatives

Rabbi Bernard Lipnick writes mourners struggle with three challenges that the Mourner's *Kaddish* directly addresses: 1) Loss of faith – the *Kaddish* proclaims faith in God because of community involvement 2) What kind of God did this? – *Kaddish* answers God who created the world according to His will including the reality that everyone dies 3) What is it all for? – the *Kaddish* says May God establish His kingdom implying that God's will is perfect and complete.<sup>418</sup> Since there is no reference to death, the question remains as to why *Kaddish* is said by mourners. Donin writes that one reason that *Kaddish* is said by the mourner is that it is an expression of acceptance of Divine judgment; at the time of loss, one might reject God in anger but this is precisely the

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<sup>416</sup> Isserles, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim gloss to 56:1- some say that one should stand for any Kaddish whether a mourner or not as one stands for the Kedusha and Barchu because it is a prayer concerning sanctification

<sup>417</sup> Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 55:1

<sup>418</sup> Wolfson, 133-136

time that it is crucial to affirm one's belief in God's righteousness.<sup>419</sup> Job expressed in Job 1:21 "The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord". Similarly, Psalm 116:3-4 says "I found trouble and sorrow. But I called upon the name of the Lord...". These are both reflected in the custom of reciting *Kaddish* as opposed to the actual words of the Kaddish prayer itself which does not speak of death or loss but praise of God.

Petuchowski writes that *Kaddish* historically took on a similarity to the Prayer for the Dead, which was recited in the Catholic Mass for the Dead.<sup>420</sup> This prayer was recited with the objective of the survivors of the deceased praying for a good result in the Hereafter of their departed one. Similarly, the *Kaddish* came to take on a similar function in that the more times it would be recited, the greater the chance that the deceased would receive salvation. A superstition around the *Kaddish* is the deceased is believed to receive judgment twelve months from the day of death but until then the bereaved must help the deceased by reciting the *Kaddish* prayer and leading services if possible; if not, the deceased will be angry and may harm the living.<sup>421</sup>

#### Reference to Ezekiel

The sanctification of God's name and the coming of God's kingdom are related to the prophet Ezekiel with reference to the mention of resurrection in the Burial *Kaddish*. The words **ברכתא שירתא תשבחתא** "blessings, songs, and praises" were considered appropriate for mourning services and consolations were considered suitable for mourners. There was also a notion of *Kaddish* having a mystical power over the living

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<sup>419</sup> Donin, Hayim Halevy. *To Pray As A Jew*. New York: Basic Books. 2001, p. 222.

<sup>420</sup> Petuchowski, Jakob. J. *Prayerbook Reform in Europe. The Liturgy of European Liberal and Reform Judaism*. The World Union for Progressive Judaism, Ltd. New York, 1968, p. 324

<sup>421</sup> Spiro, 76-77; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 26:1

and the dead, and even the response “Amen” was believed to have power to influence Divine will.<sup>422</sup> As an expression of hope for the coming of the Messiah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the *Kaddish* would have provided hope to Jews during the time of the Crusades and the Black Death persecutions in Europe with its accompanying potential for healing after loss.<sup>423</sup>

#### Who Recites Mourner’s Kaddish in the Reform Movement

While it is traditional for the mourners alone to recite the Mourner’s *Kaddish* in the presence of the required *minyan*, many congregations in the Reform movement adopted the practice of having the entire congregation stand to recite it as a communal prayer. This serves several purposes: the mourners are not singled out; if they do not know how to recite the Mourner’s *Kaddish*, there are others to help them in the security of a larger group; the community stands to recite *Kaddish* for those who do not have descendents and thus have no one to recite for them; there is a sense of communal support for the mourners; and, this practice allows for the community to be sensitized to the horrors of genocide.

Minors of all ages are obligated to recite Mourner’s *Kaddish* for parents as an expression of love. The Orthodox tradition limits this practice to boys only while other movements stipulate that this obligation applies to girls as well. Kolatch writes that once a child is mature enough to understand right from wrong, he or she is required to demonstrate respect towards parents. An adult should assist a child who is not capable of reciting *Kaddish*.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Elbogen, 82; Shabbat 119b note 19

<sup>423</sup> Rosenberg, p. 50.

<sup>424</sup> Kolatch, 130

### Origins of the *Kaddish*

Petuchowski refers to the *Kaddish* as the “doxology par excellence” in its praise of God with the focus of the prayer being on the response of the congregation “May His great name be praised forever and unto all eternity”.<sup>425</sup> It is a prayer for the sanctification of God’s name and a petition that God’s kingdom be established on earth in our time so that we may be witnesses to it.<sup>426</sup> Structurally, the *Kaddish* serves to separate one rubric from the next as well as to conclude the service in its entirety. It also is recited at the conclusion of study of a tractate of Talmud and at a burial service at a grave. The language itself is Aramaic, which was the language of the people, and they could understand it, although Elbogen writes that it was composed in the dialect of the house of study.<sup>427</sup> The *Kaddish* originated in Eretz Yisrael and went with the people to Babylon. *Kaddish* means “holy” in Aramaic. Graubard writes that it was the latter Sages, as indicated by the use of Aramaic, who instituted it.<sup>428</sup>

Although *Kaddish Yatom* (the Orphan’s *Kaddish*) now known as the Mourner’s *Kaddish* is recited in memory of those who have died, and came to be known as a prayer for the dead in the Middle Ages and since then, Graubard writes that “it is a bridge to those who have gone on to another dimension.”<sup>429</sup> The origin of the *Kaddish* was not as a prayer for the dead. Since *Kaddish* is recited as a marker between rubrics in the service, it serves and functions as other than a memorial for those who are deceased. *Kaddish D’ Rabbanan* is recited at the conclusion of study and it is believed that the *Kaddish* recited

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<sup>425</sup> Graubard, Baruch. “The *Kaddish* Prayer” in Petchowski Jakob J. and Michael Brocke, eds. *The Lord’s Prayer and Jewish Liturgy*. New York; Seabury Press. 1978, p. 59

<sup>426</sup> Hammer, Reuven. *Entering Jewish Prayer*. New York: Schocken Books. 1994, p. 281.

<sup>427</sup> Elbogen, 81.

<sup>428</sup> Graubard, 63

<sup>429</sup> Ibid. 62.

at the grave of parents' marks the conclusion of study for the person who has died. It is, in a sense, a final *Kaddish* marking the conclusion of study and represents the role that one's son assumes in the place of his father. Rosenberg writes that life is, in a sense, a study session that ends only in death.<sup>430</sup> The custom of reciting *Kaddish* for a parent for a full year originated in Germany during the great persecutions in the twelfth century and was adopted by world Jewry over the centuries. Elbogen writes that none of the early law codes including the *Shulchan Aruch* mention any binding precepts in connection with it writes "what religious law left optional, religious feeling made sacred."<sup>431</sup>

We know of the legend of Rabbi Akiba who met a deceased man who must atone for his sins with a severe punishment. He could be saved from this severe punishment through good deeds performed by his son. His son was to read from the Torah and should say the blessing "Praise God who is to be praised" and thereby the community would be induced to utter God's praise. Therefore Rabbi Akiba taught the orphan how to recite the *Shema*, the *Amida*, *Birkat HaMazon*, and he placed the son before the congregation and he said "Praise God". The congregation then responded by saying "Praised be..." and thus the punishment was lifted from the dead father. Therefore, the significance of the prayer is in the call to the congregation to utter God's praises".<sup>432</sup> There is a similar legend of Rabbi Yohannan ben Zakkai who taught the son of a man undergoing a punishment to learn to take his father's place and say the *Barchu* to lead prayer.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Rosenberg, Arnold. *Jewish Liturgy as a Spiritual System*. Northvale: Jason Aronson. 1997, p. 50.

<sup>431</sup> Elbogen, 82

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Seder Eliahu Zutta 17 (Pirkei Derekh Erets 2)

### Significance of Kaddish

Assaf explains that there is a custom to end the *Shacharit* and *Maariv* services with a *Kaddish* followed by *Barchu*, and although the Sages only explicitly mention *Barchu*, it seems certain that it is meant to follow a recitation of *Kaddish*. The reason they are grouped together is that whoever recites them is benefiting the public, for when a mourner recites *Kaddish*, the community responds with “Amen! *Yehe Shmei Rabbah Mevorach!*” and when he says “*Barechu*” they respond “*Baruch Hashem...l’olam va-ed*”. It is to the merit of the deceased parent that the public responds this way, praising the name of God.<sup>434</sup> In this way, the dead obtain forgiveness by means of good deeds achieved by their living descendants. The Talmud says in Sanhedrin 104a “A parent cannot endow his child”. If a child does not lead a good life, a parent cannot cause the merit of his own good deeds shall accrue to the credit of the child. However, “a child can endow his parent”. When a child is affected by his parent’s influence, when he is conscious of their teachings and experiences and is propelled as a result to lead a better life, his personal behavior casts new significance and merit to the life of his parent. As the Zohar says “if the son walks in the crooked path, of a surety he brings dishonor and shame on his father. However, if he walks in the straight path and his deeds are upright, then he confers honor on him both in this world among men and in the next world with God” (Zohar III, 115b). This is the reason that the child is given the privilege of reciting the *Kaddish* for the parent; it reflects the best influence of the parent as the child causes the sanctification of God’s name in public and bring honor to the parent.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> Assaf, Harav David. *Kaddish. Its Origins, Meanings, and Laws*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1998, p. 127

<sup>435</sup> Luban, p. 31.

In Mishnah Yoma 6:2 Day of Atonement in Temple, the High Priest pronounced the name of God and those present answered "Praised by the name of the majesty of his kingdom for all eternity". This was the recognition of God's rule over the world. After the destruction of the Temple, the prayer continued to be important as a doxology. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (ca 250) said "Whoever says the response 'Amen', his great name be praised...' can be certain that the punitive judgment against him will be annulled, emphasizing the importance of the response and that it was the essential section of the doxology.<sup>436</sup>

### **The Tombstone**

Erecting a monument or *matzevah* to the dead is an ancient custom that dates back to Biblical times. Jacob set up a monument for Rachel:

יָצַב יַעֲקֹב מַצֵּבָה עַל-קִבְרֹתֶיהָ הִוא מַצֵּבַת קִבְרֹתֶיהָ  
עַד-הַיּוֹם<sup>437</sup>

*Over her grave Jacob set up a pillar; it is the pillar at Rachel's grave to this day.*

The Sages used the word *nefesh* to refer to the monument because the *nefesh* (soul) hovers over the place where the body is buried even after the *neshamah* departs from it, therefore the family is obligated to give it a place to dwell and thus mark the grave and build a structure over it. The mitzvah of erecting the monument is included in the *mitzvah* of *kavod ha-met*, honoring the dead.<sup>438</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> Graubard., pp. 63-64.

<sup>437</sup> Genesis 35:20

<sup>438</sup> Goldberg, 382. Tur 348; Beit Yosef cites Teshuvos HaRosh(13) "...the stone is one of the needs of the burial"; Chazon LaMo'ed (25:1); The *Zohar* outlines the three components of the soul: the *nefesh* that constantly hovers over the grave except on Shabbat and Yom Tov, when it goes up to take pleasure in the paradise of the souls; the *ru'ah* that focuses on the person's knowledge of Torah and God's service while alive; and the *neshamah* that goes up to enjoy the Divine radiance and to progress to ever greater achievements



The monument serves several functions including serving as a marker for the final resting place of the deceased, a symbol of respect and lasting remembrance, a proper designation so that others may visit it, a symbol of respect, honor, and loving remembrance of the person who died.<sup>439</sup> Tombstones are not a legal requirement in Judaism but became a common custom so:

טעם המצבה, שלא ישכח מן הלב, והמת אינו נשכח<sup>440</sup>  
*The dead should not be forgotten*

This is based on the Jewish notion that the dead are to be remembered. While there is no designated time at which the monument must be erected, many choose to wait a period of one year. Some rabbinic authorities, however, indicate that the tombstone should be erected as soon as possible because waiting a full year is too long and painful emotions are evoked again.<sup>441</sup> In Israel the custom is to erect a monument after the *shloshim* period is over. There is usually an unveiling service that takes place at the cemetery with family and friends present to consecrate the stone and memorialize the deceased as psalms, prayers, and readings are recited.

The monument is traditionally simple and dignified. It is made of stone and assumes the concept of stone from the Hebrew word “*tzur*” that is one of the words for God. Just as natural stone lasts forever, so too is God always present in our lives and erecting a stone monument dedicated to a loved one represents the memory of that person as lasting forever.<sup>442</sup> Ashkenazim place the monument upright while Sephardim lay them horizontally on the graves. The monument typically has inscriptions of the deceased's name in English and lineage in Hebrew, date of birth and date of death, relationship to

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<sup>439</sup> Lamm, 188

<sup>440</sup> Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, 199:17

<sup>441</sup> Wolfson, 253

<sup>442</sup> Levy, 143

family, and perhaps a short epitaph and design of a Jewish symbol. Pictures of the deceased are not allowed to be placed on the tombstone. Ashkenazim traditionally inscribe the Hebrew name of the deceased and that of the deceased's father while Sephardim inscribe the Hebrew name of the mother rather than that of the father.<sup>443</sup> Ashkenazi tombstones typically have the letters for a male

פה נטמן, פ"נ

to mean "here lies hidden" and for a female

פה טמונה, פ"ט

to mean "here lies hidden" while Sephardic tombstones use the letters

מ"ק מצבת קבורת

to mean "the tombstone of the grave" for both sexes.

In addition to these markings, the letters

ת"נ"צ"ב"ה

also are engraved to indicate *tehe minshnato tzerurah bitzror hachayyim*. "May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life".<sup>444</sup> This is in connection to the verse:

וַיָּקָם אָדָם לְרֹדֶפְךָ וּלְבַקֵּשׁ אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ וַהֲיִתָּה נֶפֶשׁ אֲדֹנָי  
צְרוּרָה בְּצִרְוֹר הַחַיִּים אֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְאֵת נַפְשׁ אִיבֶיךָ  
יִקְלַעְנָה בְּחוּךְ כֶּף הַקַּלָּע׃<sup>445</sup>

*And if anyone sets out to pursue you and seek your life, the life of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life in the care of the LORD; but He will fling away the lives of your enemies as from the hollow of a sling.*

Some cemeteries have rulings as to whether the marker must be a headstone or a footstone. Rabbi Meir of Zhabaraz, in the early twentieth century, disapproved of footstones because headstones were traditional but he also taught that the head houses the

<sup>443</sup> Kolatch, 221

<sup>444</sup> Rabinowicz, 106.

<sup>445</sup> I Samuel 25:29

brain, which is the most important organ of the body and thus the tombstone, should be placed near the head rather than near the feet.<sup>446</sup>

Judaism discourages excessive visits to the grave to prevent unnatural attachment to the grave.<sup>447</sup> Suggested times for visits include at the conclusion of *shloshim*, at the time of *yahrzeit*, and the High Holidays. It is customary to place a small stone on the monument to show that someone has visited and the deceased is still remembered and loved. Having a picture of the grave if it is in another city may bring comfort to a relative who is unable to visit the grave at suggested times.<sup>448</sup>

### **The Prohibition Against Excessive Grief**

The phased Jewish structure for mourning guides the bereaved along their journey of mourning. By means of rituals, laws, community, and prayers, mourners are given permission to grieve in a prescribed period of time that is marked by phases, providing comfort and support throughout the entire time. Mourning is mandated by Jewish tradition not only in terms of minimal amount of grief but also by a prohibition of excessive grief. The Talmud tells the story of a woman in Rav Huna's neighborhood who had seven sons. One of her sons died and she wept excessively for him. Rav Huna told her not to weep this way but she paid no attention to him. He sent her a message saying "if you do not listen to my advice, you may have to make shrouds for another [son]". Another son died and eventually they all died. In the end he said:

תימוש זודתא לנפשיך<sup>449</sup>

*You are preparing shrouds for yourself*

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<sup>446</sup> Kolatch, 221-223

<sup>447</sup> Wolfson, 255

<sup>448</sup> Ibid

<sup>449</sup> Moed Katan 27b

And she died. The *Shulkhan Aruch* states that it is forbidden to mourn excessively over the death of a loved one because *Halachah* outlines appropriate mourning: “the first three days for weeping, seven days for eulogizing, thirty days for refraining from haircutting and laundering. One should not grieve more than this.”<sup>450</sup> Levy writes that Jewish law clearly marks the beginning and end of mourning practices because the bereaved can easily get caught in a web of endless grief. This does not undermine the intensity of the emotional pain of loss; on the contrary the framework of mourning practices ensures that the bereaved do not mourn too little or too long.<sup>451</sup>

The Torah states:

בָּנִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לֹא תַחֲגֹדְדוּ וְלֹא-תִשְׂמוּ  
קִרְחָה בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם לְמַת<sup>452</sup>

*You are children of the Lord your God. You shall not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads because of the dead.*

Rabbi Moshe Rosenstein explains the importance of this obligation: “Mourning takes hold of one’s heart, but not one’s mind, while sadness takes hold of the mind. Mourning leads to thinking while sadness stops one’s thoughts. Mourning stems from the light in one’s soul while sadness comes from the darkness of the soul. Mourning arouses one to life while sadness brings the opposite. The Torah obligates mourning when it is appropriate while it forbids sadness and commands we serve the Almighty with joy.”<sup>453</sup>

Levine writes that excessive sadness and grief call into question the just ways of the Almighty<sup>454</sup> and Wolfson stresses that Judaism focuses on the living not the dead.<sup>455</sup>

Spiro explains it in a psychoanalytical framework in that excessive grief could arise

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<sup>450</sup> Shulchan Aruch 394:1

<sup>451</sup> Levy, 137

<sup>452</sup> Deuteronomy 14:1

<sup>453</sup> Levine, 110

<sup>454</sup> Levine, 110

<sup>455</sup> Wolfson, 268

because the bereaved has experienced an unsatisfactory grief response to someone else who died previously. If he had anticipated anticipatory or delayed grief he may not have been capable of expressing his genuine feelings completely. Now, he is experiencing “doubled” grief with a further distorted expression of his emotions surrounding the death and extremely difficult mourning.<sup>456</sup> Thus it is critical that the mourner allows normal grief experiences within the Jewish framework and also gives himself permission to “let go” as *halachah* dictates.

### **Immortality in Judaism**

Judaism focuses on life and does not have systematized beliefs concerning immortality and life after death with life being more desirable than death or life after death.<sup>457</sup> The prayers associated with death such as *Tzidduk Ha-Din* and the Mourner’s *Kaddish* affirm life while recognizing that death has occurred. The Bible talks about *Sheol* but it is not clear if it is a place of punishment like hell. Some believed the Valley of *Gehinnom* was the earthly embodiment of punishment for the dead because heathens sacrificed children there.<sup>458</sup> There was actually little belief in life after death in Biblical times and this concept became more prominent during Rabbinic times. Resurrection of the dead and immortality of the soul were two ideas that were separate at first but then were combined so that one believed that when a person dies, that person’s soul lives on in Heaven until the time of resurrection when body and soul would be united. This is accepted by the Orthodox but rejected by those of the Reform movement.<sup>459</sup> The Talmud

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<sup>456</sup> Spiro, 45

<sup>457</sup> Spiro, 110

<sup>458</sup> Wolfson, 321

<sup>459</sup> Levine, 55-56

alludes to the notion that the deceased has moved on from an earthly abode to a heavenly one<sup>460</sup>;

בְּכוֹ לְאֲבֵלִים וְלֹא לְאֲבִידָה שֶׁהִיא לְמִנוּחָה וְאֵנוּ לְאֲנָחָה<sup>461</sup>

*Cry for the mourners and not the lost object for it (the soul) is destined for peace in the Garden of Eden whereas we are in sorrow*

Rabbinic Judaism included the belief of the resurrection of body and soul and on the Day of Judgment God would decide who earns a portion in *Ha-Olam Ha-bah* (the World to Come) and the Messiah would be a descendent of David who would bring Messianic times. Today however, immortality has been expanded to include living beyond one's physical existence and that it is the soul that remains immortal.<sup>462</sup> The concept of reincarnation is taught by some mystics as "*gilgul neshamot*" the turning of souls in which the soul leaves the body at the time of death and prepares to assumes its next assignment. In this way, it can return many times over. The ways in which the soul conducts itself in each reincarnation determines its descent or ascent in its next visit.<sup>463</sup> In his rationalist view on this subject, Maimonides said that God is pure intelligence and one's godlike qualities are in our intellects. Therefore, we achieve immortality according to our level of intelligence and knowledge of eternal truth.<sup>464</sup> Some believe that souls are required to come back to complete an unfilled mission from a previous lifetime or to rectify a sin, then they will have a place in the World to Come. This, writes Rabinowicz, explains the tragic deaths of those people who die young.<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Levine, 111

<sup>461</sup> Moed Katan 25b

<sup>462</sup> Wolfson, 321

<sup>463</sup> Isaacs, 58

<sup>464</sup> Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed, *Moreh Nevukhim* III:17

<sup>465</sup> Rabinowicz, 125

Most non-Orthodox Jews say that in accordance with the teachings of Maimonides, it is the soul/spirit /or intellects that survives the body's decay. Aligned with this theory are other ideas in which we live on through our descendents, our deeds, and our common destiny with the Jewish people such that we are each a partner with God.<sup>466</sup> Isaacs has proposed the following four modern thoughts of ways in which immortality is actualized: 1) By influence through family – we live on by the deeds and achievements of our descendents as our ancestors have lived on through us. This naturalistic view implies that eternal life occurs biologically through the children we bring into the world. 2) Immortality through influence – others choose to model themselves after us and use us as a role model when we have been able to exert a significant influence on them; this is a form of immortality. 3) Our own creative works can be significant throughout our lives and beyond. The Talmud says, “whoever has a law mentioned in his name in this world, his lips whisper in the grave” (Sanhedrin 90a). *Genesis Rabbah* says “we need not erect monuments to the righteous. Their deeds are their monuments”.<sup>467</sup> 4) Influence through memory – memory is important in Judaism and people live on in the memory of those who knew and loved them. Remembering people gives them a form of eternity.<sup>468</sup> These can provide great comfort to the bereaved that have a need to fulfill the tasks of mourning one of which is learning to live in this world without their dead loved one and another is reconstructing the deceased so that they have a new kind of relationship.

Munk offers a lovely and comforting view concerning how the souls of our loved ones participate in our *simchas*, our joyous celebrations, with us. He says that when we

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<sup>466</sup> Wolfson, 321

<sup>467</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 32:10

<sup>468</sup> Isaacs, 57-58

celebrate a joyous occasion, not only God but our dead parents celebrate with us. God removes our parents from *Gan Eden* and escorts them to our *simcha* allowing them to join in a wonderful occasion that involves God, His Divine Presence, and their children. But when a Jew has a misfortune, only God is there; God does not inform this person's parents lest they suffer as well.<sup>469</sup>

### **The Comfort of Memory**

Jewish tradition emphasizes great importance on memory of the deceased. This is very much in keeping with the notion that the dead do not leave this world entirely but move to another abode. Jewish rituals enabling memory of the deceased allow the bereaved to create new relationships with the "lost object". The Rabbis knew that it was important for the bereaved to speak about their loved ones who died and thus encouraged the sharing of emotions during the period of *shivah*. The presence of the community creates a forum in which memories and significant moments with the deceased can be shared thereby offering comfort to the mourners. Several customs enhance the possibility of memory for mourners such as the eulogy that allows for life review and memorable moments of the person who died; photo albums that may be taken out at the house of mourning for others to share their personal memories of the deceased with the mourners; the telling of stories from various life stages of the deceased; the Ashkenazi custom of naming children for deceased relatives; the giving of *tzedakah* in memory of the deceased; conducting Torah study in the deceased's honor; and the "religious" times of the year for *Yahrzeit* and *Yiskor* in which memorial candles are lit and special communal services and prayers are held that encourage memory of the deceased in a very personal way. Wolfson writes that distributing possessions of the deceased person to relatives can

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<sup>469</sup> Munk, 71



offer great comfort as they receive something that holds meaning and memory of that individual with whom they shared special times: memories elicited from these items have the potential of triggering powerful emotions that are needed.<sup>470</sup>

Because the bereaved often feel isolated, it is important that they have the opportunity to experience a sense of belonging. The community has a great role to play in this regard. Wolfson writes that we all have this need and the mourner struggles between living in the world without his loved one and finding that eventually he can live once again despite the void. He reminds us of the teaching that each person should possess a paper in each pocket. One papers reads “I am nothing but dust and to dust shall I return” and the other reads “For my sake was the world created”.<sup>471</sup> It is important however for the community to bear in mind that each person heals in his or her own way and that even with the beautiful rituals Judaism offers for remembrance, pain is still very much a part of remembering a loved one.

### **Nichum Avelim - The Mitzvah of Comforting the Bereaved**

The *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved is seen early in the Torah. When Jacob is informed that Joseph was killed by a beast, he rents his clothes and:

וַיִּקְמוּ כָּל-בָּנָיו וְכָל-בָּנֹתָיו לְנַחֵם

*All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him*

Later when Jacob dies, Joseph is comforted as he mourns the loss of his father:

וַיַּעַל יוֹסֵף לִקְבֹּר אֶת-אָבִיו וַיַּעַל אֹהוּ כָּל-עַבְדֵי פַרְעֹה  
זִקְנֵי בֵיחוֹ וְכָל זִקְנֵי אֶרֶץ-מִצְרָיִם:

*So Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the officials of Pharaoh, the senior members of his court, and all of Egypt's dignitaries,*

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<sup>470</sup> Wolfson, 226

<sup>471</sup> Wolfson, 321-322

<sup>472</sup> Genesis 37:35

וְכָל בֵּית יוֹסֵף וְאָחָיו וּבֵית אָבִיו רַק טָפָם וְצֹאֲנָם וּבְקָרָם  
עֲזָבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן:

*together with all of Joseph's household, his brothers, and his father's household; only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the region of Goshen.*

וַיַּעַל עִמּוֹ גַּם-רֶכֶב גַּם-פָּרָשִׁים וַיְהִי הַמִּחְנֶה כְּבֹד מְאֹד:<sup>473</sup>

*Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him; it was a very large troop.*

After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Jacob.

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יִצְחָק בְּנֵוֹ:<sup>474</sup>

*After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac.*

Just as God comforted Isaac while he was bereaved, so too must we comfort those who are grieving. As God comforts the bereaved, we too must comfort the bereaved.<sup>475</sup>

The *mitzvah* of *nichum avelim* is incumbent upon each and every person. The Rabbis taught that based on biblical precepts, we are obligated to emulate God's ways. When Jerusalem was destroyed Isaiah brought God's message of comfort to the Jewish people:

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:<sup>476</sup>

*Comfort, oh comfort My people, Says your God.*

*Nichum avelim* is not only a *mitzvah* in and of itself but is also included in the general *mitzvah* of performing *chesed*.<sup>477</sup> This is among those *mitzvot* that have no limit and is associated with the promise of "rewards" in the World to Come.<sup>478</sup> It is so important that it takes precedence over visiting the sick and rejoicing with the bride and groom.

<sup>473</sup> Genesis 50:7-9

<sup>474</sup> Genesis 25:11

<sup>475</sup> Pliskin, Zelig. *Love Your Neighbor. ואהבת לרעך כמוך*. New York: Aish HaTorah Publications. 2004, p.

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<sup>476</sup> Isaiah 40:1

<sup>477</sup> Levine, 1-2

<sup>478</sup> Ibid, 11

Rambam wrote that comforting mourners take precedence over visiting the sick because it is an expression of kindness to both the living and the dead<sup>479</sup>.

### **שנחם אבלים גמילות חסד עם החיים ועם המתים**

The Talmud states explicitly that we are commanded to comfort mourners: As God clothed Adam and Eve, you should clothe the naked; as God visited the sick by appearing to Abraham in the plains of Mamre, you too should visit the sick; as God comforted the mourners so too you should comfort mourners,

**אף אתה נחם אבלים<sup>480</sup>**

*You too should comfort mourners*

and as God buried the dead,

**אף אתה קבר מתים<sup>481</sup>**

*you too should bury the dead.*

The Torah teaches:

**אָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כְּמוֹךָ<sup>482</sup>**

*Love your fellow as yourself*

Moreover, those who are bereaved are temporarily in shock and are unable to function as easily as before; they need the guidance and support of a caring community to help them and teach them the ways of mourning and subsequent reintegration back into the group:

**וְהִזְקַתָּ אֹתָם אֶת־הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת־הַתּוֹרָה וְהוֹדַעְתָּ לָהֶם  
אֶת־הַדֶּרֶךְ יֵלְכוּ בָּהּ וְאֶת־הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן<sup>483</sup>**

*Enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow.*

<sup>479</sup> Maimonides. *Mishneh Torah. Hilchot Evel* 14:7

<sup>480</sup> Sotah 14a

<sup>481</sup> Ibid

<sup>482</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>483</sup> Exodus 18:20; Bava Metzia 30b

Finally, “gladdening the heart” of the depressed is another function of consoling the bereaved. This helps to ensure them that they are not alone.<sup>484</sup>

There are several means by which we comfort the mourner. Spiro specifies that we do so by being there in body and spirit; by enabling the mourner to grieve and to pray; by surrounding the mourner with community: by easing his way to a new “life” after the loss of a significant loved one; and by remembering the deceased and not forgetting the mourner.<sup>485</sup> He further elucidates the notion of “being there” as accompanying the bereaved to the cemetery and assisting with the burial of their dead; by being with the mourners throughout the *shivah* period; by welcoming them back into the community as well as to synagogue on *Shabbat* during the *shivah* period; by being at their side at the *shloshim* service; by joining them for the unveiling of the deceased; and by gathering with them four times a year for *Yiskor*. Thus the obligation of comforting the bereaved extends long after the *shivah* period is over.<sup>486</sup>

The entire Jewish community must reach out to the bereaved and offer him the consolation that he is not alone. In this way, death is not allowed to consume the mourners; rather, Judaism transforms bereavement into a vehicle that offers the possibility of strengthened family ties for the mourners and revitalizes community solidarity. This further reinforces and promotes the notion of the sanctity of life rather than focusing on death. Thus life is affirmed as the community eases the mourners back into daily life.<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Levine, 9

<sup>485</sup> Wolfson, xxviii

<sup>486</sup> Ibid, 203

<sup>487</sup> Isaacs, 4

The *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved begins at the cemetery as relatives and friends create two parallel rows through which the mourners walk as they leave the grave of their newly buried loved one. It is at this time that the focus shifts from accompanying the deceased to comforting the mourner and words of condolence are expressed to the mourners as they walk past. The words:

**המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים**

"May God console you with all who mourn in Zion and Jerusalem" are spoken to mourners in Ashkenzi practice after the burial as well as at a visit to the house of mourning. Sephardim use the expression **מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם תִּנּוּכְמוּ**, "May heaven comfort you". Comforting the mourners continues as friends and relatives escort them to the house of mourning. Condolence visits make the comforter praiseworthy but when it becomes burdensome to the mourner the visitor must leave.<sup>488</sup>

Comforting the mourner requires awareness of the needs of the mourner as well as *halachah* of this mitzvah. Bulka says the mourner needs to be "un-lousied".<sup>489</sup> Comforters offer a great deal of comfort in their presence alone; words are not always necessary. In fact, the *Shulchan Aruch* stipulates "comforters are not permitted to say anything until the mourner has first commenced to speak".<sup>490</sup> Furthermore, mourners should not greet anyone for three days nor respond to another person's greeting but inform him or her he is a mourner; after three days the mourner should not offer a

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<sup>488</sup> Levine, 11 Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 376:1

<sup>489</sup> Bulka, 129

<sup>490</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 207

greeting but can respond.<sup>491</sup> This allows the mourner to focus on his grief rather than social etiquette at this time.<sup>492</sup> The Talmud teaches **אבל אסור בשאילת שלום**<sup>493</sup>

because God said to Ezekiel **האנק דם**<sup>494</sup> - *grieve and be silent*. When Job's close friends came to visit him after losing his ten children, they sat in silence with him:

**וְאִין־דִּבֶּר אֵלָיו דְּבָר כִּי רָאוּ כִּי־גָדֹל הַפָּאָב מְאֹד:**<sup>495</sup>  
*None spoke a word to him for they saw how very great was his suffering.*

*It is upon this verse that the Talmud says:*

**אין מנחמין רשאין לומר דבר עד שתח אבל**<sup>496</sup>  
*Those who [come to] console [a mourner] are not allowed to speak until the mourner begins*

It is important that comforters be aware of the importance of not taking the mourner's grief away. The mourner must be allowed to feel the pain of loss and do the much-needed grief-work in order to be healed ultimately. The Sages and codifiers were well aware of this need. In more contemporary teachings, we learn that we must be careful to remember that things for the mourner are not "all right"; mourning is difficult work and we must recognize how difficult it is actually is. We must validate the mourner's experience of grief and allow him to take the lead.<sup>497</sup> To this end, we must be good listeners who pay attention, talk about the deceased, be nonjudgmental, and not offer suggestions.<sup>498</sup> It is extremely important that the comforter not compare stories of

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid, 210:6

<sup>492</sup> Wolfson, 210

<sup>493</sup> Moed Katan 15

<sup>494</sup> Ezekiel 24:17

<sup>495</sup> Job 2:13

<sup>496</sup> Moed Katan 28b

<sup>497</sup> Ibid, 207

<sup>498</sup> Ibid, 214

grief as a means to allay the anxieties and despair of the bereaved. This is well

exemplified in the story of Rabbi Yochanan:

*When the son of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai died, Rabbi Yochanan's disciples came to console him. His disciple Rabbi Eliezer entered and said, "The first man had a son who died, and he was consoled. You also should accept consolation."*

*"Not only do I have my personal suffering, but now you remind me of the first man's suffering", said Rabbi Yochanan.*

*His disciple Rabbi Yehoshua entered and said, "Job had sons and daughters and they all died, and he was consoled."*

*"Not only do I have my personal suffering, but now you remind me of Job's suffering", said Rabbi Yochanan*

*His disciple Rabbi Yosi entered and said, "Aaron had two great sons and they both died on the same day, and he was consoled. You also should accept consolation."*

*"Not only do I have my personal suffering, but now you remind me of Aaron's suffering", said Rabbi Yochanan.*

*His disciple Rabbi Shimon entered and said, "David, the king, had a son who died and he was consoled, you also should accept consolation."*

*"Not only do I have my personal suffering, but now you remind me of David's suffering", said Rabbi Yochanan.*

*Rabbi Elazar ben Arach entered and said, "I will give an analogy to your situation. The king entrusted a precious object with one of his subjects. The subject was in a state of constant worry: 'When will I be able to return the object undamaged and unsoiled to the king?' My teacher, you are in a similar situation. You had a son who was a Torah scholar and left this world without sin. Be consoled that you have returned in a perfect state that which the King entrusted you". "Elazar, my son, you have properly comforted me," שְׁבִי-אָדָם מִנְחָמִין כְּדָרְךָ נִחְמַתִּי said Rabbi Yochanan.<sup>499</sup>*

The words of these "comforters" hardly offered Rabbi Yochanan what he needed as a mourner. It is important to acknowledge the loss of the mourner and not divert his attention to other peoples' tragedies. This only covers over the reality and pain of their own loss at a time when they both want and need to address it. Small talk is not indicated at this time.

People are often uncomfortable when going to make a condolence call. They may wonder what to say or are confronted with anxiety about their own mortality; perhaps it brings up painful reminders of their own losses or they worry about what they could do to

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<sup>499</sup> Avot de Rabbi Natan, Chapter 14

truly comfort the mourner. People often worry that they have to “do” something and are less comfortable with just “being there” with the mourner. Verbal messages and body language however say a great deal to the bereaved. Judaism holds that one’s presence alone allows a mourner to grieve and brings honor to the deceased.<sup>500</sup> According to Lamm, the purpose of the condolence call is to relieve the mourner of the extreme loneliness that grief brings.<sup>501</sup> When *shivah* is cancelled due to a festival that occurs during that week, some feel that the cancellation of *shivah* deprives them of the support of the community in a formal sense. The *Shulchan Aruch* says even when *shivah* is cancelled, the obligation to comfort the mourner still holds; even during the festival, when one is technically obligated to “rejoice”, the *mitzvah* of *nichum avelim* still applies.<sup>502</sup> In fact, this may even be a more important time to be present because of the sense of “disenfranchisement”, a sense of being deprived on the part of the mourner of the need to observe *shivah* even though the *halachah* is explicit about its cancellation during a festival. Spiro says this emphasizes the notion that *nichum avelim* is really an expression of group solidarity.<sup>503</sup>

### The Condolence Visit

Each person of age is obligated to fulfill the *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved as much as possible. Parents should train their children in *chinuch* for this *mitzvah* and children should accompany them when they go to comfort mourners. According to *Kohellet*:

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<sup>500</sup> Wolfson, 203

<sup>501</sup> Lamm, 132

<sup>502</sup> Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 399:1

<sup>503</sup> Spiro, 131



טוֹב לָלֶכֶת אֶל-בֵּית-אֵבֶל מִלָּכֶת אֶל-בֵּית מִשְׁתֶּה בְּאִשֹּׁר  
הוּא סוּף כָּל-הָאָדָם וְהָחַי יִתֵּן אֶל-לִבּוֹ<sup>504</sup>

*It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart.*

A visit may not always be possible; in this case calling or writing can fulfill the *mitzvah* as well. Mourners take great comfort in talking about their loved one who died, looking at photographs, and hearing memories that others have of the deceased. Levine writes that *nichum avelim* fulfills the precept of *hashavat aveidah* – restoring a lost object to its rightful owner. This is based on the verses in Deuteronomy concerning the law to return one's lost animal that has gone astray:

לֹא-תִרְאֶה אֶת-שׁוֹר אֲחִיךָ אוֹ אֶת-שֵׂיוֹ נִדְחִים וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ  
מֵהֶם הָשִׁב תְּשִׁיבֵם לְאֲחִיךָ:

*If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow.*

וְאִם-לֹא קָרֹב אֲחִיךָ אֵלֶיךָ וְלֹא יָדַעְתָּ וְאִסְפָּתוֹ אֶל-תּוֹךְ  
בֵּיתְךָ וְהָיָה עִמָּךְ עַד דִּרְשׁ אֲחִיךָ אֹתוֹ וְהִשְׁבֹּתוֹ לוֹ:<sup>505</sup>

*If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow claims it; then you shall give it back to him.*

Levine writes that the Talmud teaches that if one is required to return a lost monetary object, how much more so is one required to restore health and life to its rightful owner.<sup>506</sup> This is based on the word וְהִשְׁבֹּתוֹ in the verse cited above from Deuteronomy. As explained in Bava Kamma 81b this word implies “his person” by the

<sup>504</sup> Kohellet 7:2

<sup>505</sup> Deuteronomy 22:1-2

<sup>506</sup> Levine, 10

suffix י; thus, this word means that one is required to return a “lost” person to his place.<sup>507</sup> Sanhedrin 73a offers a somewhat different interpretation explaining the words וְהִשְׁבֵּתוּ לוֹ to mean that if a person’s life is in danger, you shall “return himself to him”, that is, rescue him.<sup>508</sup> Levine explains that a mourner’s physical, emotional, and spiritual health are no longer in balance and his faith in God may be shaken; a condolence visit helps to restore his health and thus “himself to him”.<sup>509</sup> Another reason to visit a house of mourning is that the soul is believed to hover in the home during the first seven days and it receives comfort when it is visited during *shivah*.<sup>510</sup>

Although tradition teaches that a comforter should not greet the mourner, offering one’s hand is a gesture of comfort and sympathy. There are no *halachic* restrictions concerning times for condolence calls although some teach that visits should not be paid during the first three days because grief is most intense during this time and mourners wish to be alone. Furthermore, they are not allowed to extend greetings for the first three days, nonetheless, there is no *halachic* ruling that forbids a visit during this period.<sup>511</sup> Because *shivah* is exhausting, visitors must leave if the mourners are feeling uncomfortable. The *Shulchan Aruch* instructs that since a mourner traditionally does not exchange greetings, he nods his head in a manner that indicates to the visitors they are dismissed and once this nonverbal exchange takes place, the visitors are no longer

<sup>507</sup> Bava Kamma 81b note 38

<sup>508</sup> Sanhedrin 73a, note 18. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999

<sup>509</sup> Levine, 10

<sup>510</sup> Shabbat 152a, Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 376:3

<sup>511</sup> Ibid, 39

allowed to sit with him.<sup>512</sup> For those mourners who do not observe this tradition, visitors must be astute enough to perceive the nonverbal message.<sup>513</sup>

In addition to offering comfort and support to the mourners, visiting a *shivah* house provides meaningful lessons to the comforters as well such as: the realization that we will not live forever and that we have the opportunity to make our lives meaningful while we are alive. Other reflections offered by Levine are: *shivah* calls make us appreciate life itself and the lives of those precious to us; as people of God, we are never alone – we live in an enduring and everlasting community both in life and in death so we must fulfill our obligations to each other; we can recognize the significance and very human experience that giving of ourselves to the bereaved as we strengthen our bonds with others by sharing not only in their joys but in their sorrows as well; and we recognize that God is the author of life and of death.<sup>514</sup>

*Shivah* visits often involve tears as both the mourners and the visitors may cry. Weeping is not only an expected behavior but one that is recommended as well. It is appropriate for visitors to cry with the mourners. This conveys to the mourners that the visitor shares the pain of his or her loss and values both the life of the person who died and the feelings of the survivor who is deeply saddened.<sup>515</sup> Crying is not a sign of immaturity nor is not crying an indication of maturity. The loss of a loved one is painful and the mourner should not be encouraged to minimize his loss.<sup>516</sup> The Talmud says:

שערי דמעה לא ננעלו<sup>517</sup>

*The gates in Heaven [for tears] are never locked*

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<sup>512</sup> Shulchan Aruch 376:1

<sup>513</sup> Aruch HaShulchan, Yoreh Deah 376:3 citing Moed Katan 27b

<sup>514</sup> Levine, 21-22

<sup>515</sup> Ibid, 134

<sup>516</sup> Ibid, 122

<sup>517</sup> Berachot 32b

Just as it is a *mitzvah* to offer consolation, so too, says Munk is it a *mitzvah* to accept consolation.<sup>518</sup> Private *shivah* is thus not encouraged because of the obligation of the community to be with the mourner at the time of loss. Furthermore, the community must also recognize when the difficult work of mourning is over for the mourner and must encourage the end of mourning. The Talmud says “one who meets his friend who is in mourning after twelve months have passed [from the death of his relative] and offers him condolences, to what can he be compared? To a person whose foot broke and then healed. A doctor [then] met him and said to him: come to me [for treatment]; for I can break it [again] and cure it, so you should know how fine my remedies are.” This implies an unnecessary and painful prolongation of the experience that should be over; offering condolences after the mourning period has ended merely and needlessly reopens an old wound.<sup>519</sup> The *Shulchan Aruch* says that if one does comfort a mourner after the twelve months following the death of a parent, one simply says **תתנחם** - *may you be comforted*.<sup>520</sup>

Offering consolation on *Shabbat* may be done but it is better to do so on a weekday. Even though consoling mourners is permitted on *Shabbat*, according to Rabbi Chanina, it was with difficulty **בקושי** that the Rabbis permitted it as well as visiting the sick:

**בקושי התייר לנחם אבלים ולבקר חולים בשבת**<sup>521</sup>  
*It was with difficulty that [the Rabbis] permitted one to console mourners and visit the sick on Shabbat*

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<sup>518</sup> Munk, 89

<sup>519</sup> Moed Katan 21b and note 17. *The Schottenstein Edition*. New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1999

<sup>520</sup> *Shulchan Aruch* 385:2

<sup>521</sup> *Shabbat* 12b

The *Shulchan Aruch* permits *nichum avelim* on Shabbat as well, but *Magen Avraham* notes that it is better to do so on a weekday; he also warns not to be like others who wait and go only on Shabbat to console the bereaved **אין הולכין רק בשבת**<sup>522</sup>

Shabbat is a time for joy and so rather than saying the traditional words:

**המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים**

one should say instead:

**שבת היא מלנחם קרובה לבוא**<sup>523</sup>

*Shabbat is not a time to console, but consolation will swiftly come*

### **Emotions Elicited by Jewish Mourning Practices**

The structure of the mourning process as seen allows the bereaved individual to withdraw from society at a time when he is overwhelmed with emotion over the loss of a loved one and must face the new role of “mourner”. The Rabbis recognized the need for a graded mourning experience and established *halachah* that would meet the needs of both the mourner and the community in which he lived. While *halachah* concerns itself with laws and obligations that one fulfills, emotional needs nonetheless are addressed at the same time. This section deals with some of those emotional needs that the Jewish mourning practice confronts.

Ambivalence toward the dead is evident in some cultures by the desire to rid of the body of the deceased yet at the same time demonstrate an unwillingness to let the “person” go. Judaism is one of these cultures because the corpse is buried as soon as possible but has mourning practices that guarantee the perpetuation of the dead.<sup>524</sup> This is accomplished long after the first year of mourning by *Yiskor* and *Yahrzeit*.

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<sup>522</sup> Magen Avraham on Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 287

<sup>523</sup> Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 287:1; Mishnah Berurah 287:1 (see Goldberg 194)

<sup>524</sup> Spiro, 52

The Rabbis recognized the power of guilt following the death of a significant relative. In post-Biblical times, mourners asked forgiveness of the deceased at the time of burial for any offense they may have committed toward his dead loved one. This is still practiced by some Jews. We read in the Bible of David's guilt in his grief for his sick child who was dying; the son of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah whom he killed so that he could marry her.<sup>525</sup> It happens sometimes that a mourner is unaware of the death of a loved one so the Rabbis allowed someone to make up for a missed period of mourning even if it was an intentional act.<sup>526</sup> Spiro writes that guilt is alleviated to some degree by behaviors representing self-denial such as fasting for some, sitting on low stools as an act of self-humiliation, rolling in ashes in Biblical times (Job did this). The Talmud mentions the prohibition of pleasurable experiences and wearing attractive apparel.<sup>527</sup> The wearing of sackcloth in Biblical times demonstrated both physical punishment and unattractive appearance. The traditional prohibitions against not bathing, wearing new clothes, engaging in study or sexual intercourse are means of self denial and not cutting one's hair is also a form of self-humiliation.<sup>528</sup>

Some ancient civilizations feared the dead and superstitions and folklore about ghosts and spirits contributed to this fear. Spiro explains that a person experiencing anxiety may not know why he feels such apprehension and physical discomfort but the person who experiences fear usually knows the source of his fear; the bereaved individual often fears the person who died. Jewish authorities were opposed to beliefs concerning ghosts or spirits based on the Holiness Code:

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<sup>525</sup> 2 Samuel 12:15-23

<sup>526</sup> Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 396:1

<sup>527</sup> Semachot 6

<sup>528</sup> Spiro, 72-73

לִתְפֹנֵי אֶל־הָאֲבֹתִי וְאֶל־הַיִּדְעֹנִים אֶל־תִּבְקְשׁוּ לְטִמְאַתָּה בָּהֶם  
 אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם<sup>529</sup>

*Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire of familiar spirits, to be defiled by them: I the LORD am your God.*

Despite this Divine ruling, people feared the *nefesh* that hovered around the grave yearning for the body for the first year because it could get angry and do harm.<sup>530</sup>

The belief that contact with the dead was defiling and dangerous contributed greatly to the emotion of fear. This led subsequently to the ruling that one must not have contact with a dead body or anyone who has done so. Those who did have exposure to a corpse including mourners were considered to be טמא "tamé" or unclean, also associated with the notion of "taboo". Biblical law outlines parameters concerning the person considered to be טמא requiring that he be isolated for seven days from the camp for a given period of time with restriction on his activities. He is slowly allowed to return to the camp after a ritual purification ritual. In a symbolically similar way, the mourner slowly returns to his group following the seven-day ritual of *shivah*.<sup>531</sup>

According to the psychoanalytical framework that Spiro presents, other customs that reveal fear of the dead include the washing and in earlier times, the perfuming of the corpse to remove impurities and demons since they disliked water; the guarding of the corpse to prevent evil demons from doing harm as well as to keep animals away; closing the apertures as soon as possible following death because the dead person's ghost left the body as soon as death occurred but might try to return. If the eyes, mouth, and other orifices are closed, the ghost could not enter the body; the looseness of the shrouds that have no knots or hems allow the spirit to leave the body quickly and easily; opening the

<sup>529</sup> Leviticus 19:31

<sup>530</sup> Spiro, 76

<sup>531</sup> Ibid, 78

windows allows the spirit to leave easily; in the processional to the grave, taking the longest route and halting several times confuses the spirits that are hovering about the body; in returning from the grave no less than seven halts are required according to the Talmud.<sup>532</sup> In the Middle Ages, Psalm 91 was recited at each stop because the *Shulchan Aruch* indicated this would keep away evil spirits and a devious route should be used again;<sup>533</sup> spirits are hateful of water so water should be poured out immediately following a death and all should wash their hands upon leaving the cemetery or entering the house of mourning after which all standing water should be spilled; mirrors are covered because the soul of the person who looks in the mirror may be carried off by the ghost of the deceased; and finally, lit candles keep the spirits away and the *shivah* candle should be lit and remain for the seven day period in the room where the person died.<sup>534</sup> Rabinowicz adds that mirrors are covered to prevent the soul of the deceased from being reflected in the glass and to prevent the mourner from seeing his own sadness, which adds to his own grief. These are in addition to mirrors being associated with vanity, which is inappropriate for a mourner and the distraction from prayer that a reflection in a mirror might cause.<sup>535</sup> A traditional practice known as pouring out the water in which people pour out all the water that is in the house where the deceased is lying has two reasons: 1) the Angel of Death whets his knife on water, and a drop of the blood of death falls in, and 2) it is a sign to the community that a death has occurred and the *mitzvot* of accompanying the dead and comforting the bereaved are needed.<sup>536</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> Bava Batra 100b

<sup>533</sup> Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 376:4

<sup>534</sup> Spiro, 79-83

<sup>535</sup> Rabinowicz, 24

<sup>536</sup> Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 339:5



Crying is a behavior that helps to express feelings emotionally by allowing the body to release tension and physiologically in its release of serotonin that aids in providing a sense of well-being. In early Jewish culture, weeping was a form of appeasement resulting from fear of the dead; today it is encouraged as a therapeutic means of coping with emotions concerning the loss of the loved one. In Biblical times weeping was synonymous with mourning and in post-Biblical times, it became a social responsibility for each person to weep when a member of the community died. In Talmudic times professional mourners or “wailers” were used to create a sombre mood and the eulogy was used to encourage mourners to cry. This experience of communal crying helped mourners to express their innermost feelings and express their grief outwardly. This in turn helped to prevent the denial of the death and to make their needs explicit to the community. In this way, the mourner was assisted in severing ties to the deceased relative and in establishing new relationships with others.<sup>537</sup>

### **Neonatal and Infant Death**

*Halachah* stipulates that one does not mourn for a child who died within thirty days (including the thirtieth day) of birth. This law applies when there is no definitive proof that the pregnancy was a full nine months. If however, there is such proof, that is the parents know that they had intercourse nine months before the birth and then abstained for three months, then one does mourn even if the infant died on the day of birth.<sup>538</sup> If an infant dies on the thirty-first day of life or after, then one mourns and if an infant dies on its thirty-first day of life but does not live a full thirty days, some rule that

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid, 117-119

<sup>538</sup> Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 374:8

one mourns while others rule that one does not mourn unless the infant lived thirty complete twenty-four hour days.<sup>539</sup>

Many infants died during the Middle Ages and it was expected that if they survived infancy, they might succumb to illnesses during childhood. The Rabbis were knowledgeable in this area and took the approach of establishing the *halachah* that if a baby did not survive for thirty days, it was as if the baby had not lived.<sup>540</sup> The Rambam wrote the following concerning נפלים -stillborns:

*We do not mourn for stillborn infants. Whenever a human offspring does not live for 30 days, he is considered as stillborn. Even if he died on the thirtieth day, we do not mourn for him.*<sup>541</sup>

If we know for certain that he was born after a full nine months [of pregnancy], we mourn for him even if he died on the day of his birth.<sup>542</sup>

And concerning other infant losses:

*A fetus from a full term pregnancy that was stillborn, a child born in the eighth month of pregnancy who died even after living 30 days, or a fetus that emerged cut or crushed even though it endured a full term pregnancy is considered stillborn. We do not observe mourning rites for them and we do not engage in activity on their behalf.*<sup>543</sup>

This legality is repeated in the *Shulchan Aruch*:

*The infant, for 30 days, even including the full 30<sup>th</sup> day (if it dies), we do not mourn for it.*<sup>544</sup>

This ruling prohibited funerals and eulogies but did allow for burial. The grave was often unmarked and the parents might never know where their dead infant had been buried.

Given the high mortality of infants, the rationale was that some families might have been

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<sup>539</sup> Hagahos Yad Shaul. He says the *halachah* is more lenient concerning disagreements on the *halachot* of mourning. Chasam Shofer rules the more stringent opinion.

<sup>540</sup> Wolfson, 36

<sup>541</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Aveilut* 1:6

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid* 1:7. If the pregnancy was full term the birth is considered viable and the death due to other causes

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid*, 1:8

<sup>544</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 374:8

in mourning almost continuously and thus, it was considered an important leniency that the law did not require them to undertake the practices of mourning. In contemporary times, however, we are well aware of the huge loss that a neonatal death is and the need for parents and siblings to grieve. Rabbi Stephanie Dickstein of the Conservative Committee on Jewish Law and Standard of the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement provided a rabbinic responsum to the question concerning practice following the death of an infant who less than thirty-one days. She pointed to other positions in the Talmud and law codes:

*A one-day old infant, if he dies, is considered to his father and mother like a full bridegroom [and therefore should be mourned]*<sup>545</sup>

The words “and therefore should be mourned” are interpretive here and do not appear in the text of the Mishnah itself.

The Talmud tells of the sons of Rav Dimi and Rav Kahana who mourned for their newborns who died within thirty days of life and both said:

קים לי ביה שכלו לו חדשיו<sup>546</sup>

*I know for certain that its months [of gestation] were completed*

The Conservative movement under the leadership of Rabbi Dickstein has established new “*halachot*” for parents mourning for infants who died within 30 days of birth including obligation on parents for observance of full mourning practices, recitation of *Kaddish*, *shloshim* and *yahrzeit*; burial according to Jewish practice with a funeral and appropriate readings conducted as soon as possible although burial may be delayed if the mother needs time to recover; the giving of a name at the grave if the infant was not named prior to death; a complete *shivah* beginning with the meal of condolence and daily

<sup>545</sup> M. Nidah 5:3. M. Nidah 44b is the source for the interpretation of the words “like a full bridegroom”

<sup>546</sup> Shabbat 136a This means that both Rav Dimi and Rav Kahana knew this was so because they had relations with their wives a full nine months prior to the birth and had then abstained until its birth. Note 34

prayers; equal treatment for the mother and father as mourners; autopsy should be allowed if it will give useful information for future pregnancies or diseases that might affect siblings. The guidelines indicate young siblings are not obligated but those who are post - bar/bat mitzvah should use the rituals to work out their feelings.<sup>547</sup>

### **Suicide**

Suicide carries with it not only the sudden loss of a loved one, but the stigma and horror of a life unfulfilled and despondent. Survivors deal with guilt and torment over what they could have done to prevent the death. Until recently, suicide was considered a criminal act and the family was faced with this challenge as well, often having to deal with media and public intrusion while dealing with their grief. Traditional Judaism taught that suicides do not receive a share in the world to come. Deliberate suicides were not eulogized or mourned although some of the mourning laws were observed. The Talmud and *Aruch Shulchan* state “one who commits suicide willfully is not attended to at all; and one does not mourn for him and no lamentation is made for him, nor does one rend garments”.<sup>548</sup> The *Shulchan Aruch* adds that he is regarded as one who dies in a state of excommunication.<sup>549</sup>

The Rabbis consider only deliberate and premeditated acts of self-destruction to be suicide. If the individual who took his life had a sudden impulse, suffered from mental illness, or experienced an “act of aberration” or where there is doubt, a more lenient view is taken and the deceased is given the “benefit of the doubt”. The Hebrew term for suicide *me'abed atzmo leda'at* implies a premeditated, rational act, and the *halachic*

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<sup>547</sup> Wolfson, 38-39

<sup>548</sup> Semachot 2; Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 345:1

<sup>549</sup> Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 345:4

discussion of “suicide” makes that assumption as well.<sup>550</sup> In most cases, it is assumed that the person’s mind was not balanced, therefore family members are permitted to observe mourning practices and recite *Kaddish*, thus sparing them any further humiliation and grief; the Hebrew word **אבד** means “lost” and one of the modern Hebrew words for suicide, the construct form from the reflexive *hitpa’el binyan* verb **התאבדות** implies “losing oneself”. Only rarely are self-inflicted deaths labeled as suicides within the context of Jewish law.<sup>551</sup> According to the CCAR Responsa on the matter of burial of suicides, in the absence of such certain evidence of a premeditated act, one is given the benefit of the doubt: “we assume that some intense grief, fear, or worry caused him to lose his mental equilibrium, and that he committed the act in a state of mind when he could not realize what he was doing. Furthermore, consideration for his surviving relatives should, according to the Rabbis, not be ignored. And, whenever possible, we should try to spare them the disgrace which would come to them by having their relative declared a suicide”<sup>552</sup>. Furthermore, if a minor dies by suicide, it is regarded as an unintentional act.<sup>553</sup> The same respect for the dead is observed but if the death is deemed to be definitely an intentional suicide, the traditional rule is that burial must take place at least six feet from the other graves usually near the fence or border of the cemetery.<sup>554</sup> Most authorities however, are of the opinion that no one of a rational mind would take his

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<sup>550</sup> Washofsky, 434; Semachot 2:1; Shulchan Aruch 345:1

<sup>551</sup> Isaacs, 43;

<sup>552</sup> American Reform Responsa, no. 88. Central Conference of American Rabbis. Vol XXXIII, 1923, pp. 61-63

<sup>553</sup> Rabinowicz, 67-68

<sup>554</sup> Lamm, 226

or her life; the reality that someone did die of suicide implies at least a temporary state of “insanity” and thus the deceased is granted a dignified and respectful Jewish burial.<sup>555</sup>

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<sup>555</sup> Levy, 60

## **Chapter Three**

### **A Limited Qualitative Survey of Rabbis and Their Experiences With Bereaved Children**

#### **Background**

This limited qualitative survey was conducted in order to learn of the prevalence of bereaved children in some synagogues and the support offered to them by the synagogue and the rabbi at the time of the loss of a significant loved one. The objective of the study was to assist in the development of a model to be used in a Jewish response to bereaved children. Specific assumptions were outlined prior to the development of questions for this survey. They are as follows:

1. All participants will have worked with bereaved children in their experience as rabbis.
2. Rabbis who have been touched personally by a bereaved child or who were bereaved as a child will be more likely to search for appropriate referrals for bereaved children in their congregation.
3. Rabbis who work at synagogues in larger cities will be more knowledgeable about outside resources to refer to.
4. Rabbis working in larger centers will know of professionals who specialize in work with bereaved children specifically.
5. Rabbis in larger cities will know of support groups for bereaved children.
6. Larger synagogues are more likely to have a caring community committee.
7. Larger size Religious Schools will not necessarily have death education as part of their curriculum.
8. Death education will be a result of a community loss, if at all.
9. Parents and teachers will be uncomfortable with death education for their children and students.

Based upon these assumptions, the following list highlights specific information that that was sought after in this survey and served as the foundation for the questions that were developed for the interviews:

1. The prevalence of known bereaved children in congregations in selected large cities.
2. What congregations do to help a bereaved child.
3. Whether rabbis offer counseling for bereaved children and if so, to what degree.
4. Whether rabbis refer bereaved child and/or family to outside resources in the community and if so, to whom.
5. What types of resources are available in the community and whether there are grief support groups for children that the rabbis are aware of.
6. Whether there is a feedback mechanism by which the rabbi is kept abreast of the progress of the bereaved child once referred
7. What type of help families want when they come to the rabbi and if they ask for referrals.
8. How the Religious School handles and supports a bereaved child upon returning to school following a death in the family.
9. Whether death education is a component of the Religious School curriculum and if so, what the program is
10. Demographics:
  - a) The Synagogue - location, size, availability of daily *minyanim* and lay led *shivah* services
  - b) The rabbi – gender, age, number of years in the rabbinate, and personal death experiences as a child

Finally, a set of questions was created to reflect the assumptions and the data necessary to collect the information required to meet the objectives. After field testing, the questions were modified slightly and an additional question was added inviting a story of personal experience to be shared. The final questions almost completely mirror the list above:



### **Final Questions for the Qualitative Survey of Rabbis**

1. Are there bereaved children in your congregation? If so, how many?
2. What does your congregation do for them? Do you have a caring community committee?
3. Do you offer counseling? To what degree?
4. Do you refer? To whom?
5. What resources are in your community for referral?
6. Is there a feedback mechanism for you to learn of the child's progress?
7. What do families ask for? Do they want referrals?
8. How does the Religious School handle a death when the child returns to school?
9. Is death education part of the curriculum?
10. Please tell me an interesting/unique story of a bereaved child or family in your experience
11. Demographics of rabbi/synagogue

### **Methods**

In order to obtain a representative sample, synagogues were selected from the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) website based on size and location in the United States and Canada. Synagogues were stratified by membership (number of family members) and were selected primarily as representative of large urban centers. The desired sample size was four synagogues for each of the following family membership categories: congregations of 250-499 families; congregations of 500-899 families; and congregations of 900 families and larger.

In late May and early June of 2007, letters were sent by email to the senior rabbi of fourteen synagogues with an immediate positive response (one from Israel while on

vacation) within the first week from nine of them representing a 64% response rate in the first week alone from a single email contact.

Three additional rabbis were recruited during the summer and fall months. Telephone or face to face interview dates were established and they were conducted during the months of June, July, August, and October. Each interview took an average of thirty to forty-five minutes and focused on the eleven questions that were developed based upon objectives of the study. These questions were field-tested in late May and revised accordingly.

## **Results**

The twelve rabbis who participated in the survey work at synagogues in larger sized cities across the two countries and all received rabbinic training from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion with Ordination years ranging from 1967 to 2000. They range in age from 41 to 67 years. Ten of the participants are male and two are female rabbis. Five rabbis work with congregations of 250-499 families; three work with congregations of 500-899 families; and four work with congregations of 900 families and larger. With the exception of two synagogues, daily *minyanim* are not generally conducted. Length of *shivah* generally tends to be less than seven days although the Canadian trend is more traditional in this regard. While some synagogues have congregants who conduct lay led *shivah* services in the homes of mourners, the majority does not.

Responses to the questionnaire are presented in the following section. Where possible, results have been summarized, however, there was great diversity for some of the questions due largely to the personal experiences of each individual rabbi. The

personal insight offered by the participants provided very interesting and important information and thus is presented here in detail in order to reflect the significance of their work. Wherever feasible, the personal stories have been paraphrased as little as possible.

Question 1 – Are there bereaved children in your congregation?

Two rabbis responded that at this time their congregation does not have children who are bereaved, however, all of the rabbis responded that they have had some experience in dealing with bereaved children although some have had more experience than others and of course some have been in the rabbinate longer and the congregations vary in size. One rabbi spoke of experience with bereaved college students as well while working as a college chaplain. The experiences run the gamut from death of a twin sibling at birth to death of a parent to cancer, accidental death of sibling or parent, murder, suicide. One rabbi said it is not “the most common death experience” he must deal with but “certainly the most traumatic and intense”. Not all could provide precise numbers, but of those who could recall, answers included “one”; approximately six; 10-12 in 22 years; 0-5 per year; low number; several dozen over the years; three in the last four years. Ages of the bereaved children range from babies of several months to teenagers.

Question 2 – What does your congregation do for them? Do you have a Caring Community Committee?

One rabbi said the family is in shock and the priority is how to get them through the first 48-72 hours. It is important for rabbi to meet with the children and go over the sequence of events – where is the body, what will happen, uses words like “*chevra kadisha*,” “coffin,” “grave,” and “*goof*” versus “*neshama*” using props to illustrate

contents outside vessel. This way it is not so abstract; he talks a lot to make it realistic. Families always ask if kids should attend funeral; he says after 5 years old definitely.

Another rabbi said his synagogue has nothing programmatically nor any special outreach to kids but there are three ways the synagogue supports bereaved families: 1) clergy –one on one support/follow up-rabbis and cantors make referrals; 2) caring community committee which is completely lay driven; and 3) life cycle email committee – they have a special computer program and track all weddings, death, births; they send out an email to all members of Board of trustees, senior staff, board trustees, and others who want to be on list (n=100). In 95% of cases this email communication stimulates the “grape vine” with the result that congregants are informed and many attend the funeral. This congregation has a very structured Caring Community Committee, which is a subgroup of # 3 (life cycle email committee). One of the chairs follows up and two things happen: 1) a member of the committee will attend the funeral and/or *shivah*. This is sometimes a lay leader – someone the family does not know to represent Temple at least once; and 2) the Committee also sends handwritten note later on. Sometimes a pastoral relationship develops between the family and the rabbi through this channel.

Someone else told of a specific case in which the congregation came together around a whole family as the family was known and they have good school principals. The caring community committee has 2 ways of offering support: 1) for those who have fallen on hard times - sisterhood – they only write letters but there are individuals who do much in the congregation to offer help. There are some lay led services; and 2) There is a program that is currently beginning with the cantor who works with Renewal movement that is “touchy/feely” and together they do healing services. The congregants have

recently wanted to be involved. This never happened before; they created liturgy study especially for *shivah*. They “jump in” for clergy and often come anyhow even if clergy is available especially for those without family. There are 7 or 8 people who have learned how to lead *shivah* services. The cantor teaches them about bereavement and working with mourners. They are creating a bereavement booklet to replace an older pedantic prayer booklet. These congregants do hospital visitation as well.

One rabbi said he can be “very instrumental as rabbi” and does a lot of rabbinic counseling. He spoke of two fathers who lost a spouse and are not in the position to raise the kids. The children are grieving for their mother and there was concern about one bereaved Dad raising them alone. Sometimes the father took steps to ask for help but the synagogue was more focused about moving on practical steps like schedules, getting kids to school, doing things that wife did and how to talk to kids about their mother who died and how to let them grieve. In his previous congregation there was no caring committee but a “mitzvah corps” whose members arranged for *shivah minyanim* for the bereaved families. He now works with a closer-knit Jewish community. The congregation was established in 1979. The Caring community is more intimate and they are now raising their profile and being proactive. This community is more knowledgeable and more traditional; they want more ritual and more tradition; they want *shivah* observed the right way. In his past experience in another city – the bereaved fathers were more involved in figuring out their life than attention to mourning rituals. One father said he grew and became the parent he was not before; he now sees areas of personal growth.

Another respondent said nothing specifically is done for support as circumstances are so individual but the “community goes into full gear”. He refers as needed. Everyone

knows everyone and clergy/school support appropriately. The Youth group and students in the school also help. The caring community committee ensures that for the first Shabbat after loss they deliver a basket. The clergy have been there for long time so they know everyone.

Another rabbi said support is offered primarily by personal contact with the bereaved family and this is done by the Rabbi, Cantor, and Educator. All three are available to a bereaved child and there is both formal and informal counseling that is available. The caring community committee also offers support. Someone else responded that support is provided by the synagogue for the entire family by helping with meals and providing numbers for *shiva minyanim* in the home. The Caring Committee is very active in this regard. They also help by providing transportation where needed. There are some lay led *minyanim* but the rabbi or cantor leads most. Classmates pay visits during *shivah* to their bereaved classmate. Classmates write a card and everyone signs it.

The rabbi of another congregation said “structural” support is in place by means of regular meetings that include the Rabbis, Cantor, and heads of the schools, Executive director, and chair of *Bikkur Cholim* committee. They discuss Health and Welfare first and review names of congregants who are in hospital and those who have died or are dying. They review diagnosis and needs. This usually entails a list of 20-40 names. They also have a separate regular meeting for clergy alone to discuss needs of their congregants.

This community also has some lay people who deal with a children’s hospice, which is an important resource known as “Our House” and is a children’s bereavement center. After a death in the family there is an automatic referral for the child to Our

House in addition to the work with them on the part of the synagogue. Many temple members work on the Board and as volunteers with Our House. The organization provides support groups for kids and adults that are peer led including those for children. There are also some bereavement camps in the area and programs offered to high school students in the Jewish High School program. They also have a *Chaver* program in which the cantor matches up mourners with each other although this program does not include children specifically.

One participant said support for bereaved children is done both informally and formally. This rabbi spends time with children before the funeral to prepare them. In doing so, he allows them to ask questions so that they can discuss what happened concerning the death and what will happen following the death of their loved one. He also provides support to the children informally at the *shivah* visits. He also offers formal appointments for the child and/or family to discuss privately any concerns. The synagogue has a *Mitzvah* Committee that does a good job in providing visits, meals, and comfort. Other families are a great support in this congregation. Yet another rabbi explained that as a congregation there is ongoing support by clergy and education director. There is a bereavement group in the community sponsored by 3-4 congregations but there is not one for children. Support for bereaved children and their family is provided mainly by clergy and professional support. This synagogue does have a Caring community but it is currently not equipped for bereavement; their vision this year is to expand its mandate.

“Very little” replied one rabbi who said support is provided to bereaved children in terms of a structured program. The synagogue does have a Caring Committee that is very good at supporting a family if there is an illness preceding the death, but does not

function as well after the death. There had been a subcommittee on bereavement but not at the present time. Rabbinic contact and letters serve as the main follow-up method. She maintains close relationship with a mother and one son. If the bereaved person reaches out such as by coming to say *Kaddish* there is a more opportunity for an active relationship; it is harder to achieve this kind of relationship if people do not come to services. This is especially so for older people who say that coming to synagogue reminds them of the most recent loss as well as other losses they have experienced and sometimes the pain is too much to bear so they choose to stay away.

The final respondent said the primary “reaching out” to the bereaved family is the rabbi as the chief comforter. The congregation leads *minyan* services and prepares meals, taking direction from the rabbi. At the time of a death, an email is sent to each member of the board of the synagogue as well as to the chair of each committee. A sympathy card is sent to the family by the caring community committee and the chair is in touch with the rabbi concerning needs of the family and child(ren). This rabbi who served as a chaplain at a college said the Jewish Association in the community reached out the two students she worked with who each lost a parent.

### Question 3 – Do you offer counseling? To what degree?

All the rabbis said that they do offer counselling with one specifying that he does not do counselling very often. He explained that his community has specialized grief support for kids that is provided by psychologists and support groups that focus on bereaved children. He added that synagogues are not often successful with bereavement groups but one of the local hospitals is partnered with the JCC and offers a group at the current time as well as one that was conducted last year. He added that in the city in



which he lives “everybody is in therapy”. Thus, many families have support from outside the synagogue itself. Most respondents said they counsel on a formal basis for up to three times and then refer to professionals in the community. Many mentioned the importance of knowing boundaries and being able to recognize when referrals are necessary. One rabbi mentioned that he begins counseling with children “on the spot” as soon as he sees them when the death has occurred as well as at the funeral. Someone mentioned the number of times he counsels depends on the circumstances. Sometimes other issues come up. Someone converted and lost her husband 16 months later. One rabbi said the children do not avail themselves but ask for help in other ways, for example, this year a Confirmation class student lost her mother 6 months ago. When talking about a *shivah* call – she asked what if you don’t want to see them (the visitors)? He dealt with it in class and then followed up after with her. In this respect, he has other counseling avenues.

Another said that he counsels children not specifically about the grief but the trauma of the loss. One said yes, he offers counseling especially with younger children on the spot before and after the funeral gives cues to parents – kids grieve differently and let them play. One rabbi who begins counseling before the death says that children are almost always willing but some are not. Sometimes the rabbi is not called till the last day. He follows them as best he can. Yet another said it is important to be aware of pastoral care versus counseling; be supportive but recognize when family needs more. Several rabbis mentioned this and one offered an example of one family struggling after their child 8 years old died less than one year ago. Another respondent will take bereaved students out of their class to talk but specified that this is more in keeping with the concept of pastoral care than true counseling. Someone mentioned the importance of

being aware of teenagers feeling embarrassed if a parent dies because suddenly they are different from their peers.

One rabbi said he checks in periodically and advises check in and get-togethers; he calls every few weeks. At the time of the interview, he mentioned that there was to be the unveiling soon and recognized the anxiety level for the family was heightened at this time. There is one other sibling in the family. Although they were very distraught, they chose not to avail themselves of his services. Somebody mentioned that sometimes couples or family ask for counseling and that is way to reach the child. On average, the rabbi counsels an individual or family a couple of times.

Questions 4 and 5 Do you refer and to whom? What resources are in your community to support bereaved children?

While all the rabbis said that they refer, the extent to which they do so varies considerably. Each community has professional counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. The availability of support groups for bereavement is variable. Some are aware of bereavement groups designed specifically for children although most replied that they are not aware that such groups are available in their community.

One rabbi mentioned that he refers to community resources by referring directly to grief counsellors who specialize in working with children but he is not aware of any bereavement support groups in his community for children. Another rabbi says he draws upon his pastoral experience by recognizing the message in such lines by mourners as “I think we might need counselling”; “why did God do this to me?” and says that these are ways that the bereaved are saying “this hurts a lot; I don’t know if I’m normal”. He says, “most are in ball park but don’t know it”. He can counsel and they get a feel of what is “normal”. He often tells people they don’t need formal counselling from a professional.

Adults ask for a group; they all know a psychologist, he adds. His observation is that they want a Jewish group specifically. The trend for children however is that they want a direct referral for one-one counselling.

In contrast to this rabbi, another said that he does less counselling today than he used to because people tend to not come for it. He said people are oddly more private now. He added that people often come late in their grief and there are other issues that have emerged. He insists that the congregant has to agree to the referral and be made aware that he is not a trained psychologist. Moreover, most families in his congregation have three days of *shivah* and rarely is a full week observed; this cuts down on the direct communication with the family. He and the cantor follow up with phone calls thereby allowing for additional opportunities to connect with the bereaved family and a chance for them to talk if they so wish. He refers to Jewish Family Service, which in his opinion is very good, and to psychologists. He said some of the hospitals have bereavement groups some of which are better than others. He does not know about the availability of groups for children but guessed that if there are they would probably be conducted in some of the hospitals.

One rabbi specified that he refers to outside professionals only for very serious grief; this usually concerns those who have lost a parent or grandparent. For a family that loses a child he refers to Reverend Bob, a minister in community who runs a program that offers support groups; indeed the only work Reverend Bob's project does is grief counseling by support groups of different types. They have a group specific to children run by a trained social worker. At the same time, he continues to work with the bereaved

child and the family in his role as a rabbi. He does not use psychiatrists/psychologists for grief but refers solely to Reverend Bob.

Another rabbi said he “absolutely” refers to professionals in the community, primarily psychologists, and he keeps an extensive file of available resources. He makes frequent use of Jewish Family services and others. Both Jewish Family Services and the hospice program in the community have bereavement support groups. The hospice program also runs groups for children. Yet another mentioned that he makes “lots of referrals”. He refers more to psychologists than to psychiatrists, adding that he refers not as much for the bereaved child’s specific grief but for the trauma experienced by the death as so many other problems ensue. This rabbi mentioned two resources that are based in his congregation. Two congregants are sisters in a counseling practice together and have written some books to help people with their grief. A family in his congregation created a program for people who are bereaved with a special focus on children. This was a beautifully bittersweet creation following the accidental death when a congregant family was on vacation in Texas. They were involved in a driving accident; the husband was killed and mother and son injured. One of the many aftermaths of this tragedy was that the mother realized there were many issues for her and child. She could afford to obtain the necessary help but knew others might not be able to do so. Now she and her fiancée have a large home with horses and have created a program known as Tomorrow’s Rainbow that involves providing opportunities for bereaved children to take care of the horses and providing professional services for them. By developing a relationship with a horse and meeting with professionals, they are given a chance to work on their grief.

There is a sliding scale for contributions, thereby making it accessible to everyone in need. This program recently held a *Mitzvah* day with autistic kids.

One rabbi said he refers only after if a child is unable to handle the grief although he finds this is rare. There are two psychologists in congregation, one of whom has gone to public schools to discuss death and grief. He is aware of support groups for adults but not for kids. Another rabbi mentioned a resource in his community known as Our House. Following a death, there is an automatic referral for the child to Our House as well as his own counseling with them. He refers to psychologists as well, however, many people have already sought help before approaching him. Our House provides support groups for adults and children alike; all are peer led including those for children. He mentioned camps that are available for grief support as well. His synagogue has a program whereby bereaved individuals under the direction of the cantor, are matched up as “buddies” to offer support; this program however, does not include children.

A rabbi who works just outside a very large city said that he makes many referrals especially to Jewish Family Services and to the local community service for children as well as to psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. He said he knows of no groups for bereaved children (although this is available in his community). Another rabbi who works in a nearby community was also unaware of this resource for children in the area but also refers to professionals as well to Jewish Family Services that offers groups bereavement. This individual mentioned that although some congregants have requested groups at the synagogue, there are not enough people at the synagogue who would make this undertaking viable.

Another rabbi refers to Jewish Family Services and to psychologists in the community as well as to an organization that provides bereavement support groups specifically for children. She informs individuals that she cannot conduct regular weekly meetings as she is not a licensed therapist and will refer so as “not to be detrimental.” This rabbi who worked with college students would have lunch with them to maintain contact and refer as needed to local therapists and to grief support groups conducted by the Christian chaplain on campus.

The final respondent said that he has a close relationship with Jewish Family Services and has many names of professionals in private practice to whom he refers including some who specialize in children. He does not know of groups for bereaved children but the Educator of this synagogue mentioned their close affiliation with the organization known as Rainbows which is run by the local Catholic Church and does a great deal of work with bereaved children offering six month programs.

Question 6 – Is there a feedback mechanism for you to receive information about how the child and his family are doing following your referral?

As expected, all the rabbis mentioned that there is no formal feedback mechanism following the referral due to confidentiality regulations. Some of them replied that they get no feedback at all while others said: “from time to time but it is informal”; only on an individual basis but he has to call the congregant (answer of two rabbis); informally; one mentioned that sometimes a family gives permission to the counselor if they feel the rabbi should be kept informed of their progress; feedback is received but only from the family if the family wants to share; one mentioned that he has never actively sought information out but assumes it would not be provided by the professional due to confidentiality and he sees himself in a secondary role to provide support as requested by

the family; he will call the family to check in but is not privy to the therapy; one rabbi mentioned there is no direct feedback in the case of referral for bereavement in particular. One rabbi mentioned that it would not be right for the therapist to be in touch and so she approached the person directly; this in turn keeps her in close touch with the family. In summary, a feedback mechanism to inform the rabbi of the progress of a bereaved child referred for counseling does not formally exist in anyone's experience unless it is provided directly and on an informal basis by the individual or family.

Question 7 – What do families ask for? Do they want referrals?

One rabbi mentioned when a parent dies, the surviving parent is numb and often does not know what s/he or the family needs. The unique circumstances surrounding the death are very important as are the age of the child and his/her relationship with both the parent who died and the surviving parent. Other variables he mentioned that are critical include whether parents are living together or not and practical issues such as the financial situation of the family. These can play a vital role in how the child and family function in the death of a family member. He triages every day in his role as a rabbi and is especially present in such tenuous cases as those of bereaved children.

Another rabbi said that all those who come to him want counsel especially advice and a listening ear. He emphasized that it is important for the rabbi to “shut up” and listen. He said that people occasionally want referrals but his experience is that they want to be heard. He does less counseling in his present congregation than he had done previously in other locations. Another rabbi contrasted his experiences in two separate congregations explaining that congregants in one synagogue just wanted to talk with the rabbi while those in a different city tend to want the experience of a support group as well

after a few months pass following the death. He shared the story of two teenage boys who died in his present congregation. Both had mothers from the same South American country. The two mothers found each other and leaned on one another a great deal and the siblings of both teenage boys bonded; both these families also utilized a community resource that offers support groups. In this case, support was found within the congregation itself among the congregants.

Two rabbis mentioned families come for an assessment wanting to know if how they are managing after their loss is “normal” and asking for advice concerning whether or not they need help. Another said that he often meets with a parent who thinks the child has problem not realizing they have problems themselves and the parent wants the rabbi to talk to the child especially if the child is acting out. If families want referrals, they tend to ask for them specifically knowing exactly what they want. Another respondent said families ask many questions concerning the funeral and express their concern about whether their children should attend. He advises to bring children who are of kindergarten age and older unless they express a fear. He advises that for many, what they imagine can be far worse and being at the funeral is important for them. He discourages viewing the body but will accede if they insist. He mentioned that referrals are accepted if he initiates them but this tends to be only occasionally.

Another rabbi said that families want to talk about the death and have their children talk about it with him. Of particular concern are questions by children about death and burial and theological issues they have. There is a need for children to be aware of what is happening at the time of a death in the family. He does many *shivah* visits and



spends time talking with the children in order to “get a sense of them”; he considers this to be of highest order of priority.

One rabbi mentioned families want someone to put the “carpet back under their feet” after it has been pulled out from under them. They want the rabbi to offer stability and function as an anchor for them. Some families do want referrals and he often suggests referrals if it is indicated from his observations. Another said the needs and desires of the families depend largely on the stage of grief at the time of their meeting. He checks with families more than they actually go to him. Many of the issues he said, as did another, are theological ones such as “how could God let this happen?” Families are usually not looking for a theological/philosophical discourse but want to be listened to and cared about. He mentioned the family of girl who died that was disappointed with people and were working through that. He tried to help them with their feelings about this situation. He said yes, families ask for referrals and he “feels out the situation to understand what they need most”. Sometimes he recommends a referral when he is over his head even if they don’t ask. Finally, one rabbi mentioned the very real situation that people come because their faith has been shaken; they are angry at God and are experiencing a spiritual crisis. She reassures people that it is acceptable in Jewish tradition to be angry at God and tries to just listen. Another rabbi explained that a great deal of loss is expressed in anger and many congregants who come to talk for pastoral care want to deal with anger or loneliness. Some want referrals but most want their feelings acknowledged by her.

Question 8 – How does the school handle a death when the child returns to class?

One rabbi said when a death occurs, the principal of the school and the rabbi both inform the teacher who often comes to funeral and/or *shivah*. In many cases, classmates of the bereaved student come to visit and /or to the funeral as well depending on age and circumstances. The entire class is informed re: loss of parent or sibling. The rabbi goes into the class when child is not there to talk about the death and to let the classmates know that this is a sad time so it is important to be kind all the time. This is an experience of the community coming together.

Another rabbi said the return to school is very important for the student and they are trying to do this better than they have done in previous times. The issue of communication is crucial and so in the event of a death an email is sent to the entire school staff including the secretaries to ensure that everyone in the school is aware of the loss. The teacher talks with the students in the class of the bereaved child about death and how to respond and offer condolences. The rabbi is not involved in this. He said that improvements to this protocol are needed and mentioned that sometimes a death is missed especially when it is the death of a grandparent. Despite this, for those experiences in which this sequence of events has occurred, he has received only good feedback from the family of the bereaved child.

This rabbi said he does not go to the class to discuss the death with the students but leaves this task to the teacher who may or may not do so. He admitted that their protocol is “probably not good enough”. Sometimes the class writes a note to the child but it is up to the teacher to determine what, if any, action is taken to offer support. He said that we give children less credit than they deserve in terms of their ability to cope

with death and bereavement. He added that he likes honesty and admitting to children that we don't know answers as to why bad things happen.

Another rabbi experiences *Tefillah* with the students each week. He shared two incidents of teenage accidental deaths that happened in a short period of time. He spoke with the students during *Tefillah* concerning the accidents. He also discussed sadness, the nature of teenage deaths, the reality that death is part of life, and that death does affect young people and we have to recognize our blessings. There were no further discussions after this but the students and the teachers were concerned especially with second death because the media was involved. Since one accident was weather related on a school trip there were questions such as: why didn't the school protect them if there was warning? They felt the adults should be responsible and this created fear in many that the adults on the trip were not careful enough. He and the teachers talked openly with the students to explain that sometimes schools don't know best and adults do make mistakes; it is important for them to see that their parents can make mistakes in judgment.

Another participant said the approach the school takes varies from child to child. The Educator plays a primary role in this regard. The class and teacher are there as a support during illness if that is the case and they make and send cards to the bereaved child. Unless the death is sudden or tragic, the class and school are well aware in advance and can plan a program for support depending on the circumstances.

This rabbi said he discusses the family situation with the Educator and teacher then they integrate their approaches. The teacher advises the students in the class of the death before the bereaved child returns to school. The teacher allows the bereaved student to express him/herself and the choice is up to child within the context of the class.

Reports from bereaved students have indicated that the support of their classmates has encouraged them in their bereaved state to open up and share their experiences. Children, he added, are very supportive of each other in such situations.

Another rabbi said the teacher is notified by the Educator and is asked to lead a class about the death and sadness that the bereaved classmate is now experiencing. Many students share their own stories and talk about what the cemetery looks like. The teacher is advised to be kind to the student upon his/her return and to model this behavior for the student's classmates. There have been no problems in this regard when bereaved students return to school. Someone else said they have a very large school and in the case of a child who is bereaved, the Educator meets with the family before the child returns to school and then works with the teacher. Another participant said the teachers are informed of the death and to have sensitivity to the child. Mourner's *Kaddish* is recited during an assembly. There is not anything organized for class unless class chooses to do so but students in the older grades go to the *shivah* or funeral.

One rabbi and the Educator of the synagogue told the story of a student in the Religious school who died unexpectedly during the week. Her brother attended the school as well. Parents had specific ideas of what they wanted in handling it. The Educator worked directly with teacher and students. Letters were written by classmates to the parents. The Educator went to her public school where he and others formed a team of people on how to support the students who were in shock because she died on a weekend so they had not seen her for a few days. At Hebrew school they had a moment of silence. He and the rabbi talked with students who knew her about their fears and they said prayers. The students asked many questions such as "why did God kill her?" The

parents were supportive and the children responded nicely. Teachers participated as well. The class at the Religious school contributed a shelf to her school for books, they helped at the *shivah* house, and they talked about her a bit during Religious school.

Another rabbi said the Educator has a discussion with the teacher and they plan a program to inform the class. The class makes cards to send to their classmate and his/her family. Teachers attend the funeral and visit during *shivah*. This rabbi made mention of the school secretary who is very gentle and caring and beloved by the school students. She reaches out to the bereaved child upon his/her return to school.

Another rabbi responded the synagogue that the return to school for a bereaved child was done “not very well” and the teacher was not even informed, thereby lending itself to a difficult situation for the child, the teacher, and the school in general.

Question 9 – Is death education part of your Religious school curriculum? If yes, please provide details

Responses to this question were varied and ranged from no death education in the Religious School curriculum to a very comprehensive program, although this occurred in a relatively small number of cases. The programs described are all very interesting and are provided here. The notion of “death education” made the rabbis think about what they offer in their schools and while some replied that they do not cover this subject, they did mention some aspects of death but primarily embedded within the teaching of life cycle events such as funerals, death, and dying as events that happen in Jewish families. One rabbi mentioned a voluntary family cemetery program and a *geniza* burial both of which typically result in poor turnouts.

Another rabbi answered definitively “no” to death education and commented that life cycle events are covered in the curriculum with the exception of death; however, he did say that mourning rites are included. His community has a community high school in which most of the local rabbis and many teachers participate but no one has chosen to teach about death; he commented that it is important notwithstanding. His experience in teaching about death takes place at the time of a death in the family when he spends some time with the children prior to the funeral and he asks them what is on their mind concerning the death itself, life after death, and what happens after burial. This often leads to questions such as “Why did God take \_\_\_\_\_?” He feels that it is important to share the truth with children and does so at this time. One rabbi mentioned his Religious school does not provide death education in B’nei Mitzvah or before and only to some degree in high school in context of life cycle events.

Some rabbis provided details of very specific death education programs such: 1) as a Grade 7 life cycle program in which they bring in volunteers from the *Chevra Kadisha*. Fifteen to twenty-five students each year attend and they learn about rites concerning preparation of the body for burial and some mourning rites; 2) a Grade 5 workshop on Talking to Your Child About Death and Dying using the video Generation to Generation. Parents are informed of the program well in advance and most attend with their child although each year there are some families that do not come. The program is divided during the morning with some time spent with the rabbi by both the students and the parents, followed by the last hour in which parents and their children come together. Rituals and cemetery information are taught during this program. The parents have provided good feedback over the years. This is part of a program that encompasses all life

cycle events and is called “cycle of life”. The class conducted with the parents and students is followed two weeks later by a walking tour of the Jewish cemetery; 3) a death education program in the high school only that includes a tour of the Jewish funeral home that actually shows the students the various caskets and washing of a dead body; 4) a grade 4 program that includes death mentioned as part of the life cycle rituals and for the confirmation class a program entailing case studies for the teenagers to role play their responses to death. This program teaches etiquette of *shivah* and the Jewish attitude to death; 5) an occasional Grade 5 *geniza* program in which students collect items for the *geniza* and then go to the cemetery to bury them although “some find it creepy” and many parents choose not to come. This is integrated into the cemetery education program the school developed; 6) a “very powerful” and informal program in a Religious school that has two senior boys both diagnosed with cancer in their legs. One of them who had been treated with chemotherapy and radiation and now in remission went to speak to some of the junior high school classes to answer questions those students had such as “what is it like to have cancer?” and “will you die?” The younger students rallied around this boy and supported him in the fundraiser Relay for Life; 7) a small fourth grade program that introduces death to the students as the school invites the staff of Rainbows to present the topic to them; 8) a trip to a particular cemetery that has celebrities buried there – this helps to dispel the fear of the students; 9) a Grade 4 voluntary family life cycle program that covers funerals and mourning; 10) mortality taught as part of Creation; a Hebrew school curriculum to learn the liturgy of the Mourner’s *Kaddish* for *kita bet* through to *kita hei* as well as why it is recited and its significance; 11) a program that teaches the grieving process in terms of rites and obligations of Jewish mourning

although not the psychology of grieving; 12) a program for Confirmation students in which they work in a nursing home with seniors and talk about death. They study the text of the *midrash* of Abraham aging and the older people talk about fears and although the younger participants start off fearful, 90% say it is an immensely rewarding experience. They write diaries throughout the duration of the program and often deal with issues of transference asking such questions as “will my grandmother die?” with the result often being that they report feeling more comfortable around their own grandparents; 13) programs for parents that mirror the death education program for students by which the rabbi talks with parents and faculty about speak to their children about death; 14) recitation of Mourner’s Kaddish and burial for a pet of a young student in the school; 15) a family education program held every other year with fourth and fifth grade students that is mandatory and quite well attended by students and their parents; 16) a sixth grade *tzedaka* project based on a project done by one of the Reform camps that involves a cemetery clean-up and learning about some of the people buried there by studying the tombstones. The trip to the cemetery was preceded by a program at the camp in which the campers learned about how to honor the dead and to be respectful about cemeteries. Campers went in different groups throughout the summer accompanied by different rabbis. They did weeding and painting of curbs that encircled each grave. The rabbi of the local community held a *siyyum* thanking the campers. Although some had expressed feeling nervous about working in a cemetery, the overall consensus was that this was very rewarding activity. A similar program will be conducted through the Religious school this academic year. Numbers 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 are all conducted at the same



synagogue but interestingly enough there is no death education for the high school program because “no one asks for it”

A special story of their own personal experience of loss or an experience in working with bereaved children (or both)

Each rabbi graciously responded to the question asking for an experience of their own related to working with bereaved children and how, it at all, that experience has shaped how he or she supports them and their families. Their stories are presented here:

1. This rabbi was with a family who moved from the east coast who had twins and one twin died as a newborn. Judaism has problems with infant mortality; there was no funeral for the twin. Now 6-7 years later, the surviving twin has grieving issues. The rabbi told the family to plant a tree where they currently are living because the death was in the east. Furthermore, the twin does not have a marker or special place to visit her brother. The family also purchased a *yahrzeit* plaque that he mounted on the wall at a level where the surviving twin could see the plaque with her brother's name and touch it. The class goes with her at times and does it also. She needed tangible connectedness where it is safe and sacred. He does funerals for late term miscarriage and will build a coffin, and does so even for early miscarriage. He supports the family with Psalms and prayers in this special service.

2. This rabbi has never felt he was the one who made a big difference for a child although he has felt this way about his role in supporting adults. He feels privileged to be with families through their life cycle events and to be embedded in their lives. The support rabbis give, he says, is long term; it says “look-here we are”. In this continuity as a rabbi, he is deeply moved by the possibilities of renewal and rejuvenation. The best thing we do is be there for families in their sorrow and joy. He told of a Bat Mitzvah coming up

shortly of a girl whose mother has recently died; he officiated at the funeral first and now the Bat Mitzvah will be emotional. “That is what rabbis do; that is pastoral care for that family – soothing the soul”. He added, “Rabbis can play a role”.

3. This rabbi told of a time that he sat with 6-8 kids on an armchair with him after their grandparent died and answered many questions. Their parents and the other adults were grateful for him as they were uncomfortable talking about death with the children. He said that he does funerals for noncongregants with whom he usually has no contact before or after the funeral but he makes a point for all funerals to spend time separately with the children. Everyone asks if kids should attend the funeral, to which he replies, “yes” as it is less frightening than what they might imagine. It is good for them to see their parents upset, to see the rabbi, and to see the rites of *keriah*, and shoveling of earth. He encourages children to participate in the shoveling of earth for their loved one. He said families usually do bring the children. He also maintains the tradition of halting seven times at the cemetery while reciting the traditional prayers and does not translate them.

4. This rabbi said a critical piece of counseling is enabling families to mourn. The role of the rabbi is not only to be there and as a non-anxious presence but to help the family to focus on memories, let go and work through things not said. When talking with children or a surviving parent, he encourages them to focus on happy memories and not be bitter about other events that may have happened. If there are not positive memories it is important to work them through. He tells families to “bring out all photos and videos and let people see and share with you; look at the life you led and don’t be shy about emotions”. He added the point that the size of congregations is a factor; some rabbis

cannot spend a lot of time with bereaved families because they don't have the time to do. This rabbi shared two very poignant personal stories: he had a college friend who lost his brother to leukemia and was not allowed by his family to grieve; he had a hard time coping and was emotionally troubled at that time. This college friend's experience with death impacted how he works with grieving families. Years later, he personally lost his father just before Ordination and shortly after his thesis was completed. He recalls how he delivered his 5<sup>th</sup> year sermon the next week and his father died the following day. Unfortunately, he and his wife suffered a miscarriage the same week, which was very painful. Based on his personal experiences, he emphasizes the importance of being able to grieve. *Shivah* and *shloshim* are important and mourners need to see these periods as time to do their work – to confront the death and ultimately to be able to let go.

5. This rabbi said he was eleven years old when his grandfather died and he was very close to his grandmother who lived until she was 93 years of age. The death of his grandfather was the first one he experienced and it is very "enmeshed" in him. He remembers seeing him in casket and that his rabbi explained everything and as a result he always has felt that death is a part of life. He was included in everything concerning the mourning rituals. As a result of this early and significant experience, he is concerned about supporting children when they lose parents. He said the relationships rabbis have with their congregants are not just marginal relationships; he is marrying people he knew as babies. The pastoral aspect, he said, "is most important".

6. This rabbi related the story of the death of grandmother the same year as his Ordination; this was his first direct contact with death. His parents died thirty years later in a short span of each other. He said it was a strange experience for him when his father

died on the day of the first service he led in a new facility. He delivered the eulogy for his father but never really mourned. When his mother died the following year, he chose to not deliver the eulogy and allowed himself “to be the son”. It was at this time that he caught up with not dealing with the grief over his father’s death.

7. This rabbi recalls that his uncle died when he was just 4 or 5 years of age and he remembers him in his sick bed. When he was of Bar Mitzvah age his mother took him to pay a *shivah* call when a member of congregation had been killed in a car accident and he saw everyone crying. He places a strong emphasis on preparation for children and makes a point of what telling them what to expect at the cemetery because it helps if they are prepared. He asks for the children to be there for counseling before the funeral and encourages them to share memories of their loved one who died and he reinforces what they say. It is important to be aware of magical thinking that young children have. He encourage families to permit diversity and do what their children need as opposed to what others tell them to do concerning mourning. He allows children to say “no” if they do not want to participate. At unveilings he asks the children to remove the cheesecloth from the monument.

8. This rabbi told the story of when he took two little boys to say goodbye to their dying parent and of a father who died three days before his daughter was to become Bat Mitzvah. He spoke of the incredible resilience of children. He said losing a sibling is like a phantom limb and an “amputation” when parents lose a child.

9. This rabbi said he spoke to a child in Kindergarten who was afraid because an uncle died and now was asking “will Mommy die?” He also told of a teenage suicide and

the students of the high school embraced the sister of the deceased as well as the parents. This rabbi lost his brother but was not a child at the time.

10. This rabbi spoke of a specific family in which the father died. The rabbi spoke to the older son, who was thirteen years old, in his own bedroom which was unusual but the boy needed to “be in his space” and the same discussion could not have been help in the living with the other people who had come to pay respects. He needed to touch his own things as he spoke about his father. In previous work as a chaplain with dying children, this rabbi encouraged mothers to get into the hospital bed with their child.

11. This rabbi shared a personal story of a close relationship with her paternal grandmother. At the age of twelve, while away on a summer vacation with her maternal grandparents, her paternal grandmother died. The rabbi’s parents elected not to call inform their child of the death. It took “a long time” to accept having missed the funeral and not being able to say goodbye. As a result, she works with the children and includes them at the funeral of their loved one and strongly encourages them to shovel earth as it is very concrete and helps in the acceptance of the reality of the death.

12. Another rabbi generously shared her experience of being a bereaved child herself at the age of sixteen when her mother died. She said that we idolize our parents and growing up forces up to accept their faults as well. Bereaved children, however, cannot do that because of a kind of idolizing and putting the dead parent on a pedestal but “it is important to accept their faults and say goodbye to what we don’t like”. Her mother died while she was away at camp although she knew her mother was dying but was denied the opportunity to come home each time she asked, so she did not have a chance to be there at the time as her siblings had been; her mother did not want her to witness her death (and

she died alone) yet some resentment toward her siblings was felt. She had asked to come home but was told no until she went home on her own two days before the death. The youngest and only child at home, she felt the house was empty and did not want to go home after school so spent a great deal of time with a friend and her family. Coping with the remarriage of her father and changes in her life, she sometimes felt jealous of others who had a normal family situation. She did not have professional counseling at the time but today has great insight into her own grief and well understands the needs of bereaved children.

Another rabbi did not experience any losses as a young person but lost his father as an adult and his mother has Alzheimer's. The loss of a child in his Religious school has been significant.

#### Other relevant thoughts offered by the participants

Most of the rabbis who participated said they were not bereaved children but have now lost significant loved ones. One mentioned that he had been a social worker prior to entering the rabbinate and worked with Jewish Family Services. One respondent at the age of 60 still has both parents and all four of his siblings but remembers one bad word mentioned by a rabbi that affected the way he deals with grieving families; one rabbi said a parent thought the child was not doing well after a grandparent died. The rabbi recognized that the child was following lead of the mother and when mother was made aware of this and changed her behavior, the child felt better. This rabbi was able to show the mother that her child needed reassurance and followed her cue.

## **Discussion**

As anticipated, all the rabbis who participated in the survey have indeed worked with bereaved children, some to a greater extent than others. Two of the variables contributing to the degree to which they have done so are the length of their rabbinate and the sizes of the congregations they have served. Working with bereaved children and their family tugs at the heartstrings of those who want to support them and offer strength to those whose lives have been turned upside down.

The Rabbis who participated in this study generously shared stories of specific cases and how their congregations have each been a *kehillat kadosh* at the time of crisis. Although it had been assumed that larger congregations would have a caring community committee, this in fact exists in each congregation even if it does not have a committee bearing that specific name . Each congregation comes to the aid of a family in need. All the rabbis irrespective of the size of the city in which they work responded that they do have names of professionals to whom they may refer bereaved children but some are not aware of whether support groups for grieving children exist; at the time of the interview, two rabbis were not aware of groups that do exist in their community.

Several rabbis talked of their own personal experiences with death as a child and how those experiences shape their approach to working with children. All spoke of the importance of including children in at least some of the mourning rites including attendance at the funeral with a mix of opinion for very young children. Some mentioned the importance of honesty because their imaginations could make the situation worse for them and of the need to allow them to grieve in their own way, such as recognizing their

need to play even while mourning. This practice is congruent with the recommendations in the literature on childhood bereavement.

Some rabbis mentioned the importance of knowing and understanding the needs and wants of their community. Most mentioned the reality that *shivah* is not often observed by their congregants for the full seven days and families do not always come to services to recite Mourner's *Kaddish* during *shloshim*. Most do not have daily *minyanim*, thereby reducing the possibility of regular attendance. The rabbis in the Canadian cities said their congregants tend to be more traditional and prefer the more traditional seven day observance of *shivah* and attendance at services although not everyone attends. Many mentioned that families coming to them often want to talk about whether they and/or their children are "normal". Since Western society is death denying, we tend to stay away from talking about death and certainly from allowing our children to hear about it. As a result, bereavement is traumatic and especially tragic when a child is bereaved. Several rabbis mentioned that families are already receiving psychological support as one respondent said, "everyone is in therapy".

The Religious School plays a significant role in the support of bereaved children. The Religious School is an integral component of every synagogue. In each one, the Educators and teachers serve as models for their students when a death occurs as they partake in *nichum avelim* by attending the funeral and/or *shivah* of the loved one of the student, by instructing the students on how to welcome their classmate back, and on offering condolences, sending cards, and making donations. This teaches their students that these are all components of the *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved.



The greatest observed diversity in this survey relates to the curriculum of the Religious School concerning its handling of death education. The assumption that parents and teachers are uncomfortable with the idea of children learning about death was upheld by the survey results. Even in synagogues that do offer some death education, there is a sense of discomfort among the parents. Where some Religious Schools offer voluntary family programs around death, mourning rites, or cemetery rituals, many parents choose not to attend and some keep their children away. When asked what the Religious School teaches about death to children, one rabbi mentioned “now that you ask, I realize ...not enough”. The death education that is taught runs the gamut from very formal components of the curriculum to death education on an ad hoc basis, taking place if a death or tragedy occurs in the community. Those schools that do formally teach death education have a specific program geared to a particular age level. While death education in these schools is not necessarily a direct result of the death of a student, those schools that have dealt with a bereaved child have created a program be it formal or informal to deal with the particular situation. Some Religious Schools have utilized community resources and have commissioned staff of community programs to assist in educating students about death.

This qualitative study of rabbis has served to be impressionistic only as it was a cross-sectional survey of rabbis in larger cities only and is certainly not conclusive concerning the prevalence of bereaved children in congregations or how synagogues work with them. Biases and limitations to this study include the small size, the lack of random selection, and the reality that it has been conducted only one time and thus does not have a comparator by which to compare findings. The unequal representation of male and female rabbis is a result of the decision to contact senior rabbis, most of whom have

been male. The group of rabbis who participated does not represent newly ordained rabbis or those younger than forty-one years of age. Again, this is likely due to the reality that the survey included senior rabbis only.

The overall impression of these findings indicates trends that closely approximate recommendation seen in the literature. Rabbis recognize the critical importance of recognizing the grief of children and allowing them to manifest their grief; the role the synagogue must play to support them both in terms of the congregation and the *mitzvah* of *nichum avelim*; and of the significance of the Religious School in how the child is welcomed back, how he or she is supported, and in the education that is necessary concerning death and mourning. According to the responses of the rabbis, more work needs to be done in how the school handles the emotions of grief. Several of the congregations offer some death education around rituals and obligations, but have yet to consider teaching the psychology of grief.

All the rabbis make themselves available to families, recognizing the upheaval that is created not only by the death itself but by the secondary losses incurred by the child as well. Just as Judaism teaches that death is a communal event, so too do the synagogues abide by this teaching. The challenge rests with teaching children about death. Protecting them from the reality of death as a part of life means hiding the truth from them. Death is painful for us all to bear; parents and teachers tend to lean toward protecting children from experiences that are unpleasant, however in the loss of a significant person in their lives, minimizing or ignoring the situation creates more problems. Moreover, schools are in an excellent position to teach children about the importance of supporting others who are grieving. Clergy and Educators at synagogues

and Religious Schools are cognizant of this need. The call to action - that of designing, implementing, and evaluating programs for death education, is now.

## Chapter Four

### Working with Bereaved Children at Fernside: A Personal Experience

#### **Background**

Fernside is an organization in Cincinnati that provides support to grieving children and their families. Established in 1986 by Rachel and Paul Burrall after the tragic death of their son David, Fernside is a leader in providing grief support services, outreach, and education to the community. As an affiliate of the Hospice of Cincinnati, Fernside complements the comprehensive bereavement program that the Hospice offers by meeting the unique needs of bereaved children. Fernside provides the following services free of charge with the help of generous donors: Peer support groups serving over 800 children, teens and adults annually; Camp WeBelong program, providing summer camp and retreat experiences; and Community Outreach, including in-school grief groups, education and training and publications. Fernside also responds to crisis situations as needed.

Fernside began in 1986 by offering a single grief support group for 16 kids. Today more than 800 children, teens and adults participate in Fernside support groups annually. These groups are provided for children ages 3 - 18, who are grieving the death of a family member or friend. In the groups, children and teens meet with others their age grieving a similar death. Trained facilitators address a different theme each meeting. These themes include feelings, telling our story, memories, changes, and many others. Facilitators address these themes through expressive arts, games, music, puppetry and group discussion. Parents and guardians of the children attending groups also meet in

their own support group where they receive support in addressing their own grief as well as support and education to help their grieving children. A young adult support group is offered to young adults ages 18 (out of high school) to 26 who are grieving the death of a family member or close friend. Groups are held at various locations throughout the city four evenings each week. Most groups meet twice each month.

For children who are unable to attend an evening program, Fernside offers support groups in schools in the community. These groups meet over a period of six weeks and address issues similar to those covered in the evening programs. Fernside also provides crisis response with immediate and long-term support to schools following a death, recognizing the importance of teachers, counselors and administrators to the life of school children everywhere. Fernside's philosophy regarding crisis response reflects the significance of the relationship between student and school. An emphasis on educating and supporting administrators, faculty and staff is an important part of their crisis response programming. This provides the teachers and staff with tools needed to support the children with whom they are in contact on a regular basis.

Fernside also provides support to community groups, organizations and agencies as well as schools, churches and businesses on topics such as: Developmental Stages of Children & Grief; Grief and the Holidays; Factors that affect the Grief Process; Grief in Older Adults; Grief in Schools; and Teen Grief. In addition, Fernside conducts a camp program that has two components: 1) Camp WeBelong Summer Camp for children who are seven to twelve years of age held each summer at Camp Joy (north of Cincinnati) is a four day program for children who are grieving the death of a family member or friend, using expressive arts and physically challenging adventures in an outdoor setting. During

the camp, children are given the opportunity to work in a small group environment with other grieving children to share their stories of loss, how their lives have been changed, their memories, and their feelings. The camp offers the children a chance to process their grief and also participate in traditional camp activities including campfires, swimming and hiking. On Sunday, the last day, families are invited to participate in a special family day. 2) The WeBelong Retreat is an annual weekend retreat experience for youth ages 13 - 18 who are grieving the death of a family member or friend. The retreat incorporates expressive arts and physically challenging adventures in an outdoor setting. During the weekend, sharing groups and related activities promote positive self-esteem, encourage safe expression of feelings and gives the participants an opportunity to interact with other grieving teens. Each camp and retreat has a theme, which is incorporated in all the activities throughout the camp or retreat experience.<sup>556</sup>

### **Fernside's Mission Statement**

At Fernside,  
we know that the grieving child,  
has the capacity to rebuild,  
so we gently encourage sharing of stories,  
feelings and memories with trusted friends,  
honoring each one's search  
for a new beginning

### **Fernside Volunteers**

Fernside volunteers are trained to facilitate groups for children of all ages as well as adults. They come to Fernside with a variety of backgrounds and life experiences. They are homemakers, teachers, mental health professionals, business professionals, students and retirees. Some, but not all, have experienced losses as children or adults.

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<sup>556</sup> [www.fernside.org](http://www.fernside.org)

Most of all, they are caring individuals who understand the importance of providing support to grieving children and their parents/guardians. This is the only requirement in becoming a volunteer at Fernside.<sup>557</sup>

### Personal Experience

My interest in bereaved children led me to volunteer at Fernside and this experience has subsequently served as the field work for my thesis. It was important for me to work directly with children who are grieving and to observe and apply what I have learned from my research. I participated in the training program in September 2006 and was assigned to a group of nine- and ten-year old children in a Parent Loss group who were in fourth and fifth grades. I worked with this group and a co-facilitator from early October 2006 until the end of May 2007. At the same time, I participated in the development of the program for Camp WeBelong 2007 and later worked at the camp during August 2007 as a facilitator with seven- and eight-year old children who were in second and third grade. The children in the camp program had lost a parent, sibling, or grandparent and are grouped according to age. Currently, I work with two groups: a Parent Loss group of pre-school children (ages three, four and five years) and a Sibling Loss group of children who are in first and second grade (six and seven years of age).

### Facilitator Training

Fernside provides a required, comprehensive training for its volunteers that entails 21.5 hours of classroom time and two evenings of observation of a group and wrap-up following the group with all volunteers and the Fernside supervisor. This training is

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid

conducted over a four-week period and is comprised of lecture/discussion/group activities as well as creative and expressive arts experiences thereby incorporating theoretical models of grief, psychosocial issues, and creative means for expression of feelings. The outline of the training course is seen in Appendix A. Volunteers are provided with reading material, ideas for activities for the groups known as the Fernside Idea Book. Moreover, Fernside has an extensive library with resources for the volunteers with books for adults and children.

### Structure of the Evening Support Group Program

The program begins at 6:30 pm as children, adults, and facilitators join together in a large room for a pizza dinner and socialize for thirty minutes. At 7 pm, the groups assemble with their facilitators and move to their assigned room where they spend the next hour. Fernside provides groups for children by age and groups for adults at the same time that the children are in their respective groups. The facilitators of each group (usually two per group) work together to plan the program for the evening in advance and Fernside provides all supplies needed for the program that has been designed.

The group begins with a sharing circle as the children introduce themselves and say who died. The groups at Fernside are open to new participants each month after they come to a Family Orientation evening at the beginning of the month. Therefore, there are often new children who join the group and have not had a chance to meet the others prior to their first time attending. In order to allow them to ease in, we introduce ourselves each time, say who died, and we say what our favorite \_\_\_\_\_ is for that evening. Everyone has a chance to share what they would like and no one is ever forced to speak. The group participates in a program that has been designed by the facilitators who work together to



provide a theme and a set of activities that are age appropriate and will elicit the sharing of emotions or stories of their loved one who died. A safe environment is always maintained in which the children can feel secure and never judged. A set of group rules is explained at the start of the year and is reviewed periodically as needed. The activities are coordinated to reflect the theme of the evening and discussion is always encouraged but never required if a child is resistant. Children always take home the projects they make. A variety of themes and activities is considered in the planning while ensuring the need for routine that children so desperately crave especially when their lives have been turned upside down.

Confidentiality is especially important for bereaved children who often speak about feeling different from their peers. Fernside provides a place for them in which they are not “different” and can interact with others who have similar concerns and stories. Even young children are told about the importance of not talking about the other members of their group outside of Fernside. Trust is critical for children to feel safe and they eventually learn to trust the facilitators, each other, and even themselves as they begin to share and feel safe in the group. Since children grieve differently from adults and may not voice their concerns but rather demonstrate some of their feelings through behaviors and expressive arts, facilitators must be aware of many factors. Some of these include listening to what the child is saying, watching his behavior for any changes, watching interaction between the group members, watching how a new member may change the dynamics of the group, and watching to see if the children support each other or compete. Bringing the group to a close requires careful planning and routines especially for very young children. Ensuring a loving and caring environment with

familiar people is essential. After the hour program is finished and the children and adults leave, all facilitators meet with the Fernside supervisor for a “wrap-up” discussion as a large group in which the group activities and dynamics are reviewed and any concerns are raised. A report is written by the facilitators outlining the program provided and comments or concerns about the children who were present that evening.

### Themes

Fernside encourages many support group themes and provides materials for them.

Fernside has categorized these into seven broad areas<sup>558</sup>:

#### **Group Building**

- Set ground rules together
- Ice breaking activities and games
- Getting to know one another

#### **Telling Our Stories**

- How we found out about the death
- How we said good-bye or what happened at the end
- Our families
- The funeral / memorial service
- Being able to tell our stories to those we trust
- What to say to those we don't trust

#### **Feelings**

- Any and all feelings are valid and OK
- Specific feelings we have such as anger, guilt, sadness, etc.
- Worries and concerns
- Healthy and safe expressions of feelings
- Nightmares, dreams, and difficulty sleeping

#### **The Grief Journey**

- Everyone grieves in his or her own unique way
- Will I feel sad forever?
- Is it awful for me to start feeling better?
- Is it OK to have fun?
- Journey toward acceptance and hope for the future

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<sup>558</sup> Fernside Facilitator Training Manual

**Coping With Changes and Challenges**

- The world is different for me
- Heightened awareness of mortality
- Fears of what might happen to my other parent/ siblings/myself
- Family changes
- Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and family traditions
- Difficulties in school
- Friends and peers
- I am different

**Memories and Lasting Gifts**

- Cherishing memories
- Non-material gifts from my loved one
- Fear of forgetting my loved one's voice or face
- Ways to honor the memory of my loved one

**Group Closure**

- Specific activities
- Preparing the group for saying goodbye
- Anxiety related to closure
- Preparing the group for Rena's departure

Within each of these broad areas, many types of activities and projects are utilized and done to elicit discussion and feelings.

**Using Expressive Arts With Bereaved Children**

Expressive arts include art, music, storytelling, movement, dance, drama, puppetry, and poetry. Sometimes a person may have difficulty talking about a painful experience but can express their painful feelings through art, singing, or acting. Young children who do not have the cognitive ability to verbally express their emotions or understand and articulate abstract concepts can express themselves through art. The expressive arts help to foster self-esteem and confidence as the individual creates something concrete representing his or her emotions. This helps in the development of insight, self-understanding, and even understanding of others. Expressive arts have the

potential of eliciting a cathartic experience and can be used to help release feelings such as anger, frustration, and sadness.<sup>559</sup>

The creation of art stimulates mental and physical activity. Bereaved children sometimes exhibit signs of lethargy or depression; expressive arts allow them to use affective, cognitive, and kinesthetic levels of functioning. Moreover, a work of art encourages communication and feedback with other members of the support group or even the family once it is brought home. Children can feel a sense of pride and accomplishment at having created something. Their senses are heightened especially with media that provide tactile sensation such as clay, sand, or finger paints. Creating a project such as a memory box fulfills the goal of having created something uniquely their own as well as creating something that helps remember and cherish tokens of their loved one.

### **Facilitating Groups**

Fernside ensures confidentiality and safety for the children who attend support groups. This sense of safety is achieved by allowing each child to be accepted for who he or she is and not being intimidated into participating in an activity or speaking about a subject that is uncomfortable. As a facilitator, I was trained in some of the principles of leading a group that Fernside values so highly. These include the following<sup>560</sup>:

#### **Listen**

- Hear people's stories over and over
- Actively reflect back people's feelings without your own interpretations
- Don't be afraid of silence
- Demonstrate empathy through verbal and non-verbal expressions of compassion

#### **Engage**

- Validate and normalize people's feelings
- Ask open-ended questions

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid

<sup>560</sup> Ibid

- Thank people for sharing
- Facilitate discussion among group members

#### **Self Disclose**

- Share your own experiences only when there is an appropriate reason to do so
- Do not share your experiences to get support for yourself or to model the best way to grieve

#### **Respect Boundaries**

- Be aware that you cannot and should not be responsible for fixing other people's pain
- Be able to hear intense emotions of other without taking them home with you
- Do not accept or seek contact with group members beyond the scope of the support group

#### **Provide Safety**

- Establish and communicate rules for the group
- Ask that all group members respect one another despite varying beliefs or opinions
- Acknowledge that everyone in the group may be at different places in their grief

#### **Learn**

- Become more knowledgeable about theories and models in the field of grief

#### **Care for Self**

- Be aware of your own beliefs and feelings related to death, dying and grief
- Seek out support for yourself if your role as facilitator becomes too stressful

Other important factors I have learned include: be respectful of cultural differences among group members and yourself; be aware that people have lost significant others to death of all types including stigmatized death such as AIDS, murder, suicide, and unusual accidents that require the facilitator to be non-judgmental; be careful not to create a situation of disenfranchised grief by minimizing a child's experience or feelings; speak with the adults who bring the children – they often want to know how the child is adapting to the group and sometimes want to talk about their personal situation concerning the child; be knowledgeable of developmental tasks and how they relate to the tasks of mourning for the age level you are working with; do not push your own

opinion; do not bombard an individual with many questions; sometimes it is necessary to remind members of the group rules; be cognizant of signs indicating a person may harm himself or others; do allow the group members to experience fun as it is important for children to learn that they can still play and be children. The Fernside staff is very supportive and helpful to facilitators in these matters.

### Groups at Fernside

Fernside offers a program that allows children and their family to enter a support group at any time during the year once they have been interviewed in the intake process and have attended a Family Orientation evening. This differs from some other organizations that offer groups that are conducted on a six-eight week basis with a structured program for each evening. Children attending a support group have the advantage of meeting other children at their age level who have also experienced the death of a loved one and this similarity allows for bonding and relief that there are others their age who are grieving as well. Bereaved children often talk about feeling different because of their loss and shift in family life. Attending a grief support group helps to “normalize” their situation as well as it can be normalized. There are many positive potential outcomes for children who attend groups: they can feel less isolated as they receive support from both peers and the facilitators; by sharing similar experiences and feelings, they ultimately support each other as they are themselves supported; groups offer socializing tools for them at a time when they may not be able to socialize with other peers who don’t understand why their friend is different now; they can express their feelings or behaviors in an environment that is understanding and non-judgmental and where those emotions are respected as necessary and part of the grief process; groups

provide education for them about grief and other cultures as they are exposed to people of various cultural backgrounds; groups offer some “fun” time for the children even at the same time they are grieving. It is important for them to still be able to play and laugh; special friendships are created as they share the experience and emotions of their loss; children who are newly bereaved can see that those who are farther along in the grief process are coping even though they are still grieving; of prime importance is the knowledge that the group is a place to come where they can openly grieve and are given permission to do so regardless of how long ago the loss happened for them; facilitators are aware of family situations and can offer support in that respect as well.<sup>561</sup> Categories of activities outlined by Fernside are: telling your story; feelings; memories; changes; school; family and friends; grief building; special days; dreams and nightmares; and closure.

### Facilitating at Fernside

Fernside offers great support to its facilitators in its training, in one on one interest in each person, and in the matching of co-facilitators. This is integral to the satisfaction and rewarding result that facilitators need to feel when working with children who are in need of a loving and nurturing environment that allows them to feel what they need to feel; schools are not always ideal settings and peers do not quite understand. To this end, co-facilitators work closely together to get to know the children in their group, to plan the programs and evaluate them, and to share with the Fernside staff. Compatibility is crucial and so it is important for facilitators to get to know each other and work together for the sake of the children. A balance of leadership, supporting, and listening is necessary so

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<sup>561</sup> Class notes from the Certificate in Bereavement Education Program, Module 6: Groups and the Facilitation of the Grief Process, conducted by The Canadian Centre for Grief Education and Bereavement Counselling and the University of Toronto, Social Work Faculty, Continuing Education, Winter 2007

that leading activities, active listening, and mirroring can take place. Facilitators must be “present” and mindful of the dynamics of the group as a whole as well as what is happening with each individual member of the group and how they themselves react to challenging situations.

There is a large body of literature about groups and their development through various stages. Because Fernside has a program that allows children to enter at various times, the groups do not necessarily undergo the typical phases, but bonding does take place early on and the need to prepare for ending at the conclusion of the academic year is necessary. In my case, there is a need as well to prepare for my departure halfway through the year. This is necessary for the children, my co-facilitator of each group, and for myself.

### Self-Care

While extremely rewarding, working with bereaved children is, at the same time, challenging and confronting as it has the potential of triggering emotions about our own past experiences and creating fears that we have for our loved ones and ourselves. It is important therefore to be aware of our own losses and grief experience and how we handle stressful situations with others. We need to realize when we have been triggered and to seek support at that time. It is critical that we understand how we react when triggered and what repercussion our reactions may have. Transference and counter-transference may take place in groups and as facilitators we must be aware of our own vulnerabilities as well as those of the children we work with.

The notion of a child who is bereaved due to the loss of a parent/guardian or sibling is one that elicits intense sadness in us as we watch a sweet young person in his or



her grief. When I began working with Fernside, I often cried the entire way home. This eventually abated but led me to realize the importance of self-care. To support these children, we must be present yet “detached” at the same time. This is not to mean unfeeling but rather empathetic; our role is to walk alongside them and be a guide on their journey to healing. It takes time to learn how to do this so that we can offer the children the most we can and be whole ourselves. Grief is natural and normal for all of us, including children. We must be careful to stay healthy physically, emotionally, and spiritually in order to be there for them. When I requested working with both a parent loss and a sibling loss group, the concern at Fernside was the possibility that I may “burn out”; the fact that Fernside considered this reflected the degree to which Fernside values its volunteers and is cognizant of the need for self-care while working in this area.

### **My Fernside Experience**

The first group I worked with at Fernside immediately following my training was comprised of nine and ten year old children who had each lost a parent (in the case of one child, a grandparent who had been a caregiver). My time with this group began in October 2006 until end of May 2007. During August 2007, I worked at Camp WeBelong and was one of three counselors in a cabin of girls ranging from seven to eleven years of age. The children at camp were assigned to “sharing circle” groups by age that included both girls and boys. The sharing circle with which I worked was the youngest one, comprised of seven and eight year olds. Almost all activities were done in sharing circle groups. Finally, I currently work with children in a Parent Loss group who are the youngest (preschool to first grade) known as the Dolphins and children in a Sibling Loss

group who are six and seven years old. I have also served as a participant in the Facilitator Panel for new trainees to share my experiences.

I have kept a journal of the programs I have done with my groups. It is impossible given the scope of this paper to present all of them so I have now selected some programs I have led for each age group that demonstrate how activities and careful planning facilitate discussion and the tapping of emotions for some of the broad areas of bereavement support by Fernside.

### Nine and Ten Year Olds

This age group is very articulate and capable of expressing how they feel both verbally and in their artwork. This allowed us to be creative in our programming combining both expressive arts and discussion. Children of this age can easily tell what happened and how the death took place. They are capable of logical thinking and recognize that death is irreversible and universal, realizing that it will happen to them as well. They can comprehend that people die as a result of many possible causes. They are extremely sensitive to feeling different, which results when they have a loss of a parent. If the death necessitates a move to a new city or school, children at this age are very vulnerable to the many changes in their life as they strive to fit in.

For this group, my co-facilitator and I took turns planning the program alternating each time. We were in touch prior to each session so that we each knew the program in advance and supported each other as we led the program we each planned.

**Category:    Feelings  
                  Memories**

#### Program

1. Introduction (name, who died, my favorite “part of winter”)
2. Read the book *I Miss You. A First Look at Death* by Pat Thomas
3. Draw Feeling Wheel (Appendix B)

4. Discuss how it felt at the time of the death of the loved one
5. Discussion of memories and sharing of one
6. Make memory boxes
7. Draw "feeling doodles"

1. Due to the open nature of the Fernside model, we had introductions each time with everyone saying their name, who died, and our favorite item which changed each session. The children usually chose what they wanted the category to be. This served as a good ice-breaker each session. It was often but not always geared to the time of year.

This session took place on January 24, 2006 so we chose something about winter.

2. The book *I Miss You* is geared for young children but this slightly older group was very riveted to it. We sat together on the floor as a group huddled closely together. This book shows death as a part of life and outlines the possible ways a person can die. It explains that feeling sad is normal as are other emotions. It touches on wondering if you did something to cause the death but reassures that this is not so. Mourning rites of different cultures are highlighted and the book ends with the comfort of memory.

Throughout the book, there are questions on selected pages that elicit discussion of the topic of the page. A very good and honest discussion took place with the group although not all questions were selected.

3. The feeling wheel allows each child to tap into his/her feelings and to realize that they have many feelings concerning their loss, all of which are normal. This followed immediately after reading the book. They were given a page entitled "My Feelings" with a large circle and a line below the circle that said "Legend". They were told to think about their feelings concerning the death of their loved one and to color in the proportion of the circle that represents the degree to which that feeling is part of all the feelings they

are experiencing. Any shape within the circle was acceptable; it did not have to be like wedges of a pie. They were to continue until the entire circle was completed. The legend at the bottom was to represent each feeling. They were completely free to determine their own feelings, the proportion of the circle allotted to each feeling, and the color they chose for each feeling. When everyone was finished, each person presented their feeling wheel and discussed their feelings and the proportions. Everyone chose to speak even one boy who usually declined to do so.<sup>562</sup>

4. Discussion of how it felt at the time of the death of their loved one carried forward the discussion following the book and reinforced the feelings they drew in the feeling wheel. We guided this discussion to the subject of memory and each child shared a special memory of something they did with their loved one.

5. As we had this dialogue of memories, they created memory boxes. Fernside has a variety of boxes and craft supplies with which to decorate the boxes so that the children can have a small place of their own to keep special keepsakes of their parent who died or anything they would like to put in it.

6. The last five minutes were spent drawing “feeling doodles”. Each child took a turn drawing on the board in the classroom what they imagined a feeling would look like as a doodle. Just as a feeling cannot always be tangible, so too a doodle can go in all directions.

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<sup>562</sup> Acknowledgment for this activity is to Bereaved Families of Ontario and was seen in their video “A Child’s Grief”. Viewed as part of the Certificate in Bereavement Education Program, Module 1: Introduction to Bereavement and the Grieving Process, conducted by The Canadian Centre for Grief Education and Bereavement Counselling and the University of Toronto, Faculty of Social Work, Continuing Education, Winter 2007

## Impression

This was a very successful program that touched on the very important areas of feelings and memory. A new girl had joined the group that evening and she was very sad, as her father had died in November, not quite two months earlier. These children were very engaged in the book even though it was written for slightly younger children. The success of this book is that it touches upon very sensitive areas. As I sat on the floor reading it to them, I observed that their faces were very expressive. The new girl who had just lost her father looked very sad. The feeling wheel created a great deal of discussion particularly during the time they were working on them and prior to the group presentation. What was especially remarkable was the support that one boy gave another when the first one mentioned that his brother says "bad things" about his father; the other boy said he would not let someone do that and he reassured the first boy that he should defend his father as he is doing. The boy who resented his brother also chose "embarrassed" as one of his feelings because he felt very different from his classmates. All the children were very involved in this activity and everybody shared their work to our surprise including a boy who rarely spoke. The new girl filled in the circle with only three feelings, the largest one of which was sadness. Children who had experienced their loss earlier tended to include more feelings; perhaps this is a sign of healing or at least more awareness of their emotional experience. The personal legend allowed each child to feel unique and somewhat empowered, as they felt aware of their own feelings without the pressure of having to be like anyone else or behave in a way that would please others around them. The creativity of shapes and colors was wonderful. The memory discussion was good and they loved making the memory boxes. One girl spoke about her memory of

her mother's graduation upon finishing her baccalaureate; she had drawn a big wedge of guilt because her mother died in a car accident on her way to pick her up somewhere.

### **Category: Funeral and Cemetery**

We had talked about the funeral of their loved one a number of times and everyone said they had attended. Now in March, I wanted to have a program that would focus primarily on the cemetery. Jewish tradition requires accompanying the dead to the cemetery for burial and participating in the *mitzvah* of shoveling earth as a way to ensure a dignified and respectful burial for the deceased. This is in sharp contrast to some non-Jewish cultures that do not require attendance at the cemetery at the time of actual burial. None of the children in the group were Jewish and all of them said that they did not witness the burial of their parent, and in fact, most did not even go to the cemetery. One parent had been cremated but talked about the ashes being buried in the near future. I knew this program was sensitive but felt it was necessary and attempted it. I expected that some of the children had never seen a cemetery.

#### **Program**

1. Brief discussion of the funeral with more emphasis on the cemetery using pictures of cemeteries
2. Making monuments for their parent
3. Decorating clay pots
4. Planting seeds in the pots
5. Having a moment of silence with a candle lit
6. Making family trees

1. As I had anticipated, most of the children had never been to a cemetery. We looked at pictures and saw how beautiful and peaceful looking a cemetery can be. They say how trees and flowers help to make the resting place for deceased people very beautiful and serene. We looked at different styles of monuments.

2. Each child made a monument for their parent out of construction paper. Everyone chose whatever color paper they wanted. Fernside provided many craft supplies with which to decorate them the most wonderful of which was a collection of stickers that were sayings that several children used as epitaphs for their parent. Foam letters were a favorite for spelling out the name of their parent. My co-facilitator just happened to have a calculator in her bag and helped them to determine the year of birth of each parent. All the children knew the age of their parent at the time of death, the birthday, and the date of death but needed help to determine the year of birth. When they were finished, we placed the monuments against the wall, side by side, as the pictures of the cemetery showed.

3. We talked about the flowers in the pictures that were planted in front of the graves and each child was given a clay pot to decorate. Everyone put the name of their parent on it and decorated it as they pleased, depicting something about the person who died or about what they liked. Then we planted seeds of flowers in each pot. The children chose seeds of two different types of flowers. When they finished planting the seeds in the pots, each child placed his or her pot in front of the monument for his or her parent.

4. We lit a candle and turned the lights down in the room. Everyone was invited to think of their parent and either speak silently to them, think of a memory of them, or just stand quietly and feel what they wanted to. We did this for a few minutes and then turned the lights back on. One girl said "that was so good!"

5. Finally, with the few minutes remaining, we made family trees on paper. Each child drew a picture of a tree. They wrote their family name on the trunk and each branch represented a different member of their family. This could be people or pets of their choice.

### Impression

This was a really excellent and powerful program. There were four children that evening and they all responded very well. They were very involved in all the projects and they especially liked planting the seeds for their parent knowing the seeds would grow. During both the creation of the monument and the planting of the seeds, the room was quite quiet and both my facilitator and I let it remain that way. We wanted them to experience their feelings while doing these projects. They all said that they felt good having the opportunity to stand in front of the monument they made for their mother or father and have the candle lit for those few moments while they thought about who they had lost. They really liked planting the seeds and drawing the family tree. The notion of life was very reassuring for them.

Although I was concerned prior to the group session about how they would handle this program, I was very pleased that they found it to be so meaningful and an important avenue to experience death as part of life. It was very confronting for them to deal with the idea of burial but they really wanted to acknowledge the lifespan of their parent. Some said the feel of the earth was good and a few had advice for gardening (because I am a terrible gardener). Of the four children, three said their parent had been buried and one was cremated. Those three all said it was hard to imagine their parent was “under the ground” since none had witnessed the actual lowering of the coffin. The one child whose parent was cremated said she had the ashes of her father in her home; she said she “wants him back”.



### Six and Seven Year Olds

This age group is less able to deal with abstract concepts but is very much aware of how they feel. They are beginning to have the ability to reason and think logically. They strive for competency in what they do and they want to be like their friends; bereaved children at this stage do not like the sense of feeling different. They know that death is final but still wonder about why it had to happen. They respond well to listening to a book read to them as the set induction and playing games and doing crafts. Listening to a book and seeing the pictures helps them to tell their own story about how their loved one died.

This is a Sibling Loss group and is comprised of boys and girls all of whom have lost a sibling at various ages and to various types of death. Sibling Loss participants are dealing with the loss of their sibling as well as the temporary absence of their parents who are struggling themselves to cope with the death of their child. Their family life has been turned upside down and confusion often occurs. My co-facilitator and I generally take turns planning the program and are in touch with each other the week before the session.

### **Category: Family and Friends**

#### Program

1. Read the book *Lost and Found. Remembering a Sister* by Ellen Yeomens
  2. Make family trees
  3. Play "A Penny for Your Thoughts"
  4. Play the "Can You Pop Like Popcorn?" Game
  5. "Wish" closing ritual
- 
1. This is a very good book that tells of the loss of a sister named Paige who died of cancer through the eyes of her sibling who remains nameless. The focus is on family changes and the feelings associated with those changes. The sibling talks about crying at

school, feeling lonely, and how the family structure has changed. Halfway through the book, the sibling finds ways of keeping Paige with her and over time they all stop crying as much but still remember Paige. She finds ways of realizing that Paige is still with her. The book ends with "We didn't lose Paige forever. She's right here in our hearts. I know where to find her". This book handles the intensity of the emotions of loss and shows eventually the meaning of hope. The book generated excellent discussion about how each child has changes in his or her family, whether they have something of their sibling, what has happened to the room of their sibling, what it is like going to school alone now, and whether they cry at school and how their teacher helps them or not. As my co-facilitator read this book aloud, I watched how engaged the children were and wanted to talk about their own situation.

2. The children made family trees using real branches that had fallen off bushes that I collected prior to the session. Then using construction paper of fall colors since this was done in October, each child cut out leaves freehand of whatever shape they chose. Each leaf was to represent a member of their family including the sibling who died if they so wished. The name of each family member was written on a leaf of his or her choice; pets were allowed to be included. We poked two holes in each leaf and the children threaded each leaf onto the smaller branches of the big one resulting in a family tree on different colored leaves on a real branch. This was an activity they enjoyed doing and talked about their family members as they made the leaves. The family tree followed the theme of the book in that the person who died still remains a part of the family.

3. "A Penny for Your Thoughts" is a board game on a letter-sized paper (that I had laminated). The child throws a penny and it lands on one of sixteen boxes each one of

which has a question or a direction. Examples of these include: tell about a happy memory with your special person; tell about a gift you gave your special person; tell about a sad memory with your special person; get a prize; give a prize to someone in the room, etc. In the end, everyone wins a little prize. As each person responds to what is written on the box that his penny landed on, others participate in the discussion as well.<sup>563</sup>

4. “Can You Pop Like Popcorn?” is an activity that allows children to actively work out some of their energy and have fun at the same time. Bereaved children may exhibit signs of fatigue or lethargy when they feel sad and this is an opportunity for them to move about physically. They are told to act out what we tell them and make appropriate sounds as they do so. The activity begins with telling them to pop like popcorn and then additional instructions are: crawl through a cave; sway like grass in the wind; swim like a salmon; climb a tall ladder, fly like a kite; shake your tail feathers and others. They could take turns making suggestions as well. This is a good way to bring the program to an end before the closing ritual.

5. Wish activity – this is a closing ritual that we do each time in which we all stand in a circle with our arms crossed over and hands joined with the next person. One person at a time makes a wish choosing to speak it aloud or to himself or herself and then squeezes the hands of the two people whose hands he or she is holding. When everyone has made a wish, we all turn around, thereby releasing each other’s hands and say goodbye until the next session.

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<sup>563</sup> Acknowledgement for this activity is to Lowenstein, Liana. *Creative Interventions for Bereaved Children*. Toronto: Champion Press. 2006, p. 113

## Impression

Among the tasks of mourning is the necessity to create a new relationship with the deceased. To this end, the book *Lost and Found. Remembering a Sister* helps a child learn that a lost sibling is still very much a part of the family but has a different “form”. This necessitates the creation of a new kind of relationship; one in which the sibling is no longer physically there but still very much a part of the child’s life. The book generated very good discussion and there were two new children at the session, one of whom shared a great deal. The family tree activity was excellent as it continued the theme of family and the members of each person’s family including the deceased sibling. The Penny for Your Thoughts game allowed for a continuation of the discussion of the relationship with the deceased and helped to keep some memories alive. The Popcorn game is always successful and allows for a sense of balance to ground the children from the hard work of dealing with their loss and to offer some fun. Finally, the wish ritual brings the program to an end and they prepare to gather their projects and leave on a positive note with a bit of fun. The children enjoyed seeing the reactions of everyone else and their parents as they showed them the family trees they created.

## **Category: Changes**

### Program

1. Introduction
2. Read the book *Children Also Grieve* by Linda Goldman
3. Cracked pot activity
4. Wish closing ritual

This objective of this program was to discuss changes in their lives and their family. Sometimes it seems like everything in our world is broken into many pieces and it is hard to find all the pieces and put our life back together again.

1. Introduction (name, who died, my favorite thing starting with the first letter of my name is \_\_\_\_\_)
2. The book recognizes that children grieve as well as adults; they feel scared, worried, guilty, and lonely; there are lots of unanswered questions; memories are important; rituals can help; and there are some activities at the end to tap into feelings.
3. A large clay pot was broken into pieces before the group session began and we explained what it meant with a discussion of how their lives are different now and the changes their family has faced. They each talked about some changes in their family since the death of their sibling. Each child chose a piece of the pot to decorate by writing the name of their sibling who died on the inside and draw or write something about them on the outside. Each child shared what he or she wrote and then as a group, we rebuilt the pot. This proved to be quite challenging since the pot had not broken perfectly into large clean pieces and there were several small shards. In the end there were two holes that we could not fill in due to the missing small pieces. This allowed us to discuss the holes that we have in our lives due to the loss of our loved one.
4. The wish ritual was done as usual which everyone participated in.

#### Impression

The book generated a great deal of discussion and the cracked pot served as a very good program for the children to talk about changes in their lives. They worked extremely well as a group in the effort to rebuild the pot especially since it required a great deal of glue and it was important to all of them to make the project work. They were attentive until close to the end when their attention waned for two of the four. At

that point we moved into the closing ritual. They were pleased at the following session to see how the pot had dried and did not collapse.

### Dolphins (Pre-School)

These very young children need extremely concrete activities and play therapy, as they do not have the cognitive development to deal with abstract ideas or even the skills to always articulate how they are feeling. Telling the story of their loss therefore, is easier for them to do through activities and expressive arts. Children of this age love stories and activities that result in making something they can take home. Whereas slightly older children are content with making something that might have to dry and be taken home the next time, very young children like to have something that is completed in a short time. They are very capable of speaking about how they feel but may not necessarily realize why they feel as they do at the particular moment. Fernside staff tells us that very young children sometimes need to be reminded as to why they are there at the group. Since young children see death as reversible and experience magical thinking, planning programs for this age group requires careful thought bearing in mind as well that children at this level are egocentric and time must be allotted to hearing them talk about themselves. They want autonomy to do things for themselves, yet at the same time, need recognition from us. Therefore, my co-facilitator for this group and I always plan the programs together well in advance.

### **Theme: Telling Our Story**

#### Program

1. Introduction (my name, who died, and choose an animal puppet from the center of the circle)
2. Hold up the animal puppet and make the sound and show the animal when it is happy and then when it is sad; then show how you look when you are happy and sad

3. Read *Goodbye Mousie* by Robie Harris
4. Fill in body outline and say how they feel when they think of the person who died
5. "Can You Pop Like Popcorn?" Game
6. Bubble ritual

1. These young children met for the first time and introduced themselves.
2. They loved choosing an animal puppet and enjoyed making the animal sounds; they were very expressive about the animals and themselves.
3. *Goodbye Mousie* is a very sensitive book about a young child who wakes up one morning to find that his pet mouse has died. Mommy and Daddy sensitively explain death to him and help him decorate a shoebox and prepare Mousie for burial. The little boy is very sad and says maybe he will get another mouse but not yet. One little boy said, "that's a sad book". It is very beautifully written and focuses on mourning rites as well as the need to grieve the loss and not quickly replace the mouse with another before grieving the one who died.
4. Body outline – we gave each child a picture of a body outline and asked them to fill it in as themselves and to show how they feel when they think about their Mommy or Daddy who died and then to tell a story about the person which my co-facilitator or I wrote out on the paper for them.
5. Can You Pop Like Popcorn? – This is the same game as described in the earlier section. This group of young children loved the physical activity.
5. The bubble ritual is a closing activity that my co-facilitator and I developed for the first evening that we have since maintained. One of us holds the bottle and places the wand that is filled with soapy liquid in front of one child. That child is told to say something that we tell them such as making a wish, telling your Mommy or Daddy

something special, etc. After blowing the bubble, that child then dips the wand into the bottle that we continue to hold and places it in front of the next child to blow. This way, each child has a turn at blowing a bubble and then does something for his or her peer as a way to help support each other. This is a greatly loved activity and the children leave having settled down after their hard work. On this particular evening, we told them to make a special wish and then blow the bubble.

### Impression

This was an excellent program for the first session as the children (all boys) got to meet each other and share who died and how they felt. The activities were well geared to their age level and they especially loved the animal puppets. The book very gently spoke about death and the finality of Mousie not coming back even though the little boy wanted him back. The physical activity of the popcorn game served as a very good balance to the sadness that was elicited by the book and the bubble blowing was a lovely end to the session.

### **Theme: Special Days - Halloween**

#### Program

1. Introduction while passing a ball (Name, who died, my favorite candy)
2. Read *It's Okay to be Different* by Todd Parr
3. Decorate masks
4. Decorate pumpkins if they finish the mask early enough
5. Bubble ritual

1. Young children like to hold something as they speak and eagerly anticipate their turn. Since Halloween is such a favorite time and observed as parents take their children out for trick or treat fun, some children will be reminded of past fun times with their deceased parent. In this case, however, the ball served as a distraction because it has



“tentacles” and the fascination to experience the tactile sensation of feeling the tentacles made the circle time quite long.

2. *It's Okay to be Different* is a large colorful book that tells children being different is absolutely fine. They loved the colors and the silly pictures and wanted to read it again although we did not. I took advantage of some of the pages concerning feelings to talk about how we feel when our Mommy or Daddy dies. A new little boy all of three years old said “I get angry at my Daddy because he died”. This was quite a surprise for me to hear such a young child express especially at this first group session. Young children are very honest indeed.

3. Halloween is a time when people dress up and often wear masks. Parents are very involved with their children at Halloween as they partake in the fun and ensure the safety of their children. It was important, therefore, to acknowledge this time of year. Masks hide our face and can also hide what we are feeling. Sometimes we want the mask to hide our face so others cannot see how we really feel. The children decorated papier maché masks with the assignment of decorating the outside as they want others to see them on the outside and then we told them to decorate the inside to show how they really feel when they think about their Mommy or Daddy who died. They did not really understand the instructions but had a great time making the masks.

4. Since they spent so much time decorating the masks, we did not have time for the pumpkin decoration, which was fine.

5. The bubble ritual - on this particular evening, we told them to say how they will show someone they love them. One little boy said a most remarkable thing: “when my

Mommy cries because of my Daddy, I will rub her back and make her feel better". This was articulated by the last child in the circle; what a lovely way to end the session.

### Impression

This program proved to be a very good learning experience for me. I have worked with children ranging from three to eleven years of age and have done the mask decorating activity with them all. This experience with the little Dolphins reinforced what I have learned from the developmental literature. Such young children cannot comprehend abstract concepts such as a mask covering up feelings that we do not want others to see. We had a very good discussion about their feelings and they can readily state what feelings they have, however, decorating the outside of the mask differently from the inside of the mask was not something they could grasp. They enjoyed working with all the material and decorating both sides of the mask but it was purely a craft about a mask in its most concrete form. Within the group itself, I also saw there is a big difference between a three year old and a five year old in terms of attention span and comprehension. The next age level up (six and seven year olds) was able to understand the concept but I learned that these younger children needed a more concrete program.

### Camp WeBelong

The structure of Camp WeBelong differs from the groups that Fernside offers during the year in that it is a planned program that all campers take part in. The program is held at Camp Joy with Camp Joy staff directing all the camp related programming such as swimming, hiking, canoeing, etc. while the Fernside volunteers lead the grief work with each group that is separated by age. All groups do the same program at the same time with the facilitators adjusting it as necessary for the younger age groups.

The camp has a different theme each year; the theme for 2007 was "Life As a Roller Coaster". All the grief activities, therefore, were planned along the theme of the "ups and downs" of the emotions of grief much like the "ups and downs" of a roller coaster. I had the privilege of working with Fernside staff and volunteers to help in the development of the programming. There was a sharing circle held on each of the four days. The themes in order were 1) telling our story 2) feelings 3) changes and 4) memories. In addition to these sharing circles in which the campers talked about their grief, there was an opening and a closing ceremony and a special bonfire activity on the third night. I have selected two activities to describe here.

### **1. Mark Your Grief On the Roller Coaster**

A large roller coaster track was drawn on a very large banner that was taped on the wall of the mess hall. Each child in his or her sharing circle group was given a cut out of a roller coaster car that they decorated. The facilitators took Polaroid pictures of each child. After the picture dried, they cut out their face and it was taped onto their car so it looked like each child was sitting in the roller coaster car. Each group went to the mess hall to the large roller coaster drawing and each child chose where to place him or herself on the "roller coaster on grief".

### **2. Bonfire Ritual**

The campers were given some time during one of the sharing circles to write a letter to their loved one who died. The letters were not read aloud but given to the facilitators who rolled them and tied them with ribbon and put them away. The next night, which was the last night of the camp program, a bonfire was made and after an evening of fun, all the campers sat around it. One of the Fernside staff members

explained that a tribe of native people believe that putting a letter in a fire that was written to a deceased loved one allows the ashes to fly up to where they are and that we will do the same. In complete silence, each group went up to the bonfire, one group at a time with their facilitators and each child, when ready, put his or her letter into the fire. This ritual is very powerful and a strong contrast to the evening of fun they had just had. It was important to stay close to the campers, as many were emotional and cried very intensely. One girl who I supported back to the cabin at the end of the program was not in my cabin or in my sharing circle but needed someone to hold her as she wept bitterly for her mother who had died six years ago saying "it's not fair; a girl needs her mother!" The campers returned to their cabin immediately after the ritual where a little gift awaited each of them but the mood was very somber and everyone was very reflective. There was almost a "cleansing" effect to this ritual as everyone awoke the following morning, which was the final day, eager to pack and prepare to see his or her family who arrived in the afternoon for lunch and a series of family activities before departing.

### Impression

The four-day program of Camp WeBelong is an intensive experience in working closely and living with bereaved children. The camp experience offers an opportunity for the children to have fun, many of whom have not had fun for a long time. They are suddenly living with peers who are all bereaved and bonds form very quickly. The actual grief work in the sharing circles takes place for just two hours each day but most of the camping activities also are done in their sharing circles and they spend a great deal of time together. Facilitators are in the cabins with the children and spend twenty-four hours together. Fernside is considerate and thoughtful in providing respite time for each

facilitator. The experience is fun and supportive for the children and proved to be extremely meaningful and significant for me in my work with bereaved children.

## Chapter Five

### A New Jewish Response to Death Education and The Support of Bereaved Children

#### **Background**

Doka writes that grieving rules are “sets of norms...that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve”.<sup>564</sup> Norms emerge out of human interaction and become part of the cultural context in which further interaction occurs. These guidelines are structured by “shoulds” and “should nots” of behaviors. As outlined in chapter two, traditional Judaism teaches that the *halachah* of mourning focuses primarily on legalities and obligations with far less emphasis on the psychological benefits and release of emotions. With the exception of a few mourning rites, the obligation of the observance of *aveilut* does not apply to minors. The teaching concerning *chinuch* as it applies to *aveilut* states explicitly that we do not train children in things that cause them pain.<sup>565</sup> An example offered is that of *keriah* which is performed on behalf of a child by an adult not for the sake of recognition of the child’s pain, but to elicit sadness in the adults present, thereby increasing honor to the deceased. There was also mixed opinion as to whether children should be taught to recite the Mourner’s *Kaddish*. This view is diametrically opposed to the findings of modern psychosocial research as outlined in chapter one that indicate clearly the need for bereaved children to feel the emotions of their grief and to be allowed to mourn openly and participate in

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<sup>564</sup> Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief*, 31

<sup>565</sup> Zevin, Rabbi Shlomo. תנח. *Talmudic Encyclopedia*. Jerusalem: Talmudic Encyclopedia Institute, 1980.  
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mourning rituals and behaviors. In a way, the avoidance of teaching children things that cause them pain is a progenitor of disenfranchised grief.

Doka writes that in wanting to protect children from having to confront death, adults want to exclude them from rituals that are painful. However, the fact remains that, whether or not they attend a funeral or participate in any ritual, they experience grief that accompanies loss. What they may not be experiencing are the support and value that come from participating in ritual. Children, he adds, respond well to rituals because they are natural approaches that allow children to act symbolically on the grief experience.<sup>566</sup> To participate and benefit from rituals, children need information, options, and support. These need to come from adults who appreciate their need to be active participants in mourning rituals and are willing to offer them such opportunities.

In their work with grieving children, James and Friedman outline five myths that adults have concerning children: Myth 1: Don't Feel Bad - telling bereaved children this line forces them to be in conflict with what they truly feel and they feel at odds with their nature forcing them to "go underground" and hide their real feelings if they perceive that others do not understand that sadness is normal. The suggestion is that what they are feeling is wrong and they learn quickly that positive emotions that adults feel more comfortable with will get them more support than negative emotions that are confronting for adults. Bereaved children thus experience emotional confusion and wonder why we should not allow ourselves to experience sad, painful or negative feelings when that is what the reality of our situation is. Feeling, therefore, is bad and other people determine

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<sup>566</sup> Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief*, 140

what we should or should not feel. In the words of James and Friedman, other people are the architects of our feelings.<sup>567</sup>

Myth 2: Replace the Loss (part 1) is concerned with an immediate promise of replacement such as a new dog whereby feelings of loss are ignored. As a result, a child cannot deal effectively with the emotions of the loss while attempting to attach once again. Moreover, the combination of myth one and myth two creates a model for handling future challenges as the child listens to others telling him not to feel bad and to replace the loss. By doing so, the value of the lost relationship is diminished and introduces an assumption that all relationships are disposable. Moreover, “replacement” of a parent with a stepparent or a new baby to replace the lost sibling can be fraught with difficulties. Early replacement conflicts with one of the tasks of grieving that requires establishing a new relationship with the deceased; inability to do so makes the development of new relationships all the more difficult. The authors write that children do not need to be “fixed”; they need to be heard. “Children need to feel bad when their hearts are broken. Don’t try to fix them with a replacement”.<sup>568</sup> They add that if a child keeps talking about the same issue over and over, it is almost always because their feelings have not yet been heard. It is crucial that we hear and acknowledge their emotions before addressing the details of the story itself. Part 2 of this myth is concerned with relationships and the necessity to deal with unfinished business; otherwise unresolved difficulties get carried forward into future relationships.<sup>569</sup>

Myth 3: Grieve Alone, creates a situation that does not provide safety for children to express their entire range of emotions and thereby sets up the child for criticism and

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<sup>567</sup> James and Friedman, 14-21

<sup>568</sup> Ibid, 27

<sup>569</sup> Ibid., 25-32



judgment. When a child is told to go to his room or to the school office to be alone in his grief, a gulf is created between him and the world. Myth 4: Be Strong, likewise, can hinder children when this means they have to support their parents and be strong for their sake, resulting in a loss of their own childhood. This presumption of strength, write James and Friedman, is false because being strong really implies a natural demonstration of emotion and real strength results in teaching children how to communicate feelings, not bury them. Myth 5: Keep Busy is a way to avoid feeling the pain of the loss. The myth that keeping busy will be a distraction and the child will not feel sad dismisses the reality and severity of the loss.<sup>570</sup> Furthermore, a very busy schedule for a grieving child is physically exhausting and can increase his vulnerability to illness and somatic complaints.

The five myths outlined above (Don't Feel Bad, Replace the Loss, Grieve Alone, Be Strong, and Keep Busy) combine together to create an unhealthy scenario for grieving children in which they do not feel free to express their emotions, cannot take the time needed to slow down and mourn, and must support others in their world. Bereaved children, however, have experienced a major upheaval in their lives and need the time and freedom to grieve as they are capable of doing given their level of development and attachment to the deceased. The denial to keep bereaved children safe in the lack of expression of their grief may create a situation of unreality for them. This distortion of the real world denies the validity of what they see, hear, and feel leading to an assault on their belief in a rational and knowable world. Not being allowed the truth, therefore,

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<sup>570</sup> Ibid, 33-47

distorts reality.<sup>571</sup> By depriving them of this right, we run the risk of creating a situation of disenfranchised grief.

The need to help children cope with grief looms large. Recent decades have demonstrated huge growth in this area among clinical caregivers but the tendency of Western society to be death denying as well as the discomfort of openly expressing emotions still limit the openness with which we deal with bereavement in general and particularly with bereavement concerning children. The notion of a child who is grieving shatters our image of childhood as an idyllic time filled with innocence and if something tragic should happen, a sweet child need not be burdened by it. This view however, simply is a matter of sweeping the dust under the carpet. The traditional Jewish view of not training children in things that cause pain similarly does not address the emotional needs of children who do experience losses of significant people in their lives. The survey of rabbis reported in Chapter Three points to a recognition of the need for understanding what bereaved children need as well as the importance of death education as part of the curriculum of our general lessons in life.

The St. Louis Bereavement Center for Young People outlined nine organizational assumptions in their approach to caring for grieving children: 1) Children and adolescents grieve 2) Education can assist them and their families through the grieving process 3) Everyone grieves in his or her unique way and there is no right or wrong way to grieve unless it harms self or others; 4) Death and dying are subjects not easily addressed; 5) Skills to cope with dying, death, and bereavement can be learned; 6) Children and teens have the ability to heal themselves especially if given love and support; 7) Group settings are conducive to the grieving process for many children, adolescents, and adults; 8) One

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<sup>571</sup> Harris, 33

never “gets over” a death of a loved one but instead learns to live with the loss. Grief is a lifelong process, whereby a new, revised relationship with the deceased is established; and 9) In one way or another, unresolved losses eventually present themselves.<sup>572</sup>

These assumptions are important principles to consider as the Jewish community grapples with how to give grieving children what they need. The synagogue and Religious school must consider implications for the child who has sustained the loss of a significant family member such as the actual loss experience itself; interpersonal and intrapersonal changes in the child; challenges faced by the child in his/her social world; ambivalent relationships that develop or come to the fore in light of the loss; and ongoing crises in the child’s life and his/her ability to adapt and cope. The important questions we need to ask are not only what the griever needs to “do” to mourn but from a programming position, what changes are needed by parents, adults, peers, teachers, helping professions, and the community at large.<sup>573</sup> This chapter focuses on the synagogue and Religious school as key stakeholders in a new Jewish approach to supporting bereaved children.

Wolfelt once spoke of Sam Leveson who said that when his father came to America from the old country, he discovered three things to his dismay: the streets were not paved with gold; most of the streets were not paved; and he had the opportunity to help pave them.<sup>574</sup> This is the role Wolfelt said grief counselors must assume; so does the Jewish community in its role of supporting bereaved children: we have the opportunity to help pave those streets. By incorporating the tenets of Judaism with the knowledge of what bereaved children need, a new Jewish response is both possible and realistic.

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<sup>572</sup> Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief*, 184

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid*, 286

<sup>574</sup> Wolfelt, Alan D. “Companioning vs. Treating: Beyond the Medical Model of Bereavement-Part 1”. *The Forum Newsletter*. 24:4, July/August 1998, p.10

## **A Framework for a New Jewish Response to Bereaved Children**

Grollman writes that Judaism offers consolation in death by reaffirming life. We read in the Torah *"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life so that you and your offspring may live"*.<sup>575</sup> As we each come to death, the final gate as he calls it, we leave behind only memories of our life achievements, attempts taken, and moments shared. We mark this final gate with tears, stories, memories, love, food and friends, and with silence. Silence, he explains, is not about passivity; rather Judaism offers four virtues that form the core of silence. 1) the first of these is hearing – the hearing of the inner voice of pain and love; 2) the second is memory that allows to us hold on to the past as we refuse to forget the joys it once held and recognizing that the deceased remains with us as he or she lives within us and therefore never truly "dies"; 3) the third virtue is action by which we honor our dead as we continue to live as they would have wished; and 4) the fourth is wisdom – every life is a teaching and we must allow the wisdom that was the person we loved and died to become a part of ourselves giving us the potential gift of deeper insight.<sup>576</sup>

Grollman outlines important basic Jewish beliefs that children need to learn including: death is real; dead bodies no longer function; Judaism focuses on life and living; memories never die and are important for us; children need honest explanations in simple words or stories; children ask about God and the soul.<sup>577</sup> Corr and McNeil propose the following necessary qualities of teachers or anyone working with bereaved children: awareness of one's own feelings and reactions to death, dying, and grief; thorough

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<sup>575</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19

<sup>576</sup> Grollman, Rabbi Earl A. "Death in Jewish Thought" in Morgan, John D. *Death and Spirituality*. Amityville: Baywood Publishing Company. 1993, p. 28

<sup>577</sup> Grollman, Rabbi Earl A. *Bereaved Children and Teens. A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1995, pp. 148-153

knowledge of the subject matter; comfortable use of the language of death; knowledge of developmental stages of childhood and of life; awareness of social changes; and, self confidence in dealing with sensitive issues.<sup>578</sup>

Parker Palmer writes of the “heart of the teacher”. Good teaching, he says, cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. Connecting with students depends less on methods used than on the degree to which a teacher can trust his or her selfhood and is willing to make that selfhood both available and vulnerable. He writes:

“Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves...The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning *heart* in its ancient sense, as a place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.

As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is the loom on which the threads are tied, the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight. Small wonder, then, that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart – and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require.”<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>578</sup> Corr and McNeil, 17

<sup>579</sup> Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1998, p. 11.

Finally, one of the most beloved of Jewish scholars, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote "in Judaism there is no higher distinction than that of being a teacher".<sup>580</sup> The combination of the writings of these thinkers creates a model we can use to offer bereaved children and even more importantly all children the education and support they need to understand what happens when a death occurs in terms of their feelings and tasks. Educating children before a death happens is of prime importance to adjustment and sensitivity when tragedy strikes.

Rando teaches that the tasks of mourning for bereaved children are the same as those for bereaved adults, however childhood carries with it unique conditions that come into play but are often overlooked. These three conditions are important considerations for synagogues and Religious schools that see children on a regular or semi-regular basis and for an extended length of time as they grow up. She draws upon the writing of Furman who says a young child's ability to remember a significant loved one may be inadequate; this child may need assistance with this even until the time of puberty. Therefore it is necessary to use pictures to help the child remember the dead person and to have special celebrations of important dates such as birthdays and anniversaries to help keep the memories alive for a young child. Adults in the child's life on an ongoing basis must reinforce the emotions the deceased had for the child. Second, children must grow up with the loss and life is full of reminders of the significant piece missing in their lives. "Firsts" will be difficult reminders that his parent or sibling is not there unlike the other children who have whole families participating in or witnessing their significant milestones. Third, young children have a special need for both a male and female figure

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<sup>580</sup> Heschel, Susanna ed. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity. Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel.* Canada:HarperCollins Canada Ltd. 1996, p. 152

to whom to respond. It helps if a consistent surrogate for the deceased parent is available although neither Furman nor Rando recommend that the surviving parent rush into a remarriage.<sup>581</sup>

### The Role of the Synagogue

The synagogue is an important institution in the Jewish community. In addition to providing the infrastructure for observance of religious life, it plays a vital role in the dissemination of information and education to its congregants, to the community at large, and to its students. The Religious School and the synagogue are partners in this regard and thus are important vehicles by which the Jewish community can support bereaved children by two initiatives: 1) By having people trained to respond effectively and appropriately to children who are grieving; and 2) By teaching children about bereavement as a part of life by finding opportunities, wherever appropriate in the school curriculum, to make death education an integral component. This is a large and demanding proposal given the reticence people experience concerning the need to address death as a topic to discuss especially with children.

Like sex education up until a few decades ago, the topic of death is not an easy one and creates discomfort for those who are confronted with the need to teach it. Judaism's focus on life can easily be used as a framework by which we approach death as a part of the lifecycle. In order to achieve this goal, death education needs to be an integrated component of the curriculum of the Religious school. There are three ways to approach this: 1) Providing professional training for all teachers and synagogue staff; 2) Finding opportunities for death education in the already existing school curriculum, such

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<sup>581</sup> Rando, Therese. *Grief, Dying, and Death. Clinical Interventions for Caregivers*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press. 1984, pp. 155-156

as holiday observances with *Yiskor* and selected Bible stories; and 3) Development of a specific unit on death education that should be taught in every class at an age appropriate level.

### Rationale for Death Education Opportunities

Supporting bereaved children is emotionally draining and brings us face to face with our own fears of mortality and randomness. In our society that does not offer open expression of feelings in general and in particular those around death, we do not often allow our own vulnerabilities to surface. Our Western culture does not provide many opportunities for children to grow up with elders living with them and witnessing the occurrence of death as a normal part of the lifecycle. Consequently, we fear death and we fear discussing death. When suddenly confronted with a personal tragedy or having to witness someone else cope with a crisis, we are uncomfortable with our own feelings of inadequacy to cope as well as with anxieties for ourselves and our loved ones. Despite our fears, we are faced with the reality that people die and sometimes those who die leave behind young children. Bereaved children need support from caring adults and a helpful environment. Ralph Klicker writes that the school has a built-in support system of peers, teachers, and counselors.<sup>582</sup> While his emphasis is on a regular full-time school, the Religious school in the synagogue can play an equally significant role.

In the endeavor to educate children about life and about Jewish life, we are challenged in finding ways to include those aspects of life that are less than pleasant. It is important that death education is incorporated and presented in such a way that it is not a taboo subject. By incorporating death education into the subjects and values already taught, it becomes a basic and accepted component of life. Moreover, teachers and other

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<sup>582</sup> Klicker, xv



staff need to know how to respond to children who are bereaved and to impart such behaviors to their students. The dissemination of philosophy, values, and behaviors are principal components of education. Behaviors develop from values and philosophies that are well grounded and internalized. The ultimate goal is to teach children about death and the need to support others within the Jewish context of mourning and loss. This education must start early with an understanding of death as a natural occurrence and what the Jewish approach is. The Jewish way of handling death and grief entails not only the observance of *mitzvot* and rituals but also the recognition of feelings of others and ourselves all within the framework of community. The teaching of *mitzvot* is less threatening for teachers because it involves teaching what to “do”; teaching about how we and others “feel” requires emotional “buy-in” on the part of the teacher and can be more intimidating. Ultimately, children can learn how to recognize their own feelings concerning death and how to support bereaved peers and adults in their world. When such situations arise, these are valuable and critical experiences for children albeit painful; preparation is of prime importance. In order to offer such preparation, we need to begin with ourselves, the educators.

### **Training of Synagogue and Religious School Professionals**

#### **Rationale**

Parker Palmer uses the metaphor of a Border collie sheepdog to describe himself as a teacher. He writes the sheepdog has four vital functions: 1) It maintains a space where the sheep can graze and feed themselves; 2) It holds the sheep together in that space, constantly bringing back strays; 3) It protects the boundaries of the space to keep dangerous predators out; and 4) When grazing ground is depleted, it moves with the

sheep to another space where they can get the food they need. Ultimately, his metaphor helps to reveal, “To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.”<sup>583</sup> Teaching death education requires truth; children need honest information and a safe environment in which to be able to feel. Teachers need to be role models for them in this regard.

The privilege of being a teacher brings with it challenges and times when we need to take risks. These risks are aimed at the ultimate goal of teaching from the point where, as Palmer says, integrity and identity meet. These are moments when we may feel vulnerable; it is critical therefore, that we examine those trigger points. Doing so with others in small groups is of extreme value. This kind of inquiry, he writes, takes us as teachers deeper than methodology; it allows us to listen to others and at the same time reflect silently on our own identity and integrity as teachers.<sup>584</sup> Such self-exploration can reveal our shadow as well as strengths as we feel vulnerable in sharing fears and concerns in preparing to teach about death. We must support each other in this endeavor. Palmer writes the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person’s soul, we must sit quietly and wait for that soul to show itself. Then we may be present to another person’s problems in a way that does not presume that we know what is right for the other person but in a way that allows that soul to find its own answers at its own level and pace.<sup>585</sup> The ability to support bereaved children is rooted in the skill of being present in this way. In order to provide a comprehensive communal response to supporting bereaved children, it is important to train the staff in its entirety. This will, in the end, result in an integrated approach with a

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<sup>583</sup> Palmer, 148

<sup>584</sup> Ibid, 147

<sup>585</sup> Ibid, 151

program that will best suit the needs of the students and teachers and Jewish synagogue professionals alike.

This training is based on a Jewish approach to learning. It is in the form of a retreat that begins Saturday evening with *Havdallah* and continues through late afternoon on Sunday. It involves the study of texts that are relevant to the topic at hand and learning in *chevruta* as well as in the large group. Each section has exercises for each participant to complete and use as the foundation for his or her thoughts and approach in subsequent exercises and discussions. In order to evaluate the effect of the training session on attitude toward teaching death education, each participant will complete an identical pre- and post-training questionnaire (Appendix K). A value will be assigned to each response for each question. A total will be computed for each questionnaire completed by the individual. Results of a paired t-test analysis will indicate the degree of change in attitude for each person as well as for the group at large.

### **Course Description for Training of Teachers and Synagogue Staff on Death Education for Children in the Religious School**

#### Saturday Evening 7-10 pm

Welcome, *Havdallah*, coffee and dessert

Pre questionnaire

Exercise 1 – Reactions to a case study

Overview of children and grief

Overview of Jewish mourning practices

Brief overview of what we do wrong

What bereaved children need

#### Sunday Morning 8 am - Noon

*Shacharit* service

Breakfast

Examining our own feelings about death

Exercise 2 (Appendix C)

Sociocultural attitudes towards death

Exercise 3 (Appendix D) and Exercise 4 (Appendix E)

Text study

Exercise 5 (Appendix F) and Exercise 6 (Appendix G)

Lunch

**Afternoon Session 1-5 pm**

Experiential exercises with expressive arts (see Appendix H)

Introduction of **FORMULA** for Focus on Life

Real situations and application of **FORMULA**

Exercise 7 (Appendix J)

Evaluation and post questionnaire

**Curriculum for the Retreat**

**Exercise 1. Case Study (Goal is to elicit feelings)**

You teach fourth grade and received a call last night from the Educator of the school who had been informed by the Rabbi of a tragedy involving Karen, one of your students. Susan and Jeff L. and their eight-year-old daughter Karen and two-year-old daughter Jennifer have been members of the congregation for several years. Karen attends both Hebrew School and Religious School in third grade. While on her way home from an evening out with friends, Susan was in a car accident and was killed instantly. Jeff is distraught and the children are crying for their mother. He is overwhelmed with the shock, having to inform Susan's parents and his own parents, and is at a loss as to how to deal with his children. He now has to make funeral arrangements and inform family and friends.

1. What do you do?
2. How are you feeling?
3. What do you know from your personal loss experiences that would help?
4. What does Judaism say about how to support Karen and her family?

### Examining Our Personal Feelings About Death

In the mid 1970s, Robert Kavanagh wrote a book in which he legitimized our discomfort concerning our emotions towards death. He said that it is normal and natural to be uncomfortable and spoke of the masks we wear to cover up those feelings in many situations in which we are insecure; the fear of the unknown is frightening. Honest recognition of these feelings frees us to make choices about whether or not to don these masks and sometimes we can go maskless instead of always needing to avoid the reality of all death and grief because we are afraid: being in touch with those latent feelings can be empowering. He writes “ what is so wrong with feeling a modicum of fear and uneasiness without running to hide? Such feelings are as normal and natural as death...for practiced and unpracticed alike, it is normal to feel uneasy around death. And it is not abnormal to admit or show it...let me assure you it is okay to feel uneasy or afraid. It is okay to want to run, to send floral wreath or mass cards instead of self....It is okay to feel whatever is real. Feelings have no morality. They are neither good nor bad, always ethically neutral...Once we discover the nature and extent of our visceral feelings, it helps to counter-attack. It facilitates growth to experience what we fear without trying so hard to mask our reactions. Uneasy in the presence of the dying? Visit them and stay longer than needed. Fearful of open tears? Visit grief-stricken friends....Soon we will find that others can accept our clumsiness whenever we can.”<sup>586</sup>

In addition to being cognizant of our own personal feelings around death, we need to be knowledgeable about the societal attitude towards death within the context in which we live. Each society has its own response to death and belief concerning how it fits into its view of life. Rando outlines three societal patterns of response to death: death-

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<sup>586</sup> Kavanagh, Robert. *Facing Death*. Baltimore: Penguin Books. 1974, pp. 22-27.

accepting, death-defying, and death-denying. Primitive societies such as those of the Fiji-Islanders are death-accepting and view death as a natural and inevitable part of the life cycle. The early Egyptians had a death-defying society believing that death did not take anything away and possessions were taken to the next life. Western society is a death-denying culture in which death is avoided, people are sent to die in hospitals and in many cases when people need human comfort and companionship the most, they are left alone in a hospital room to wait for death on their own.<sup>587</sup>

## **Exercise 2 Early Experiences Influencing Reactions to Loss and Death (Appendix C)**

### **Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Death**

Lifton writes of six variables that are contributing factors to the increased difficulty Americans have in facing death: 1) urbanization forced individuals to move to large cities away from the farms and nature that forced the continual witnessing of life and death; 2) exclusion of the aged and dying by segregating them into nursing homes and hospitals creates a fear of aging and death and removes death from occurring at home where it was once a natural occurrence for everyone to witness; 3) movement towards the nuclear family without the extended family of elderly relatives minimized the exposure to death and the accompanying support as well as minimal understanding of death as part of the natural cycle of life; 4) secularization from religion removed the special meaning of death along with the notion of immortality of the deceased; 5) advances in medical technology have given humans more of a sense of control with less need for theological or philosophical meanings of death; and 6) mass death with war and nuclear destruction has removed the significance of the impact of death on society. On a more positive note, Lifton also suggests five modes by which we can find some comfort in dealing with death

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<sup>587</sup> Rando, 5

that provides some form of immortality: the biological mode, social mode, religious mode, natural mode, and experiential transcendence mode (states beyond the confines of ordinary daily life).<sup>588</sup>

**Exercise 3 will address the application of Judaism to this framework (Appendix D)**

**Exercise 4. How do the five modes outlined by Lifton apply to Judaism? (Appendix E)**

### Text Study

**אם אין אני לי מי לי<sup>589</sup>**

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? - Rabbi Hillel*

Although this is not intended to be a workshop or training session for psychologists or grief counselors, anybody working with those who are bereaved is touched by the pain of the other person and vulnerable to emotions evoked in him or herself that may interfere with being able to easily offer the needed support. Bowlby writes “the loss of a loved person is one of the most intensely painful experiences any human being can suffer, and not only is it painful to experience, but also painful to witness, if only because we’re so impotent to help”<sup>590</sup> We cannot bring back the dead person for the bereaved and watching the pain of someone else, a child in particular, can elicit feelings of resentment, frustration, and helplessness. It is essential, therefore, that we are aware of how bereavement in others can affect us.

Worden writes of three ways that working with bereaved individuals can affect the helper. First, working with persons who are grieving can make us aware of our own losses and may trigger some painful feelings. This is especially true if we are supporting

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<sup>588</sup> Rando, 7-8

<sup>589</sup> Rabbi Hillel, M. Avot 1:14

<sup>590</sup> Bowlby, 7

someone who has experienced a loss similar to that of our own. Second, the loss experienced by the bereaved person may represent a loss that is feared by the person who is the helper; this can interfere with our ability to be effective as we support the bereaved. The third area is concerned with existential anxiety and awareness of one's own personal death. Working with a person who has sustained a loss puts us in a confronting situation as we are forced to face the inevitability of our own death.<sup>591</sup> This is not easy and can create an uncomfortable situation in which we want to cut short the relationship or avoid talking about the loss with the individual at a time when it may be most needed.

To assist in providing the best support we can, Worden also proposes the need to explore our own history of losses. The advantages to this are twofold: by doing so, we can better understand the process of mourning, the experience of grief, and how healing through mourning can occur; and, by exploring our personal losses, we can understand what resources are available to the bereaved. This concerns what was helpful and equally important, what was not helpful and also helps us to appreciate what our own coping style is.<sup>592</sup> The Zeigarnik psychological principle advises that an uncompleted task will be remembered until it is completed. It is important for us in our work with bereaved children to be aware of the personal losses we have not adequately grieved for and to explore what we need to do in our own mourning tasks.<sup>593</sup>

Supporting someone who is bereaved can be emotionally draining and exhausting. It is easy to take on the pain of the person we are watching but it is imperative that we find a way to find balance for ourselves. Rest and recreation, proper nutrition, exercise,

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<sup>591</sup> Worden, J. William. *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy. A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. New York: Springer Publishing Company. 2002, pp. 173-174

<sup>592</sup> Ibid, 174-175

<sup>593</sup> Ibid



outdoor activities in nature, prayer, friendship and love are critical components to life that need to balance the sadness we encounter in helping a bereaved person. We need to find ways to nourish our own souls in whichever way proves most meaningful to each one of us. Jewish tradition teaches the significance of Shabbat in taking a day to slow down and re-focus and to relish in the peace and joy of this beautiful tradition. Regular Torah study, celebration of holidays and festivals, time with family and friends, volunteer work in the community, and connection with others, nature, and our bodies contribute to our need to replenish ourselves spiritually.<sup>594</sup> As Rabbi Hillel implied, if we deplete ourselves we cannot give to others, therefore, we are responsible for taking care of ourselves first; we will be healthier and stronger for it as we give to others.

#### **Exercise 5. Questionnaire on Self-Care (Appendix F)**

**כי אני יהוה רפאך<sup>595</sup>**

*For I, Adonai, am your healer*

Jewish tradition teaches that God is the ultimate healer. Professionals and helpers are instruments by which God brings about healing. As individuals who support the bereaved who are suffering, we often have the privilege of walking alongside them and helping to make a difference but Rabbi Flam warns us we witness, ease, and accompany but we must be careful not to interfere inappropriately. We need to remember our role and make sure that our own ego needs or false understandings of our role do not “obscure the Divine”; we need to know our place. The words from the *Amidah* that we recite in our

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<sup>594</sup> Flam, Rabbi Nancy. “Spiritual Nurture for Jewish Pastoral Caregivers”. In Friedman, Rabbi Dayle A. Ed. *Jewish Pastoral Care*. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. 2005, pp. 220-221

<sup>595</sup> Exodus 15:27

daily liturgy reminds us continually that God is the source of all healing:

<sup>596</sup> ברוך אתה, יי, רופא החולים *Blessed are you Adonai, source of all healing.*

As we are blessed with the (sometimes painful) gift of guiding or assisting someone and are privileged ultimately to witness signs of healing, we must remember that we are not the source of the healing. Jews are taught that we can make changes in the world by our actions; *tikkun olam* is an important tenet of Judaism but humility is needed on our part; we are partners with God. Until healing begins, someone else's grief is difficult for us to bear. The words <sup>597</sup> בידו אפקיד רוחי *Into God's hands I entrust my spirit* acknowledge that we have done our best in assisting and the rest is up to God.<sup>598</sup>

<sup>599</sup> אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ

*Please God, heal her, please*

Moses speaks these pleading words to God when Miriam is stricken with illness during their wanderings in the wilderness. These five words have been created into a *Misheberach* prayer that is chanted in synagogues. Although in the Torah, the words are used to petition God for recovery from a physical ailment, the notion of healing today is broader and encompasses healing of body, mind, and spirit. Healing from the pain of the loss of a significant loved one is part of the process of mourning; it is a natural and healthy outcome and it needs help. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky writes that two things about this narrative in the Torah remain perfectly clear and not only are evident throughout Jewish history but are also replicated in our own life experiences: God's presence brings healing,

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<sup>596</sup> Amidah liturgy

<sup>597</sup> Adon Olam liturgy

<sup>598</sup> Ibid, 215

<sup>599</sup> Numbers 12:13

and, any individual can impact the healing of another.<sup>600</sup> We have the opportunity to make a difference for someone. It is important for us to know how we can do so in the best way. Supporting another person means helping them in a way that works for them; we need to explore how we react to that need. Being aware of our uneasiness is critical as we endeavour to assist someone through his or her personal storm to the best of our ability.

<sup>601</sup> רָאוּ כִּי-גָדֹל הַכָּאֵב מְאֹד

*They saw how very great was his (Job's) suffering*

### The Book of Job

In times of sadness, we are often reminded of the story of Job, a good, upright and God-fearing man who lost his possessions, animals, and all his children. He is overcome with grief and his friends try to comfort him but result in making him feel responsible for his ill fate and he responds with resentment and has a spiritual crisis. We question why a good person is punished so unjustly and we feel angry with the friends who tell him that he must have done something wrong to deserve such treatment by God. Ultimately, this story teaches us that we cannot know the answer to some questions; we do not know why some things happen and the role that God plays in them.

Rabbi Harold Kushner author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, deals with this struggle. In the complexity of dealing with emotional trauma that results from personal tragedy, Kushner raises several important issues including the randomness of events, God and nature, strength and courage as gifts from God, God's inability to cope as well, our personal emotions, not getting what we pray for, the importance of

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<sup>600</sup> Olitzky, Rabbi Kerry M. *Jewish Paths Toward Healing and Wholeness. A Personal Guide to Dealing With Suffering*. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. 2000, p.45

<sup>601</sup> Job 2:13

community, the power of love, and finally, the thrust of his writing as expressed in the following question: “what do I do now that this has happened?” after one can rise beyond the question “why did it happen?”

Kushner reminds us that it is difficult to accept the reality that sometimes things happen for no reason. In our systematized world, we are accustomed to making connections with fragments of information that result in a reasonable conclusion. He asks the question: why can't we let the universe have a few rough edges?<sup>602</sup> We feel threatened by such unpredictability. When events do not follow the expected or natural order, we experience chaos. Kushner emphasizes that these events do not reflect God's choices, but rather deals with the free will of humans or with randomness. He teaches that chaos is evil because it has the potential of preventing us from seeing God's goodness<sup>603</sup>. God gives strength and courage to people who have to suffer through no fault of their own. Kushner voices the question we have all pondered: where is God at times of tragedies?

The situation of a bereaved child leads us to ask the same question. Where is God? What did a young innocent child do to deserve such “punishment”? We are overcome with the need to know the unknowable answer to these questions but in dealing with our helplessness in attempting to find that solution and explain it to others and ourselves, we sometimes fall prey to behaving as Job's friends did. Kushner actually uses the example of a bereaved child to elucidate this point. He says to try to make a bereaved child “feel better” by explaining to him that God wanted his parent and that parent is now happily with God in heaven where it is beautiful, deprives the child of the right to grieve.

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<sup>602</sup> Kushner, Rabbi Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Anchor Books. 1981, p. 54

<sup>603</sup> Ibid, 61

The child has a right to feel angry, sad, and afraid; it would be completely inappropriate for him to feel happy so why would we force him to be happy when he is distraught as everyone else is over the loss of a significant loved one.<sup>604</sup> He needs to have his experience and his feelings validated and we have no right to deprive him of these. Job's friends thought they were helping but the result was not "helpful" in the least.

אל תפרוש מן הצבור<sup>605</sup>

*Do not separate yourself from the community*

Jews in the form of community observe occasions of joy as well as grief. This is an important and vital principle of Judaism. Rabbi Karyn Kedar writes that the desire for community is not necessarily the search for friendship but rather for shared responsibility.<sup>606</sup> This means that members of the community not only share in the joys and sorrows of life, but seek to find their sameness in life. Shared responsibility means that others respond when one is in need. She believes that to be fully actualized as an individual, one must belong to a larger community, "a community that requires that you break down walls of isolation, a community that will respond to you – and that will ask you to respond in kind".<sup>607</sup>

**Exercise 6. Remembering - Using the texts while remembering a death that occurred in your family (Appendix G)**

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<sup>604</sup> Ibid, 109

<sup>605</sup> Pirke Avot 2:4

<sup>606</sup> Kedar, Rabbi Karyn D. "Community" in Matlins, Stuart M. ed. *The Jewish Lights Spirituality Handbook. A Guide to Understanding, Exploring, & Living a Spiritual Life*. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. 2001, p. 134.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid, 135

## **Proposal for Death Education Within a Larger School Curriculum**

### **Death Education Model: A Jewish FORMULA for Focus on Life**

F =	Feelings
O =	Others (community)
R =	Rituals
M =	<i>Mitzvot</i>
U =	Understanding
L =	Life cycle
A =	Always

Each program will have a component relating to each of these seven categories

### **Rationale for a Jewish FORMULA for Focus on Life**

Children have a curiosity about death and how it fits into the bigger world. Young children in their egocentricity are concerned with how everything affects them, death being no exception. While the goal is to provide death education to all children beginning at a very young age, the reality is such that it will take several years for such education to become a standard unit in most school curricula. The fact remains that some children experience the loss of a significant loved one and suddenly their world is no longer the same. Moreover, the other children in their world do not know how to make sense out of what has happened to their peer. Therefore, children need a death education program that addresses multiple factors: a Jewish approach to death education encompasses learning about *mitzvot* (M), and rituals (R) of mourning within the context of others (O) in community. These are probably the areas that have been taught the most if any death education has taken place at all; they are the most tangible aspects of death education. FORMULA for Focus on Life offers a means of touching on the human components as well, that is, feelings (F), understanding (U), and always (A), thereby integrating all six aspects of death and mourning education.

Wolfelt writes of the six needs of mourning for children. With the help of others, they need to: acknowledge the reality of the death; feel the pain of the loss; remember the person who died; develop a new self-identity; search for meaning; and receive ongoing support from caring adults.<sup>608</sup> A Jewish **FORMULA** for Focus on Life offers a framework that allows these to be acknowledged for the child who is grieving as well as for the child who is learning about death. Being aware of feelings of self and others, learning that the Jewish way in death and mourning involves others in community, learning about the *mitzvot* around death especially comforting the bereaved, participating in rituals, understanding the intensity of death regardless of age, learning about death as a natural part of the lifecycle, and knowing that death is for always but so too is memory all address the needs of the grieving child as well as the information that nonbereaved children need to know.

Bereaved children deal with many complex and simultaneous issues. They often “lose” the other parent temporarily when one parent dies or even both when a sibling dies. Depending on their age level, their understanding of death interferes with the ability of adults to offer what they need. Bereaved children develop fears that nonbereaved children do not such as fear of the death of another family member or their own death. Bereaved children feel different from their peers and teenagers may feel embarrassed. Worden conducted a controlled study of bereaved children and studied thirty-five factors of grief, following the children over a period of two years. He observed that some behaviors tended to become more intensified as time passed, contrary to what one might presume. Health problems, accidents, and changes in self-esteem are some examples of these findings. Bereaved children, when compared to their nonbereaved controls,

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<sup>608</sup> Wolfelt, Alan. *Healing a Child's Grieving Heart*, 3-8

believed they were less in control over life's circumstances (locus of control) both one and two years after the death of their loved one.<sup>609</sup> Worden concluded that loss of a mother is worse for most children than loss of a father especially as one moves through the second year of bereavement; mother loss brings more daily life changes and for most families, he found, the loss of the emotional caretaker of the family. Furthermore, mother loss is associated with more emotional/behavioral problems including higher levels of anxiety, more acting-out behavior, and lower self-esteem.<sup>610</sup> The upheaval of family life and adaptation to the loss often leaves bereaved children in a "no man's land". Worden's study raises our awareness that the myth of "time heals" as pointed out by James and Friedman does not necessarily apply as some of his results have shown.

#### Objectives for Death Education: A Jewish **FORMULA** for Focus on Life

- To teach death education within a Jewish context
- To teach not just rituals and *halachah* but their significance and to recognize how we feel and recognizing feelings of others
- To teach that grief and mourning do not end with *shivah* but are ongoing throughout a person's life
- To adapt the existing Religious school program to this model
- To develop a comprehensive program beginning with pre-school level that is part of a curriculum about bringing God into our Jewish lives
- To focus on community in Jewish life

#### What makes A Jewish **FORMULA** for Focus on Life concept Jewish?

- We study together
- We learn on an ongoing basis
- We carry on traditions
- We examine the sources where applicable
- We remember
- We fulfill *mitzvot*
- We focus on community as well as ourselves
- We care for others
- We take care of ourselves at the same time; this allows us to examine our own feelings and even have fun

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<sup>609</sup> Worden, Children and Grief, 72-73

<sup>610</sup> Ibid, 95



- We understand the importance of community – no one is to be left alone and we do not isolate ourselves – if we do temporarily, we allow others to help us
- We learn that death is forever and we can't know why but learn that we are partners with God to help others or we can let others help us
- We remember formally on anniversaries and four times yearly plus informally; this keeps the deceased person "with" us
- We learn of the significance of names given to babies of deceased family members

### Analysis of each Domain of **FORMULA**

#### Feelings

- Recognizing how we feel
- Recognizing how others feel
- Examples: scared, angry, sad, guilty, embarrassed, jealous, lonely, missing the person who died, feeling different, awkward around bereaved people
- Recognizing these are felt on many levels
- Understanding healing needs support

#### Others (Community)

- People don't grieve alone
- We help others
- We need family and friends
- Schools can help us
- Synagogue can help us
- Going to synagogue services can help if we want to go
- Professionals in the community can help us
- Organizations like Fernside can help
- Books are good
- Music can be a help to reach out
- Libraries can help

#### Ritual

- Helps us to face reality even for very young children
- Consider rites that are important in Judaism for death and mourning: funeral, *keriah*, *shivah*, *shloshim*, unveiling; meal of condolence; shoveling earth and hearing the sound on the coffin; *tahara*; *tzedaka*; *yizkor*; *yahrzeit*; planting trees; prayer
- Consider rites of other cultures

#### Mitzvot

- Attending funeral
- Attending burial
- Accompanying mourners home
- Visiting during *shivah*

- Helping with the meal of condolence
- Reciting *Kaddish* and/or attending services
- Giving *tzedaka*
- Remembering the person
- Supporting the bereaved on an ongoing basis beyond *shivah*
- Remembering grief is ongoing

### Understanding

- Judaism teaches that we must face the reality that a death occurred
- Recognizing something serious has happened and the person's life has changed
- If you are bereaved – knowing you are now different
- Knowing you did not cause the death of your loved one
- Knowing the bereaved person needs you
- Knowing you need others if you are bereaved
- Understanding others may be uncomfortable around you
- Understanding you may be uncomfortable around people who are bereaved
- Knowing death is difficult to cope with
- Knowing healing is hard and takes time and help
- Knowing it is OK to play and have fun sometimes
- Knowing that others may feel bad and want to help but don't know how to help
- Understanding that we carry on old traditions of Judaism that are very important

### Life-cycle

- Learning that death is the end of life (age related education for this)
- Learning that death is a natural part of the life cycle
- Learning that death is one of many life events; sometimes these events occur out of the order we expect

### Always

- The change caused by the death of someone significant always changes a person
- People who are bereaved need your help always, not only at the time of the death
- We always need others to care about us
- We always have different needs at different times
- We always want to remember good times with the person who died but we also need to always remember the person even some of the sad times with him/her
- Don't ignore grief or stop talking; it must always be acknowledged to stay healthy
- Always be a friend-you can't fix it but you must always care
- The dead person will always be with you in a different way now
- You will always have memories of him/her
- You will always be affected by your loss
- You will always have an important role as you help others
- A baby can be named to carry the memory of the dead person and that will always be a nice way of remembering
- Your loved one will always be at the cemetery and you can visit

- A tree planted in memory of your loved one will always represent life

### **Finding Opportunities to Adapt the Existing Curriculum to A Jewish FORMULA for Focus on Life**

The existing curricula of Religious Schools are rich in lessons on Jewish values, holidays, Bible stories, and connection to traditions and Israel. These themes can be adapted to include death education using A Jewish FORMULA for Focus on Life. Two examples are offered here to demonstrate how death education can be a part of a lesson plan that is already utilized as part of a regular curriculum. By adding a death education component, students learn how death is an integral component of Jewish life. The first example is an adapted lesson plan for teaching about Passover and incorporates two important rituals we observe at Passover: the Seder and the *Yizkor* service.

#### **I. Lesson Plan for Teaching about the Passover Seder Incorporating Death Education using A Jewish FORMULA for Focus on Life (Sixth Grade)**

##### **Objectives for the Students**

- To learn of the significance of the Seder
- To learn about the *Yizkor* service
- To understand the symbolic significance of life and death at the time of this Festival

##### **Introduction**

- Holidays are times that we spend with family and friends. We are happy that we are together for these happy times but sometimes we also feel sad as we remember those people who have died and cannot be with us at these happy celebrations

##### **Set Induction:**

- Present a Seder plate and a *Yahrzeit* candle to introduce how life and death are commemorated in the festival of Passover

##### **Activities**

##### **Part 1**

- Discuss the symbolism of the items on the Seder plate with a focus on those that represent life – the egg and the green vegetable

- Discuss some of the symbolism of Passover as it pertains to the many themes of the holiday
- Do a Passover Seder activity

Snack (of Passover related foods)

### Part 2

- Read the book The Saddest Time by Norma Simon
- Discuss the *Yahrzeit* candle and explain that each one of the three festivals has a *Yizkor* service in which we remember people who have died and that is a way to include them in our observance of this holiday
- Discuss the significance of memory
- Ask students to think of people who have died and how they remember them
- Are these people who used to attend their Seder? How does it feel when they are not there now?
- What could we do to keep their memory alive?
- What is the meaning of the *Yahrzeit* candle and how does this ritual help us remember people who have died?

### Part 3

- Conduct a *Yizkor* service with age appropriate readings and Mourner's *Kaddish* which they know at this grade level
- Distribute samples of Psalms and poetic readings and ask the students to work in groups and choose three readings to arrange in the order they like, to compile a list of names of people they know who have died, and to include Mourner's *Kaddish*
- Each group conducts their *Yizkor* service
- Students make a memory box to take home

### Closing

- Students discuss how it feels to create and participate in a *Yizkor* service in their class
- Discuss how adults or bereaved children would feel during a real *Yizkor* service as they remember their loved ones and how we could support them in their sadness
- Students discuss the significance of life and death symbols and observance in the Festival of Passover
- Students discuss the feelings they experience as they observe the life component of Passover and compare them to those feelings they experience as they observe the death component of the same holiday
- Discuss why it is important to have a service for remembering people who have died

New words learned from this lesson:

- *Yahrzeit*

- *Yizkor*
- *Kaddish*

Application of FORMULA to this lesson:

- F= Students explore their own feelings around losses they may have experienced; around emotions concerning death and the significance of remembering people who have died; they acknowledge how others would feel as they remember their loved ones; they learn to appreciate the mix of emotions around the holiday and around both life and death.
- O= Students are encouraged to think about the joy of celebrating with others and to consider how others would feel as they remember their dead loved ones during *Yizkor* and as they must grapple with their absence during the holiday.
- R= Students learn of the rituals around the Seder and the symbols of the food; they learn of the ritual of *Yizkor* and its importance at the Festivals; they learn about the ritual of Mourner's *Kaddish* as we remember those who have died. This ties in to the Exodus concerning our ancestors who went before us so that we may have "freedom". Remembering our ancestors is one theme of the Passover Seder and remembering our ancestors in *Yizkor* carries forward one of the important messages of Passover. These rituals during the same week bring together past and present as we observe the notion of rebirth.
- M= Students learn of the *mitzvah* of the Seder and the *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved; they honor the dead by announcing their names and choosing readings for a *Yizkor* service to remember them by.
- U= Students understand that the celebration of the Festivals occurs despite the absence of loved ones in a physical sense; the deceased remain with us during the celebration as we remember them in a *Yizkor* service.
- L= Students learn of the lifecycle through the symbolic foods on the Seder plate representing Life and of death as we discuss the *Yizkor* service commemorating the dead.
- A= Students learn that Passover is always celebrated and always includes acknowledgment of those no longer living; the dead are always remembered at significant moments in our tradition; memory is a vital part of Judaism and always allows us to keep the dead person a part of us; they learn of the continuity of tradition and learn the ritual of *Yizkor* is always a part of the Jewish people.

## II. Lesson plan for teaching about *Mitzvot* and *Rachamim* Incorporating Death Education using A Jewish FORMULA for Focus on Life (First Grade)

### Objectives for the Students

- To learn the word *rachamim* (kindness)
- To learn the word *mitzvah*
- To learn of the importance of performing *mitzvot*
- To learn about some *mitzvot* we should do
- To learn that *mitzvot* strengthen our relationship with God and our community

### Introduction

- God created the world so that we all can live in a safe world where we can work and play together in happiness. Not everyone is lucky enough to be healthy or live in a safe place. Sometimes people have problems and we have to help them. We also have to take care of animals and our environment. Showing *rachamim* and performing *mitzvot* help to make the world a better place for everyone.

### Set Induction:

- Present plastic models of an animal that is endangered; an empty juice bottle; a picture of a child who is starving; a picture of a person in a hospital bed; and, a picture of people standing in front of a grave at a cemetery

### Activities

#### Part 1

- Discuss *rachamim* and ask how the students show kindness to their parents, siblings, friends, etc.
- Discuss *mitzvah* (it means commandment, good deed) and how we each are commanded to fulfill the commandments
- Talk about each item on the desk and ask what we can do to show *rachamim* and what kind of *mitzvah* would help

#### Part 2

- Using the Behrman House booklet (Appendix I) entitled "In God's Image", introduce the idea that we are all different with different features and unique personalities but we are created in the image of God
- Pass around a mirror for everyone to look into
- Have students pair up to find physical differences between themselves
- Teach the words *b'tzelem Elohim* – "in God's image" and teach the importance of being like God and helping others
- Have students give ideas for the section in the pamphlet about good things to do when:
  - A friend is sick...
  - I find something that doesn't belong to me...
  - Guests visit the house...

- I want to show I love and respect my parents...

**Add:**

1. Good things I can do to help the environment...
  2. Good things I can do when someone I know is sad because somebody important died...
- Introduce the *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved
  - Exercise of tracing your hand
  - Ask someone sitting near you to trace his or her hand on the same square to show that everyone lends a helping hand
  - Discuss *mitzvah* of *tzedaka* as shown on last page
  - Discuss giving of *tzedaka* as well in memory of a loved one

**Part 3**

- Hand out activity sheet entitled What I Can Do (Appendix I) that allows children to be creative about how to do *mitzvot* using different parts of their body
- Discuss how to help birds in winter when it is hard for them to find food
- Make a bird feeder using Popsicle sticks and fill each one with birdfeed – teach Jewish tradition says “It is forbidden for a person to eat before he/she feeds his/her animals” (Berakhot 20a)
- Read the book Goodbye Mousie by Robie H. Harris and discuss what we could do to help the little boy who is sad about his pet mouse who died.

**Closing**

- Connect the value of *rachamim* to the lesson on *mitzvot* by asking “how does it feel when we help others?”; “how does it feel when others help us?”
- Ask “why do we feel good?”
- Discuss ideas for the *tzedaka* that we collect each week in class
- Close with the notion that we care about each other in good times and in difficult times; when people or animals are hungry we help by giving food; we help animals who are endangered; we recycle to help the environment; and when people are sad because someone special died, we help by visiting and being there to comfort them

**New words learned from this lesson**

- *Rachamim*
- *Mitzvah / mitzvot*
- *B'tzelim Elohim*
- *Tzedaka* review

### Application of **FORMULA** to this lesson:

- F=** Students are given the opportunity to explore their feelings around what it is like to know others are less fortunate; they can feel what it is like to help others; they can feel what it is like to know they are following God's ways when they perform *mitzvot*; they are sensitized to sadness others feel when someone dies; if they share a personal loss of a relative or pet, they can feel their own sadness or witness the sadness of a peer who shares; they are exposed to the range of feelings around loss as they hear of the little boy in the book "Goodby Mousie" who experiences a range of emotions around the loss of his pet and friend.
- O=** Students are sensitized to the difficulties that others in the community may have; they learn it is important to help others and we are commanded to help others; sometimes we need others to help us; when someone special dies, others must be caring and support those who are mourning; we lend a helping hand to other people and they lend a helping hand to us so that everyone helps each other; the environment and wildlife are other parts of the world that need our help also.
- R=** The giving of *tzedaka* is a ritual done in the classroom every week; some *mitzvot* are rituals also because we do them as part of our culture and heritage; rituals such as burying Mousie as the boy did in the book is something important that we do.
- M=** This entire lesson is about *mitzvot* and comforting the bereaved is a very important *mitzvah* for us to help people who are sad because someone died; taking care of animals is so important that we must feed them before ourselves; remembering Mousie is very important for the little boy in the book.
- U=** Students understand that *rachamim* is expressed by the performance of *mitzvot* and caring about other people, animals, and the environment. By recognizing that we feel good when we help others, students learn that *mitzvot* help us to make the world a better place; sometimes doing *mitzvot* is not easy such as comforting somebody who is sad because a loved one died, but it is important to help others; remembering someone who died is a special thing to do as illustrated by the little boy in the book.
- L=** Students learn of the lifecycle through the discussion of various *mitzvot*, for example, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, etc. Death is a lifecycle event that invites fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved.
- A=** Students learn that *mitzvot* must always be done because we always must be aware of caring for others and our world; we always need to lend a helping hand and be willing to receive a helping hand from others when we need it.

### **Exercise 7. Real Situations and Application of FORMULA for Focus on Life (Appendix J)**



### **New Formalized Classes That Utilize A Jewish FORMULA for Focus on Life**

Another option for providing death education to students in Religious Schools is to create a new curriculum that is geared specifically to this objective. Death education would ideally be instituted in the early years of Religious School and be carried forward at each grade level with programs that are developed accordingly for each developmental level. The subject matter is complex and challenging. The recommendation here is to utilize the already excellent curricula that are available. Examples of such curricula both within a Jewish framework are found in the following books:

Kadden, Barbara Binder and Bruce Kadden. *Teaching Jewish Life Cycle*. Denver: A.R.E. Publishing, Inc., 1997.

- This book has excellent programs on death education for primary, intermediate, and secondary students for Religious School and for Hebrew School. There are also ideas for teaching programs aimed at adults and families as well as thoughts for school-wide initiatives.

Marcus, Audrey Friedman, Bissell, Sherry and Karen S. Lipschutz. *Death, Burial & Mourning in the Jewish Tradition*. Denver: Alternatives in Religious Education Inc., 1976.

- This book and its accompanying Teacher Guide, although quite old now, offer excellent ideas for death education aimed at Grade 5 through High School in the form of a Mini-course. It is very comprehensive and creative.

### **Additional Suggestions**

- Emphasize mourning is ongoing, not just at time of crisis; people need help all the time

- Have a time each month when significant deaths are recognized eg. Monthly *yahrzeit* – light a candle at start of class or plug in light
- Add to the list of *yahrzeit* each month
- Have pets in class to watch how they live and die; have a funeral and burial
- Acknowledge death of pets students have at home and have a memorial service on a regular basis as this occurs
- Have cemetery programs: what does a tombstone teach; learn about burial; do programs that do not make cemeteries seem creepy but a beautiful place that is hallowed
- Memory-have students as a class do something on anniversary of death of a loved one or pet to honor the deceased
- Teach students how important it is to allow bereaved to express grief
- Lesson on *tahara* and respect for the dead
- Have programs that teach not only what we “do” but how we “feel” around death (Use Krementz Jill. How It Feels When A Parent Dies. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.)
- Help students remember some negative characteristics of deceased as well: Talmud teaches we do not credit the deceased with characteristics they did not have
- Ask other congregations for pen pals for bereaved students so they could share together
- Utilize the many excellent books (Appendix L) and videos (Appendix M) for children on grief and bereavement

## **Some Suggestions for New Death Education Initiatives**

### **Personal and Family Level (Concerning personal loss of family, friends, self, pets)**

- What is death, rituals, mourning, childhood behaviors as reactions to death, a safe forum for telling of personal losses, Jewish interpretation of death, Jewish prayers, songs and liturgical readings
- Different causes of death (natural, illness, accidents, suicide, murder, natural disaster, terrorism, war, SIDS, miscarriage, abortion, etc)
- Jewish mourning, prayers, and burial customs
- Stigma associated with some deaths (suicide, AIDS, murder)-how does Judaism view these?
- Burial customs surrounding these deaths
- Discussion of different feelings and emotions
- Support to families, support groups for children and for families, siblings, dying children
- Buddy system, teaching prayers, encouraging kids to teach others, having children's funerals and memorial services, memory activities, discussion of Jewish tradition of naming new babies after deceased relatives to carry on their memory, *tzedakah*, *yahrzeit*, *yizkor*, support groups specifically for children, drawing on Jewish stories, songs, poetry, led by multi team approach of therapists, rabbi, educator, music and art specialists, etc., JCC programs, funeral homes, and synagogues joint effort-maybe rotating basis, meditation, information on Jewish burial

- Planning of Jewish funerals and cemetery rituals (burial, monuments, unveiling);  
*shivah, shloshim*
- Significance of Mourner's *Kaddish*
- Rituals for burial of sacred texts
- Provision of lists of professional resources for families
- Inclusion of the child or teen in family decisions
- Encouraging recognition of the need to reach out and accept support
- Emphasizing the reality that grief is not linear and has peaks and valleys
- Removing the sense of "aloneness" by encouraging group dynamics and caring

#### Community Level

- Death in families of friends, what to do, how to support others, how to welcome classmates back after a loss
- Offering permission to grieve
- How to support a classmate or friend who is dying
- Death education in schools and through synagogues, funeral homes
- Visits to hospitals, funeral homes, cemeteries, *shivah* homes
- Ongoing participation in *mitzvot* in the community
- Involvement in volunteer organizations for illnesses of which loved ones died
- Community healing services
- Caring Community Committees of children for children supervised by adults
- Emotional and financial support for families and single parents
- Provision of materials for families to borrow

- Removal of stigma associated with a family or individual “needing” help with emphasis more on the obligation of community in our tradition to care for others
- Death due to terrorism worldwide

### **Death Topics in the Greater World**

- War
- Disaster
- Natural problems
- Space shuttle and manmade risks
- Global projects
- Tree planting
- The significance of *Tikkun olam* (repairing the world)

### **The Need for A Systemic Response**

The need for the support of bereaved children is a serious concern that has yet to be addressed in a widespread way. This is a single attempt to address the gap in our Religious School system that is reflective of our societal discomfort around the subject of death. The logic inherent in this program is that support of bereaved children will follow after death education is an integrated component of the school curriculum. No doubt, this will take several if not many years to occur. This monumental task however requires more than the training of teachers and synagogue staff alone; we need a systemic response to training others in how to support bereaved children. Other adults, elders, *madrichim* (youth teacher assistants), teacher assistants, secretaries of the school and synagogue, and even caretaking staff need similar training in order to provide a Jewish

response in a solid approach that incorporates Jewish traditions around mourning and grief, knowledge of children and bereavement and what they need, knowing what other synagogues and schools are doing, and utilization of excellent resources that are available

## Conclusion

The early loss of a significant person in a child's life has repercussions that can last a lifetime. One never "gets over" the loss of a person with whom a meaningful relationship has been experienced. Added to this difficulty is the unfortunate reality that children are challenged by numerous complications when they are bereaved. Age and level of cognitive development at the time of the loss affect their ability to understand on an intellectual level. An incomprehensible sense of abandonment with its accompanying emotions of fear, sadness, and anger makes coping with the loss of a close loved one almost intolerable for a child. The multiple secondary losses that bereaved children face add to emotional and social isolation as they feel different and often alone in the world where their peers still have intact families and cannot understand the intensity of the pain their friend is experiencing.

Over the last several decades, much has been written about the understanding of childhood bereavement and the needs of the grieving child. Although we have endeavored to protect children from difficult issues, this has led us to realize that children do not function well when they are excluded from mourning rituals or sent away at the time of a death never to find out what happened to their loved one. Specialists today emphasize the necessity of recognizing the needs of grieving children to grieve openly. As adults, we need to support them and offer opportunities to do so. Adults who were bereaved as children express profound loss that stayed with them since the time of the death. These are people who constantly re-grieve as they reach meaningful milestones in their lives and are reminded of the absence of their special person.

Attachment to a parent very early in the life of a child plays a monumental role in many facets of that child's life: loss of that significant individual brings reactions that are extreme in the child's ability to develop and interact emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Complex changes in family dynamics that occur following the death of a parent or sibling leave a bereaved child in a state of confusion as their sense of stability and security are confronted and turned upside down. Unable to comprehend the finality of death, young ones cannot understand the absence of their loved one. Older children who do understand the implications of their loss may struggle with multiple difficulties including disenfranchisement of their grief by others, making the mourning process extremely difficult.

Judaism has a set of laws that provides a structured timeline with prescribed norms and rituals created to bring honor to the dead and to offer the mourner a period of time in which to express his grief. Moreover, the community is obligated to ensure the opportunities for the mourner to do so. *Halachah* stipulates that it is incumbent upon each of us to walk in God's ways according to the laws as outlined in the Talmud and the law codes. This means partaking in the obligations of mourning when we are bereaved and in consoling the bereaved when others are mourners. Fulfillment of these obligations assist in the healing from loss as respect is paid to the dead and emulating God is practiced. According to traditional Judaism, however, these obligations that provide comfort to the bereaved, are not applicable to children, thereby leaving children who are bereaved at a loss for expression of their grief. The many rituals that adults partake in as part of a rich religious and cultural heritage were designed by the Rabbis centuries ago who understood the need to grieve. The accepted notion of not teaching children about matters that are



painful leaves children isolated even within this rich structure of mourning practices. Psychosocial research has clearly indicated the need for children to participate in ritual but a gap exists between what they need and what Judaism offers. Closing this gap is something we need to address in terms of a communal response.

A survey of rabbis for this thesis has clearly indicated the need to acknowledge the role of synagogues and Religious schools in the support of bereaved children. All the rabbis who participated in the study have had experience with children who have experienced a loss and expressed the importance of helping families in such a situation. According to these rabbis, the existence of death education programs in the Religious schools and a well-established infrastructure for supporting bereaved children, however, is not a standard component of school curricula or synagogue policies. Some even mentioned that the synagogue with which they are affiliated does not do enough for these children. The unanimous response was that more work needs to be done in this area. While synagogues generally offer a great deal of support for adults and for families who experience the loss of a loved one, they fall short in established programs for bereaved children specifically.

Organizations such as Fernside, the Dougy Center, Compassionate Friends, Rainbows, and some others provide support to children and their families who are bereaved. My personal experience with Fernside in Cincinnati has allowed me to work directly with children who are grieving and to observe their struggles and their healing. These organizations provide a place of comfort where they can feel that they are not different or judged by peers who cannot understand their new situation. Fernside offers a

loving and safe environment for children to express their feelings, act out their anger, and eventually support others.

The combination of study, *halachah*, research of rabbinic practices, and fieldwork for this thesis has allowed me to understand and synthesize many components of a complex topic. The subject of death and bereavement is threatening and uncomfortable for most people; the addition of death and bereavement as it applies to children makes it all the more so. This has been an important area to study as I have grappled with the question of how to help children who have endured a profound loss in their lives, one that has multiple ramifications and far reaching implications. The question is multifaceted and the answer is not simple. A great deal of excellent work has been done in the field of childhood bereavement. Pioneers such as Rabbi Earl Grollman, Helen Fitzgerald, Kenneth Doka, and Nancy Boyd-Webb to name a few have published important data and methodologies for clinical interventions. Many wonderful children's books have been written to explain death and recognize the pain of childhood grief. Organizations that support bereaved children do wonderful work.

The Jewish response to bereaved children has, for the most part, been founded on traditional obligatory mourning practices that exclude minors. In light of what we currently know from psychosocial research, it is now necessary to make some modifications and refocus somewhat. We must adopt the different view that education for children in areas that are painful is indeed difficult but at the same time necessary. We must find a way to introduce the notion of death as a part of life given the reality that children do not often witness the death of elders in the society in which we live today. Children must be educated in the *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved. Above all, children

need to be given a voice in the area of death education. Eventually, we can move away from being death denying as present and future generations learn about death as a natural part of the lifecycle. Judaism upholds the sanctity of life as a cherished tenet and honor of the dead as a component of that sanctity; our children are entitled to learning of its importance and its application to their lives.

A new Jewish approach to bereaved children is needed at this time. Incorporating death education and how to support others who are grieving are critical components of Jewish education for our children. Adaptation of our existing curricula, creation of new programs, and the provision of experiences that bring both adults and students face to face with the realities of bereaved children will make a profound difference in our community. Training of Jewish professionals and others is necessary and need not be frightening if embedded within the structure of our Jewish values and ways of learning and is based upon the rabbinic texts that have so carefully guided our traditions.

This work has been especially meaningful for me as I have worked with bereaved children and conducted the academic component of this thesis concurrently. Speaking with the rabbis who participated in the survey shed an important light on what is currently done and what still needs to be done to provide a Jewish response to bereaved children. The pain of grieving children is especially palpable and tugs at the heartstrings of those who try to walk alongside them in their grief. It has been a privilege to do so. In her book *To Begin Again*, Rabbi Naomi Levy explains that Moses put the broken tablets in the Ark along with the new tablets of stone and they traveled with the Israelites as well. Moses, she writes, knew that even though they were broken they were holy because they were from God and were a reminder of the imperfection of the people who

succumbed to idolatry. So too, each person's broken pieces are a reminder of his or her vulnerability and are sacred. We each try to bury those shattered pieces but ultimately they become a seat of wisdom, insight, and compassion; they must be preserved not buried.<sup>611</sup> Bereaved children need to have adults and peers in their world who understand the importance of those holy broken pieces they both need and want so desperately to hold on to. It is up to us to ensure the sanctity of those pieces and assist children in healthy grieving in their journey toward healing.

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<sup>611</sup> Levy, Rabbi Naomi. *To Begin Again*. New York: Ballantine Books. 1998, p.255

Appendix A  
Fernside Facilitator Training

Day 1: 9 am – 2:30 pm

Welcome

Introduction to Fernside and staff

Attitudes toward death

Respect and appreciation for the individual AND traditions across diverse populations

Overview of grief models

The course of grief – significant factors

Day 2: 6:30 – 8:30 pm

How children express grief

Childhood development and grief

Day 3: 9 am – 2:30 pm

Facilitator panel

Themes in grief support groups

Expressive arts in grief support groups

Day 4: 6:30 – 8:30 pm

Group process and practice

Day 5: 6:30 – 8:30 pm

Alumni panel

Grieving parents

Day 6: 9 am – 2:30 pm

Grieving families – finding a new norm

Facilitators – rules and roles in leading support groups

Fernside groups for facilitators

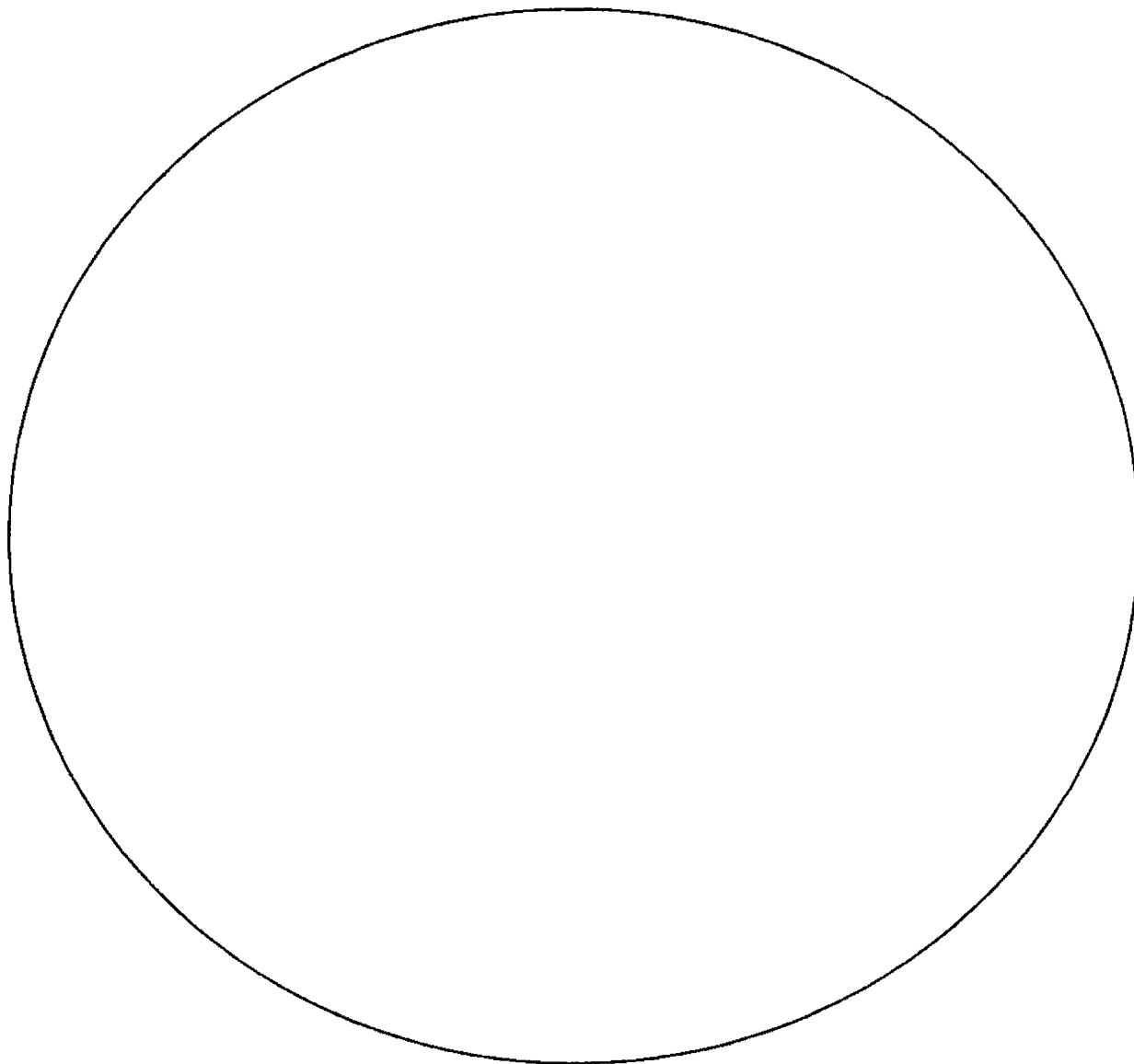
Risk assessment

Experiential learning exercises

Closing

Appendix B  
Feeling Wheel

My Feelings



Legend

## Appendix C

### Exercise 2. Early Experiences Influencing Reactions to Loss and Death<sup>612</sup>

#### **I. Think about your earliest death-related experience:**

When did it occur? Who was it? Who was involved? What happened?

What were your reactions, positive and negative?

What were you advised to do, and what did you do, to cope with the experience?

What did you learn about death and loss as a result of this experience?

Of the things you learned then, what makes you feel fearful or anxious now?

Of the things you learned then, what makes it easier for you to cope with death now?

#### **II. Consider your next death-related experience:**

When did it occur? Who was it? Who was involved? What happened?

What were your reactions, positive and negative?

What were you advised to do, and what did you do, to cope with the experience?

What did you learn about death and loss as a result of this experience?

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<sup>612</sup> Rando, 9-11

Of the things you learned then, what makes you feel fearful or anxious now?

Of the things you learned then, what makes it easier for you to cope with death now?

Taking together both of these early death-related experiences, what ideas or feelings appear repeatedly?

Think of your own feelings about death and the attitudes you maintain about it currently. Write down these feelings and attitudes.

How do these feelings and attitudes about death affect how you currently cope with loss experiences, positively and negatively?



#### Appendix D

#### Exercise 3. Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Death

Lifton writes of six variables that are contributing factors to the increased difficulty Americans have in facing death. How do these apply to Judaism? Give examples from modern life or Biblical or Talmudic times to illustrate your points.

- 1) Urbanization:
- 2) Exclusion of the aged and dying:
- 3) Movement towards the nuclear:
- 4) Secularization from religion:
- 5) Advances in medical technology:
- 6) Mass death with war and nuclear destruction has removed the significance of the impact of death on society:

### Appendix E

#### Exercise 4. How Do the Five Modes Outlined by Lifton Help Us?

Lifton suggests five modes by which we can find some comfort in dealing with death that provides some form of immortality: the biological mode, social mode, religious mode, natural mode, and experiential transcendence mode (states beyond the confines of ordinary daily life). What are some examples of each one? How do these apply to Judaism?

Five modes of immortality:

1. Biological:
2. Social:
3. Religious:
4. Natural:
5. Transcendence:

Appendix F  
Exercise 5. Self-Care Assessment<sup>613</sup>

*This questionnaire is for professionals working with traumatized clients – although some items may not apply, please answer wherever relevant to yourself*

Rate the following areas in frequency

- 5 = Rarely
- 4 = Occasionally
- 3 = Rarely
- 2 = Never
- 1 = It never occurred to me

**Physical Self-Care**

- \_\_\_ Eat regularly (e.g. breakfast, lunch, and dinner)
- \_\_\_ Eat healthily
- \_\_\_ Exercise
- \_\_\_ Get regular medical care for prevention
- \_\_\_ Get medical care when needed
- \_\_\_ Take time off when sick
- \_\_\_ Get massages
- \_\_\_ Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, sing, or do some other physical activity that is fun
- \_\_\_ Take time to be sexual – with yourself, with a partner
- \_\_\_ Get enough sleep
- \_\_\_ Wear clothes you like
- \_\_\_ Take vacations
- \_\_\_ Take day trips or mini-vacations
- \_\_\_ Make time away from telephones
- \_\_\_ Other:

**Psychological Self-Care**

- \_\_\_ Make time for self-reflection
- \_\_\_ Have your own personal psychotherapy

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<sup>613</sup> Saakvitne, Karen W. and Pearlman, Laurie Anne. *Transforming the Pain. A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization For helping professionals who work with traumatized clients*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1996, pp. 63-66

- \_\_\_ Write in a journal
- \_\_\_ Read literature that is unrelated to work
- \_\_\_ Do something in which you are not expert or in charge
- \_\_\_ Decrease stress in your life
- \_\_\_ Notice your inner experience – listen to your thoughts, judgments, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings
- \_\_\_ Let others know different aspects of you
- \_\_\_ Engage your intelligence in a new area, e.g. go to an art museum, history exhibit, sports event, auction, theater performance
- \_\_\_ Practice receiving from others
- \_\_\_ Be curious
- \_\_\_ Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes
- \_\_\_ Other:

### **Emotional Self-Care**

- \_\_\_ Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
- \_\_\_ Stay in contact with important people in your life
- \_\_\_ Give yourself affirmations, praise yourself
- \_\_\_ Love yourself
- \_\_\_ Reread favorite books, re-view favorite movies
- \_\_\_ Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places and seek them out
- \_\_\_ Allow yourself to cry
- \_\_\_ Find things that make you laugh
- \_\_\_ Express your outrage in social action, letters, donations, marches, protests
- \_\_\_ Play with children
- \_\_\_ Other:

### **Spiritual Self-Care**

- \_\_\_ Make time for reflection
- \_\_\_ Spend time with nature
- \_\_\_ Find a spiritual connection or community
- \_\_\_ Be open to inspiration
- \_\_\_ Cherish your optimism and hope
- \_\_\_ Be aware of nonmaterial aspects of life
- \_\_\_ Try at times not to be in charge or the expert
- \_\_\_ Be open to not knowing
- \_\_\_ Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
- \_\_\_ Meditate
- \_\_\_ Pray
- \_\_\_ Sing
- \_\_\_ Spend time with children

- \_\_\_ Have experiences of awe
- \_\_\_ Contribute to causes in which you believe
- \_\_\_ Read inspiration literature (talks, music, etc.
- \_\_\_ Other:

### **Workplace or Professional Self-Care**

- \_\_\_ Take a break during the workday (e.g. lunch)
- \_\_\_ Take time to chat with co-workers
- \_\_\_ Make quiet time to complete tasks
- \_\_\_ Identify projects or tasks that are exciting and rewarding
- \_\_\_ Set limits with clients and colleagues
- \_\_\_ Balance your caseload so no one day or part of a day is "too much"
- \_\_\_ Arrange your work space so it is comfortable and comforting
- \_\_\_ Get regular supervision or consultation
- \_\_\_ Negotiate for your needs (benefits, pay raise)
- \_\_\_ Have a peer support group
- \_\_\_ Other:

### **Balance**

- \_\_\_ Strive for balance *within* your work-life and workday
- \_\_\_ Strive for balance *among* work, family, relationships, play, and rest

### **Other Areas of Self-Care That are Relevant to You**

Appendix G  
Exercise 6. Remembering

Remember a death that occurred in your family (other than the death you used for exercise 1). Think of the texts we studied and answer the following questions:<sup>614</sup>

1. Who died?
2. What was the most comforting to you?
3. What was the least comforting?
4. What was the source of false comforts?
5. Who listened to you?
6. Did you cry?
7. What was the reaction of others when you cried?
8. How did you react to their behavior?
9. Did you feel embraced or isolated? For how long?

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<sup>614</sup> Levy, Adapted from the chapter titles.

10. How are you feeling now as you think about question 9?
11. What do you wish people could have done for you but did not?
12. Did you feel envious of others? Who? Why?
13. What emotions did you feel after the *shivah* was over? After *shloshim*?
14. How did you feel toward God at the time of the death of your loved one?
15. How do you feel now? How long a period of time has gone by?
16. What was it like to return to work or school?
17. How have you changed as a result of the loss?
18. What have you learned about comforting others in grief?
19. Did you participate in ritual? Which ones? How did they help or not?
20. Has there been a turning point for you in your mourning where healing has begun?

## Appendix H

### Expressive Arts Exercises

#### **I. Mandala (Soft music played in the background)**

The mandala is associated with healing and ritual.

The mandala is comprised of three separate rings on a large piece of fabric taped to the table. The group stands around the table and each person finds a place. The group members are asked to think of a loss of their own and using the various craft materials available, convey “your thoughts and feelings at the time of your loss” and express that in the outer ring closest to you.

Upon completion, the group members are told to think of the “here and now” and using the crafts, convey “how you think and feel now about the death?” and using the craft material, express that in the middle ring.

Upon completion of the second task, the group is asked to project outward and to think about how they feel about teaching death education and using the craft materials, express that in the center ring.

Group members are invited to share their work and their feelings (if comfortable to do so).

#### **II. Timelines**

Group members are asked to draw a timeline of their life to date indicating significant events as they occurred and to indicate the “highs” and “lows” on the line with a small picture indicating what each event was. Each member will have a jagged timeline when they are finished.

Group members are asked to share their work and feelings (if comfortable to do so).



Appendix I  
Materials for Lesson Plan for First Grade

1. In God's Image booklet
2. What I Can Do

This material is from Behrman House, Inc. Springfield, New Jersey, 1998



# IN GOD'S IMAGE



Let's look in the mirror, now we both can see,  
You look just like you and I look just like me.

People are quite different, and so it may seem odd,  
That we are all created in the image of one God.

God has no hands or feet, no face that we can see.  
God's image is the goodness inside both you and me.

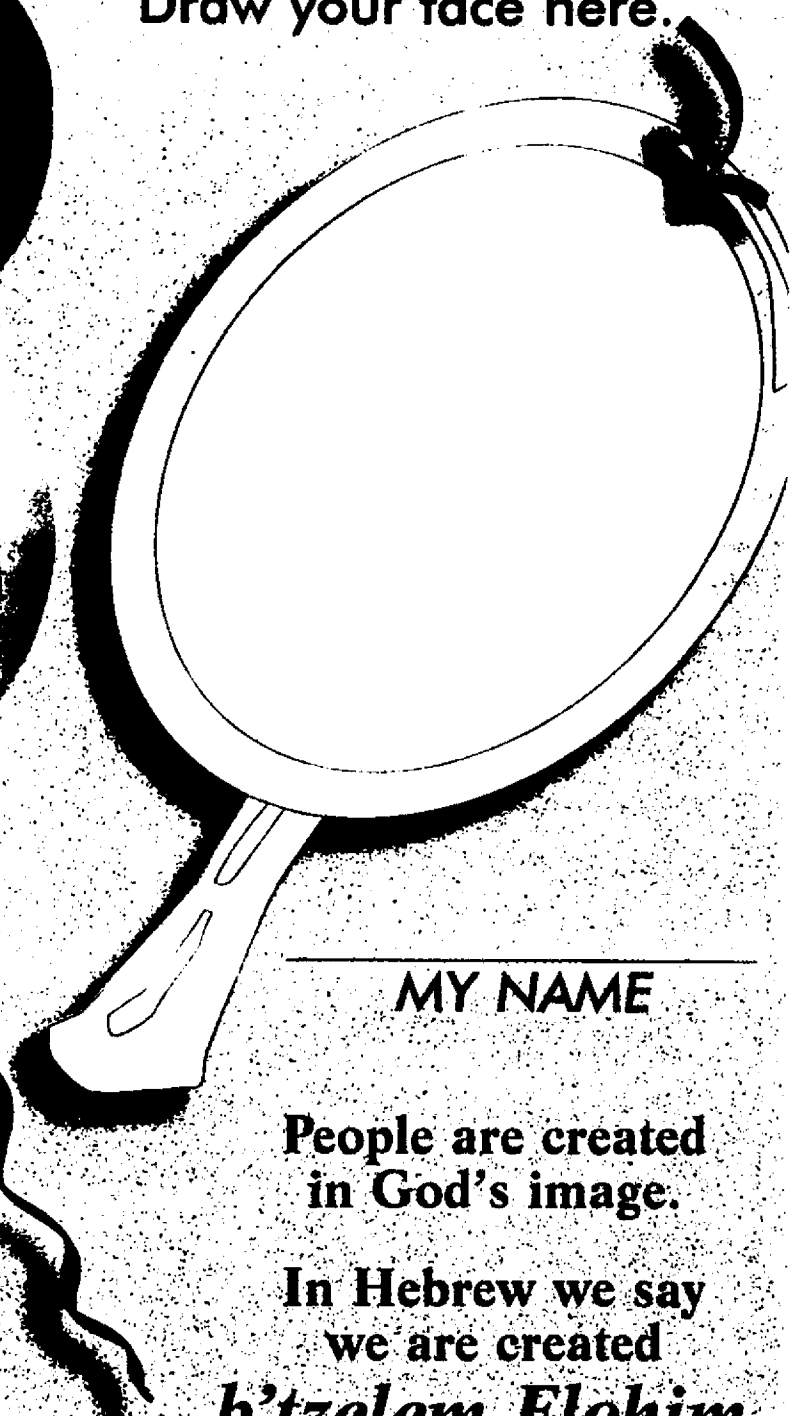
# Who are you?

Draw your face here.

No one  
is exactly  
like you.

You  
are  
special.

What do  
you like best  
about being  
you?



MY NAME \_\_\_\_\_

People are created  
in God's image.

In Hebrew we say  
we are created

*b'tzelem Elohim.*

This doesn't mean we  
look like God. It means  
we can act like God by  
being kind and helpful.



How is this boy acting in  
God's image?

# IN GOD'S IMAGE

What good things can you do to show that  
you are created in the image of God?

When a friend is sick, I can...

When I find something that doesn't  
belong to me, I can...

When guests visit my house, I can...

To show I love and respect my parents, I can...



Trace your hand here. Inside your hand, write the name of someone  
you want to help. Tell what you want to do.

Remember to offer a helping hand.

# TZEDAKAH

Giving money to tzedakah is an important way to help others. When we put our coins in a tzedakah box, we show that we are created in God's image.

You can make a tzedakah box:

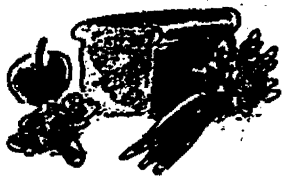
1. Cut a slit in the top of a container.
2. Write the Hebrew word *tzedakah* on a piece of paper.

צדקה

3. Then paste the word on the container.

What happens to the money in a tzedakah box?

Tzedakah money is used to buy things people need.



Choose two things and tell why they are important.

My Family and Me

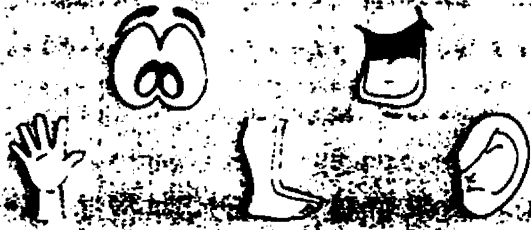
Every Friday, before Shabbat begins, ask family members to put coins in your tzedakah box. When the box is filled, decide how to help people with the money you have collected.

# WHAT I CAN DO

What parts of your body could you use? How would you do these things?

Draw yourself doing a mitzvah. Show which parts of your body you are using to do the mitzvah. You can make a difference.

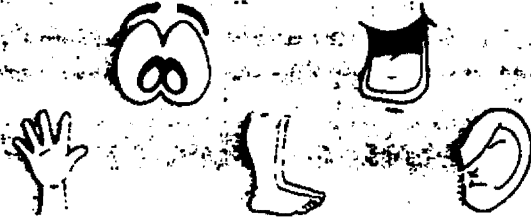
1  
I could cheer up someone who is lonely by using my



to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2

I could help to feed someone who is hungry by using my



to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3

I could help a person who is new to my school by using my



to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for a student to draw themselves performing a mitzvah.

**Appendix J**  
**Exercise 7. Real Situations**

With your colleagues, in your group according to grade level you teach: Read the assigned story from the book How It Feels When A Parent Dies as told by the bereaved child and answer the following questions:

What are some of the expressed concerns by the child (both explicit and implicit)?

Do you see potential for complications and if so, what might they be?

How could the synagogue and Religious School support this child and his/her family?

How do you feel about your ability to help this child?

What could you do to help?

What teaching opportunities could this child's situation lend as valuable lessons for your class?

What teaching opportunities could this child's situation lend as valuable lessons for your class?

How could you go about teaching these?

How would you apply FORMULA for Focus on Life in your lesson plan(s) for these lessons?

F	
O	
R	
M	
U	
L	
A	



Appendix K  
Attitudes Towards Death Education Questionnaire

Your participation in this retreat is very important. In order to address feelings concerning this sensitive subject, this questionnaire will provide invaluable information. Your honest responses are essential. Thank you for your valuable contribution.

Please rate the following:

As of today, my comfort level about teaching death education is:

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Somewhat comfortable
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

The extent to which I have dealt with my own grief experiences makes me feel:

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Somewhat comfortable
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

My level of knowledge concerning how children understand death makes me feel:

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Somewhat comfortable
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

My experience with bereaved children as a foundation for teaching death education makes me feel:

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Somewhat comfortable
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

My knowledge of Jewish sources that might help me in teaching death education makes me feel:

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Somewhat comfortable
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

My knowledge of what bereaved children need as a foundation for teaching death education makes me feel:

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Somewhat comfortable
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

Knowing that as a teacher or synagogue staff member I may be called upon to offer support to bereaved children makes me feel:

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Somewhat comfortable
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

The idea of children learning about death makes me feel:

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Somewhat comfortable
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

Appendix L  
Children's Books About Death and Bereavement

**Bahr, Mary. *If Nathan Were Here*. Illustrated by Karen A. Jerome. Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans's Books for Young Readers, 2000.**

This is a book for children told by the best friend of a boy Nathan who died. He is lonely without his pal, and ponders his memories of his best friend. He remembers how Nathan and his sister Mary Kate teased each other and annoyed each other. He thinks about special times they spent together in the tree fort. The class teacher, who herself is mourning Nathan, suggests that the class make a memory box, inviting each child to put something in it about the best things they remember about Nathan or better still to ask Nathan questions. The author, whose name we don't know, needs to think about what to put in the memory box. He wanders through the fields near his home, visits a neighbor and together they remember Nathan, and then he tells his father that he wants to go up to the tree fort to spend some time there alone 'speaking' to Nathan. His father squeezes him, demonstrating his understanding in a sensitive, non-verbal way. He struggles to find the question to ask and it finally comes to him in the tree fort. It is "what am I supposed to do without my best friend?" He then waits and listens to the silence. Shortly after, he hears Mary Kate and chooses to ignore her. Later, he is allowed to walk Nathan's dog and that is filled with sad memories as well. Some relief comes to our author the next day when he climbs the tree fort again on a bright sunny day and hears Mary Kate. He realizes that although Nathan did not want her with them in the tree fort before, perhaps now it would be all right.

This book teaches about sadness and longing that accompanies the loss of a friend. This young boy does not have to experience disenfranchised grief as we read

about the sensitivity of his father, a neighbor, his teacher, and Nathan's mother (who allows him to walk their dog). The reader learns that it is a normal reaction to feel sad and lost. His willingness to allow Mary Kate up to the tree fort shows that the relationship with Nathan can continue in the friendship he can maintain with his sister. We do not know the cause of Nathan's death or the name of his friend who misses him so terribly, but that does not matter. In fact, it makes even more real the actuality of feelings without full information or understanding. This book received the ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Award.

**Blue Lantern Studio. *Grieve Not*. Seattle: Laughing Elephant, 2001.**

Someone who has died tells this beautiful book of paintings by artists and a poem in the first person. The message is from the deceased telling the reader that he is not in the grave but everywhere in life and is still in the memories of his loved one. The poem is one that was written by a soldier who was killed in a landmine in 1989 by the IRA. It is a book for all ages and reminds the reader that the person who has died lives on in their heart. It is geared to an older child who can reflect on the memories of the loved one who died.

**Binch, Caroline. *The Princess and the Castle*. London: Red Fox Books, 2005.**

Little Genevieve hates the sea because "many" years ago, her Daddy's fishing boat got lost at sea and he never came home again. Her little brother was born shortly after and her Mum cried a lot. Her life is different now. She will never play on the beach. One day, Mum introduces her and Jack to a new friend named Cedric. She is afraid of Cedric but Mum likes him and now wears pretty clothes and never gets angry. She grows to like Cedric but would not let him take her to the beach or on his boat for a long time.

She eventually goes to the beach but would not go on his boat. She looks out her window and looks longingly at a castle on an island. Cedric wants to take her there but she is afraid. She begs her Mum not to let Cedric go out on the boat in case he gets lost. Mum reassures Genevieve but she worries. One day he convinces her to visit the castle that they must take the boat to. She is scared but goes with the family and Cedric. She sees that they arrive safely and feels thankful for Cedric who came into their lives. She now has conquered her fear of the ocean as well as that of losing Cedric as well.

This is a very important book for children who have lost a parent and are afraid of further loss in their life. They can see that Genevieve overcomes her fear of the water that took her father away from her and now that another significant adult is part of her life, she fears losing him as well. The other loss is of the water itself; she fears not only the loss of Cedric but she deals with her own fear of death for herself. She learns in the end, that in time, she is brave to take a chance and the result is a good one.

**Bley, Anette. *And What Comes After a Thousand?* La Jolla, California: Kane/Miller Publishers. 2007.**

This gentle book is about a friendship between a little girl Lisa and an old man named Otto. He teaches Lisa many things and she loves him. We do not know if he is a relative or a friend but they have a special relationship and spend time together in the garden as Otto teaches Lisa how to use a slingshot. Then they count the stars at night and Lisa asks, "What comes after a thousand?" Otto tells her the numbers never end. One day Otto is sick and she asks him if he will die soon. Otto tells her honestly that he thinks so. They discuss where he wants to be buried. There is a lovely picture of Lisa curled up in the bed next to Otto just holding his hand. When he dies, Lisa misses Otto terribly and asks, "why did Otto leave me?" There are so many strange people at the burial that she

does not know. Somebody named Olga goes with Lisa into the garden but she says it is not fun any more in the garden. Olga tells Lisa to imagine a cake in her mind. In the same way she can see and remember Otto. She tells Lisa "Otto is like numbers. He's inside of us, and that will never end". This is a beautifully illustrated book that shows of how special a relationship with an older adult is for a child and the pain of the loss that follows the death. Memory helps to keep the deceased person close by.

**Brown, Laurie Krasny and Marc Brown. *When Dinosaurs Die. A Guide to Understanding Death.* New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1996.**

This is a truly excellent book that teaches young children about death really leaving nothing out. The Browns offer snippets of information. including how people die including natural causes, accidents, illness, poverty, and even murder, war, and suicide. They reassure the reader that most people die after a long life but sometimes young people die. They explain what dead means and the variety of feelings that one experiences when a loved one dies. They teach how to help peers who are returning to school and how to be sensitive to them. In the teaching of funerals, they depict a scenario first of a little girl whose hamster has died and the funeral that the family holds for their pet. This is followed by information about a funeral for Grandpa. Customs of a number of different cultures and religions are shown, including a Jewish family sitting *shiva*. The question is raised about what happens after death with the honest truth up front that no one knows for sure, but there are various ideas. They provide wonderful ideas for a child to remember someone special, and finally, they teach the reader that having fun, learning new things and making new friends does not mean that they are forgetting their loved one, but rather just doing other things. The book ends with a cheer for life!

This book is a remarkable success in providing real information for young children in an understandable way which surprisingly, does not tell a story, but presents facts. The use of dinosaurs makes it somewhat whimsical and even realistic in that dinosaurs did indeed die out. Children learn from this book that life itself can be difficult for some people. Death is not easy to cope with but the feelings are real and it is OK to feel them. Customs around death are important and they learn about different rituals; they may seem unfamiliar, but they are important for those who observe them. Learning new things and making new friends teaches young readers that life continues even while we miss someone and that memory of that person keeps him/her with us forever. This book removes the mystery and fear of death and makes it very much part of life and continuity. It offers a reassuring message as all the pictures present a sense of community and family.

**Buscaglia, Leo. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf. A Story of Life for All Ages.* New Jersey: SLACK Incorporated, 1982.**

This is a classic story that addresses the big questions, those of life and death, the cycle of seasons, and the continuity of life, what is life about, and why do we die? Freddie the leaf learns from his friend Daniel the leaf all about the reality that life comes to an end for each living creature. Until then, however, it is important to relish in the joys of life, the friends we make along our life journey, and the wonder of nature and relationships with others. When Freddie says he is afraid to die, Daniel reassures him that it is natural to fear what we don't know, reminding him that he was not afraid when the seasons changed and death is yet another season. Daniel falls from the tree in the Fall and Freddie holds on until Winter but then he falls as well and gently lands on a clump of snow on the ground and he can now see the magnificent tree that he was a part of. He did

not know it, but eventually he would join with the water in the snow and help to make the tree stronger for the new leaves that were already a part of the plan for the coming Spring.

This beautiful story uses nature and the most basic of life's cycles to teach about death as a natural part of ongoing life with promise for the future. It is told in a loving, sensitive way with no element of fear but yet addresses fear when Freddie says that he is afraid to die. Daniel, the wise friend, tells us that it is normal to feel afraid when we don't know what to expect. This validates the emotions we all experience, child and adult alike. Children understand the experience of leaves falling from trees and new buds appearing in the Spring. New beginnings can happen, and children can see themselves as part of a larger picture in the magnificent creation and ongoing cycle of Life.

**Clifton, Lucille. *Everett Anderson's Goodbye*. Illustrated by Ann Gricalconi. New York: The Trumpet Club, 1983.**

Everett Anderson is a little African American boy who misses his Daddy terribly. His Daddy died and he cries a great deal, saying he does not love his Mommy, his baby sister, even Christmas and candy. He promises to be good and do his homework if he could just see Daddy walking and talking and being alive. He has a hard time sleeping and eating; he just sits and stares wondering what's the use of caring? His Mommy reaches out to him but he is so very sad. After some time passes, as he looks at photos of his Daddy, he says "love doesn't stop, and neither will I". This book teaches about healing in the face of sadness and missing the person so much that one's heart feels like it is breaking. The book is illustrated in charcoal drawings that very well highlight the African American family. There are lovely pictures of the love between Everett and his



Mommy who is always there to comfort him in her sadness as well. This very well shows the reality that adults and children grieve at the same time.

**Cochran, Bill. *The Forever Dog*. Illustrated by Dan Andreasen. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2007.**

Mike has a dog named Corky who is his best friend. They do absolutely everything together and share secrets. Mike tells Corky how much he loves him. One day they make a plan and shake on it; the two of them will be best friends forever. They call it their Forever Plan. It worked for years until one day Corky gets sick and has to go to the clinic. Mike has a sense of foreboding and can't sleep that night alone in the bed. The next day, he learns that Corky has died. Mike is heartbroken; what about the Forever Plan? He says it is not fair and Mike gets angry at Corky for breaking his promise. Mike's mom asks Mike if he remembers the things that he and Corky did together and she tells him Corky will always be with him but "it's just different now". Mike cries some more because having Corky in his heart hurts but in his head he tells Corky that he is sorry he had been angry at him and tells him the Forever Plan will still work, only a little differently than he had expected. He feels better knowing Corky is in his heart. This sweet book allows a child to know that sometimes we feel angry at the person who died even though we feel sad at the same time. Painful as it is, remembering the things we did with the particular person is very special and that person stays with us forever, just in a different way.

**Coerr, Eleanor. *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. New York: Puffin Books, 1977.**

This beautiful and painful book is a true story about a girl in Japan who develops leukemia as a result of exposure to the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. An aspiring track athlete, Sadako falls ill during her training and knows that she will die because so many others have died of the atomic bomb disease. As she spends her last days in the hospital,

she receives a gift of an origami crane given to her by her best friend. The crane is a Japanese symbol for long life, good health, and prosperity. She also tells Sadako of the legend that the gods will make a sick person well again after folding one thousand cranes. Sadako decides to take on this challenge. However, she manages to make 644 before she dies. Sadako's friends complete the remaining 356 cranes so that she could be buried with one thousand cranes. This book teaches so much to children and adults alike. The reader learns about Hiroshima, exposure to toxic elements, cancer, the death of a child, the love of family and friends, the continuity of love, death due to war, commitment to a cause, and incredible courage of a young girl and her family. Sadako gives so much in her short life to all of us who read about her. Ms. Coerr provides some information about the events following Sadako's death, and some letters sent to her by young readers as well as some background to her motivation to write this story and how she found her information about Sadako. A beautiful addition to the book is a section with instructions and illustrations for making an origami crane.

**Cohen, Laura A., Allen, Sandra, and Eric Dlugokinski. *one family under the same sky*. Raleigh, North Carolina: Feelings Factory, 1997.**

This beautifully poignant book is a collection of children's artwork following the Oklahoma City bombing. The first section of art depicts feelings of children such as sadness, regret, fear, anger, confusion, and hope. This is followed by artwork representing children's visions for healing such as friendship, happiness, love, helping others, taking action, and others. This book allows children and adults alike to talk about their feelings concerning the bombing as well as about death. The cover was designed by artwork of children who participated in a project sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Oklahoma City.

**Copeland, Kathe Martin. *Mama's Going to Heaven Soon*. Illustrated by Elissa Hudson. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.**

This is a book to prepare children for the imminent death of a parent. It is about a family that likes to do things together but one day Mama does not feel well and the family stays home. The children learn that Mama will soon go to heaven. They want to go with her but Daddy says they cannot go and Mama tells them that her life with them will soon be over. They ask her "why?" "Don't you love us any more?" she reassures them that she does and always will and that she wants to be with them but when she goes to heaven she will not be living like they are living. She tells them that she will not have pain any longer. Daddy says they will feel sad, scared or angry now but will be happy again one day and he will be with them. There are lots of people who love them who will be happy to talk with them but most important, Mama will always love them and they will have their memory and knowledge of that. This book is painfully compassionate and is based on a true story of children whose mother died at a young age of cancer. It is written by their grandmother who writes that there was little material available at the time to help them. The language is honest and explicit; it allows children and adult alike to recognize their feelings of sadness, fear, and anger and to prepare for the death. The book is short and very gentle. There is a section at the end for adults on how to talk to children about death.

**Daleski, Gil. *Is God Sad?* Illustrated by Debbie Weinstein. Jerusalem: Gefen, 2007.**

This book begins with a girl named Tamar who asks her Daddy about God. She wants to know if God loves everyone, why some things happen, and if we can see God. Eventually, the subject of death is raised and she asks what it means to die. Daddy says "we die when the soul that God has given us leaves and back to the huge soul that is

God". She asks if someone can come back after death and Daddy explains that this is not possible but the soul is happy because it is with God and we can remember the fun times we had with the person who died even though we are sad. The important lesson a young child learns from this book is that death is not reversible.

**dePaola, Tomie. *Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs*. New York: Puffin Books, 1973.**

This book captures the magical relationships of a little boy with both his grandmother and his great-grandmother. He visits them every Sunday and shares special times with each one. His relationship with his grandmother and great grandmother are very different but he loves them both. He calls his grandmother Nana Downstairs and his great grandmother Nana Upstairs because she is always in bed upstairs. One day Nana Upstairs dies and he is very sad and misses her. He sees a falling star a few nights later and his mother tells him it is a kiss from Nana Upstairs. Many years later, Nana Downstairs dies and he sees yet another falling star. He says "now you are both Nana Upstairs". This is a lovely book that depicts the loving relationship between children and grandparents and the privilege of a child to know both generations. Nevertheless, the pain of loss is very real even if there is still another grandmother. The love of the relationships is very apparent.

**Fitzgerald, Helen. *The Grieving Teen. A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000.**

Recognizing the need for bereaved teenagers to be acknowledged, this book was written by Fitzgerald specifically for teenagers. It is written in the format in which she is addressing the teenage reader and offers information and explanations at that level. She explains normal grief reactions, becoming aware of one's feelings, handling the difficult moments such as funerals and burials, and seeking help. She has written it as though she

is sitting with the teenager herself in language a teenager can relate to. She also offers advice to others who are not bereaved themselves but want to help a grieving teenager. Mourning customs of other cultures are covered as well, including *shivah*. This book offers very practical and realistic advice in a compassionate approach that is very well geared to teenagers who are dealing with many challenges in life at the time that they are grieving.

**Johnson, Joy and Marv. *Where's Jess?* Illustrated by Shari Barum. Omaha: Centering Corporation, 1982.**

A little boy's baby sister Jess has died and he wants to know what "dead" is and where Jess went. His parents tell him truthfully what dead is and is not but it is hard for him to understand. He wonders if he did something and that is why Jess is dead but he is reassured that he did not cause her death. He and his parents are sad when they think of baby Jess but his mother tells him that crying helps. He misses Jess and feels sad that her crib is gone. His mother tells him that they will all miss Jess for a long time but he knows that his parents love him and his is OK. They talk about Jess and even laugh together sometimes.

This is a very gentle book for young children and offers reassurance that they did not cause the death of their loved one and it is acceptable to laugh and have a good time even though they are sad. The memory of the dead person will always stay with them and the family and they will be cared for and loved even though it seems that their parents are self-absorbed for some time.

**Goldberg, Neal C. and Miriam Liebermann. *Saying Goodbye. A Handbook for Teens Dealing with Loss and Mourning.* Southfield, MI: Targum/Feldheim , 2004.**

This book is written for teenagers who are faced with the loss of a loved one. It is geared to Orthodox teens that have a foundation of Talmudic, Biblical, and Midrashic education. The authors review the *halachah* around death and mourning and explain everything very well for a teenage reader while providing the sources and reasoning for each *mitzvah*. The book also addresses emotions and finding meaning in the loss. Some creative writing is included. This book is very well written and extremely sensitive while explaining the Jewish approach to death. The average teenager would have difficulty understanding some of the rabbinic material but would benefit from the explanations and other components.

**Greenlea, Sharon. *When Someone Dies.* Illustrated by Bill Drath. Atlanta: Peachtree, 1992.**

This book explains how you feel when someone dies. An important message is that grownups don't think about talking to you or maybe they just don't know what to say. Nothing in life seems like it used to be and it is recommend to cry with someone you love and trust; that person may want to cry also. Writing a letter to the person who died can help. All the memories of our loved one helps to make us feel better. This book is beautifully illustrated with scenes of nature and everyday life and is very calming. It sends home the important message of allowing ourselves to be aware of our feelings and gives permission to cry.

**Goldman, Linda. *Children Also Grieve.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006.**

This book about grief is told to children by a dog who is named Henry. Henry is sad because Grandfather has died. He has lots of friends both animal and human, but

Henry is upset and has lots of questions; he does not feel happy any more. Sometimes he wonders if it is his fault that Grandfather died. There are many questions in the book geared to the reader to help elicit discussion about the issue on each page. There are many suggestions about how to deal with feelings and how to share memories. This book allows for a great deal of reflection at the level of a school-aged child. The end of the book has a section for the child to create a memory book of the loved one that died. It has very sweet photographs of animals and children.

**Grollman, Rabbi Earl. *Talking About Death. A Dialogue Between Parent and Child.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.**

This is one of the earliest books about death for children by Rabbi Grollman, a pioneer in this field. He very explicitly explains what death is and the feelings associated with knowing someone special has died. He uses the words “death”, “dead”, and “die” very honestly and explains it is not a game. He uses the example of flowers that grow from seeds and eventually die. He uses Ecclesiastes 3 to introduce the notion of a time for everything. Grollman discusses feelings, funerals, and memory. In its time, this book would have introduced children to a subject rarely discussed. It is to the point and gentle.

**Heegard, Marge. *When Someone Very Special Dies. Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief.* Minneapolis: Woodland Press, 1988.**

This is a workbook for young children that addresses feelings and fears about grief and losing someone special. It begins with the lifecycle of living things and changes that happen in life. Each page is dedicated to a unique topic and invites children to complete an exercise. It also covers hopes and “if only” dreams, how to be comforted, memories, how we mask our feelings, where someone goes after death, and how we can still have fun. It is an excellent collection of worksheets that can be used for many ages. It was

written by a mother whose three children lost their father at the ages of 9, 10, and 12 years.

**Hanson, Warren. *The Next Place*. Golden Valley, Minnesota: Waldman Press, 1997.**

This book is comprised of spectacular illustrations that describe “the next place” I will go. There will be no pain and it will be beautiful and serene, joyful, and peaceful. Everything will be perfect. There will be no skin color, no body, no negative emotions. I will travel empty-handed because the only thing I need to bring is the love of others who have cared about me. I will appreciate everything I had and the new light in my spirit will shine forever. This book helps to remove the fear of death and reinforces the spirit of oneness. It does not deal with emotions or fears around death.

**Harris, Robie H. *Goodbye Mousie*. Illustrated by Jan Ormerod. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 2004.**

A very young child wakes up one morning to find his pet mouse, Mousie, dead. He is shocked, confused, upset and angry all at the same time. Mousie was alive last night, he can't be dead now. Daddy spends time with him, explaining that dead is different from sleeping and shows his son how he can demonstrate his love for Mousie by burying him in a meaningful way. The child places his tee shirt and some toys along with snacks and a picture of himself inside the box and then decorates the outside to make it special for Mousie so that he won't be hungry or lonely or even bored. Together, he and his parents bury Mousie and place a marker on the little grave. He then thinks about Mousie and knows that he will not be there tomorrow morning either. Daddy reminds him that Mousie had a good life. He knows that Mousie won't come back. He thinks that perhaps one day, he may get another mouse, but not just yet.



This sensitive book for very young children touches on the important areas about life, death, feelings, grieving, rituals, and memory. An especially important message not seen in any of the others outlined here is the importance of allowing oneself time to grieve without self-imposed expectations. We often think that we can replace a lost pet with another one very quickly. Yet, childhood grief specialists warn us not to assume that children forget the loved one who died and that time is needed to grieve. In time, as this wise child in the book says, maybe he will get a new mouse to love; for now, he needs to remember Mousie and to continue to love him even after he is gone. This book is a good way to teach Jewish children about our obligation of respect for the dead and about our obligation to ensure a dignified and respectful burial.

**Hipp, Earl. *Help for the Hard Times. Getting Through Loss*. Illustrated by L. K. Hanson. Center City, Minnesota: Hazeldon, 1995.**

This is a book directed at teenagers to help them with loss, not necessarily loss by death. By including all kinds of loss, the author appeals to a young person by acknowledging those feelings associated with difficulties that might otherwise be dismissed by others, leaving the teenager to experience disenfranchised grief. He offers an explanation of grief as a response to loss, and explains the bigger the loss, the more complicated the grief. He offers advice that is easy to read and practical. The book is very well illustrated with fun drawings, snippets of appropriate quotations, and various font sizes and editorial variations, making it appealing to teenagers.

**Jones, Frances. *A Circle of Love*. Oklahoma City: Feed the Children, 1997.**

This is a collection of artwork by children dedicated to the nineteen children who died in the Oklahoma City tragedy. It is a beautiful sampling of honesty and hope by children of all ages. Although specific to the bombing, the messages of the artwork are

relevant to all children who are bereaved and can be used to initiate discussion and reflection.

**Johnston, Tony. *That Summer*. Illustrated by Barry Moser. Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2002.**

This is a painful and beautiful book about two brothers, one of whom is dying. Together with their grandmother, they begin to create a quilt. It is told by the big brother whose name we do not know but he and his little brother Joey cry together. He says that now every little thing in life is important to him; he had taken everything for granted before. Joey cries when his hair falls out so his big brother shaves his head as well. Joey has real questions such as “when will I die?” and “who will care for me when I die?” Joey dies before the quilt is finished but his big brother finishes the last part with fabric from Joey’s pajamas. The last page shows Joey’s older brother, bald, as he whispers to Joey “*Goodbye*”. This book presents real issues that arise as a family prepares for a loss.

**Keckler, Ben. *Incredibly Lonely, That’s Me*. Illustrated by Dick Davis. Indianapolis: Eagle Creek Publications, 2007.**

This book is about a girl who is always very lonely because when she was only nine years old, her big sister Laura died. Loneliness has taken over her life even when she is in a crowd, but she eventually sees that the feelings allow her to be in touch with Laura in a different way. She wishes Laura had not climbed up the rocks that she fell from. She knows that she can feel what she needs to feel in her own world where it is safe and invites the reader to come to her safe world as well.

**Krementz, Jill. *How It Feels When A Parent Dies*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.**

This exquisite book is a powerfully moving set of personal accounts by eighteen children who have lost a parent. Krementz is a photographer who captured the emotions

of loss in the portraits of the children and then recorded their stories. Each is unique and speaks from the heart of a bereaved child. The children speak very candidly of how it felt at the time of the loss and how they have coped. This is for an older child to read with adult supervision. Some of the children offer statements that are painfully honest and a bereaved child can probably well relate to.

**Krishnaswami, Uma. *Remembering Grandpa*. Illustrated by Layne Johnson. Honesdale, PA: Boyd Mills Press, 2007.**

This lovely book is about a little rabbit named Daysha whose Grandpa died a year ago and now her Grandma is experiencing a bad case of sadness. Daysha goes to search for items that are memories of Grandpa. Sad was not how she remembered Grandpa so she goes to look for a cure for Grandma. It is the small things she remembers that are important like a stone that reminds her of a button on his belt buckle and leaves. She gathers things from the places in the garden Grandpa loved and makes a pile of all the special things. She then takes Grandma's hand and brings her to see everything. Grandma cries and thanks her saying that was the nicest way to remember Grandpa. Then they go for ice cream and Daysha sees that Grandma does not really need a cure; she needs hugs, and the right kind of remembering. This is a lovely way of teaching children about the small things that they shared with their loved one as well as recognizing the grief of others and how they might offer some help.

**Liss-Levinson, Nechama. *When a Grandparent Dies. A Kid's Own Remembering Workbook for Dealing with Shiva and the Year Beyond*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995.**

This is a book for Jewish children that teaches about *shivah* and some of the mourning customs of Judaism. There are places to write information about the deceased grandparent, to draw a picture of the tombstone, to insert photographs, and how to

remember the person who died throughout the year. Suggestions for memory projects and honoring the person are offered. There are places in the book to journal and reflect. This book also helps children to think about their grandparent during each significant holiday. A glossary of terms is provided as well.

**Mellonie, Bryan and Robert Ingpen. *Lifetimes. The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1983.**

Mellonie and Ingpen explain death as part of the natural lifecycle for all living things. They illustrate lifecycles of insects, fish, mammals, butterflies, and people. They use a formula of birth and death and living in between. It all appears very natural and non-threatening. Their approach is very matter of fact and not emotional at all. This book is a good choice when introducing the concept of death, however, for a bereaved child who is currently grieving a loss, it would leave the child cold and not address the emotions that would need attention at the time.

**Mundy, Michaelene. *Sad Isn't Bad. A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss*. St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 1998.**

This is a very reassuring book for a child who is feeling a mix of emotions following the death of a loved one. It tells the child that it is okay to cry and to ask questions; it states explicitly "it is not your fault"; it encourages sharing feelings; it acknowledges that some things will remain the same and other things will change; it addresses the question of where the loved one is now; it encourages asking for help and giving your grief time; it is okay to feel mixed up and confused; and it draws on the importance of memory. This is a very helpful book for a child who is grieving: it is honest and written for a child but not in a manner that is infantilizing.

**MacGregor, Cynthia. *Why Do People Die?* Illustrated by David Clark. New York: Citadel Press, 1999.**

The book begins with explaining that an old pair of sneakers, like some other things cannot be fixed. Sometimes our body gets hurt and can be fixed but other times it cannot. When a person dies, he or she stops breathing and cannot do regular activities any longer. The book goes on to explain that people feel sad when someone dies. There is an explanation about what a funeral is and different religions have different clergy who officiate. There is a picture and explanation about a coffin and the cemetery. The book presents rituals of various cultures. There is a section on life after death and a good portion of the book is dedicated to feelings and memory with the message that it is normal to have a variety of feelings when someone special dies and memories are forever. This book addresses the key areas that parents feel uncomfortable with. The book is quite long and probably should be read in multiple readings concentrating on specific sections at a time because there is a great deal of information for a child to absorb.

**Miles, Brenda S. *Imagine a Rainbow. A Child's Guide for Soothing Pain.* Illustrated by Nicole Wang. Washington, D.C.: Magination Press, 2006.**

This is a book of imagery for children who are suffering. Regardless of the source of their suffering, this book has lovely images that allows a child to imagine soothing and imaginative scenes that take them away for a few minutes. It is a relaxing book that offers children a break from the difficulties in their lives. While it does not address grief specifically, it can certainly be used for a bereaved child who needs to escape the pain of loss if even for a short time. The American Psychological Association publishes this book.

**Numeroff, Laura and Wendy S. Harpham. *The Hope Tree. Kids Talk About Breast Cancer.* Illustrated by David McPhail. New York: Simon & Shuster Books for Young Readers, 1999.**

This book is a compilation of material written by children of mothers with breast cancer. They cover such topics as what it was like the day they found out about the diagnosis; you can't catch it; there are many emotions; what to do to help Mom; looking for the good in something bad; family meetings; and how helpful it is to get together and talk with others who are in the same situation. This book would be of great help for children living with a parent who has cancer.

**O'Toole, Donna. *Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope.* Burnsville, NC: Compassion Books, 1988.**

This is a wonderful but long book that offers hope. Aarvy Aardvark is sad and lonely because people have captured his mother and sister to take to a zoo. He grieves for them and is very sad. His friend Ralphie Rabbit tries desperately to comfort him but Aarvy is despondent. Ralphie tells him to let his feelings "come outside in the open so we can dance with them". Aarvy does not feel like playing for a long time. One day he sees a bird "sleeping" on the ground but does not realize she is dead until Ralphie Rabbit tells him. He is devastated but Ralphie Rabbit tells him that now they have to find a way to remember her and her beauty. "The memories can help us grow". They bury her and Aarvy asks if he could give her a name; he chooses the name of his sister, Clarice. Aarvy finds it hard to say goodbye. They both cry and Aarvy remembers times he shared with his sister Clarice. He tells Ralphie Rabbit maybe they will play together soon.

This is a lovely book of hope while it teaches about grief. Due to its length, an adult should read it in a number of readings to a child. It teaches the important lesson of cherishing those in our lives. It is truly a book for all ages and need not be reserved for

children alone.

**Palmer, Dr. Pat. *"I wish I could hold your hand..."A Child's Guide to Grief and Loss.* Illustrated by Dianne O'Quinn Burke. San Luis Obispo: Impact Publishers, 1994.**

This is a book for very young children that deals with the feelings that are associated with losing somebody you love. After dealing with a variety of specific feelings, it then teaches that it is better to feel the sadness and to learn to deal with your feelings than to carry them with you forever. The book encourages the child to cry and explains that tears are beautiful and healing. Talking to a grown up who is a friend can help and it is also fine to have fun sometimes. The book offers suggestions of things to do such as writing a letter to the person or pet that left you even if he or she cannot write back. It also tells the child that this is a time to be especially good to yourself. The book ends with a reminder that love never really goes away but stays with you forever.

**Parker, Marjorie Blain. *Jasper's Day.* Illustrated by Janet Wilson. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 2002.**

This is the story of the last day of Jasper, the beloved golden retriever of Riley and his family. Jasper's cancer is "really bad" and the family has decided that they cannot let him suffer any longer. This will be a special day as Riley's Mom and Dad stay home from work. They give Jasper his pain medication and then spend the day giving him his favorite treats and taking him to his favorite places, including a visit to Grandma to say goodbye. As the pain medication wears off, Riley knows that Dad has to take Jasper to the veterinarian for a shot that will be gentle and then Jasper will be dead. Riley and his Mom cry while they wait for Dad to return with Jasper's body. Then together, they bury Jasper in a grave that Dad dug yesterday in the backyard under a beautiful tree. They put his toys in as well and they bury Jasper. Riley is sad and has difficulty falling asleep. He

knows he will miss Jasper but decides to spend the summer making a memory book of his special friend. This was a hard day but it was good also because it was Jasper's Day.

This painfully beautiful book is a story of love; a story of love of life and a love so strong that recognizing Jasper's inability to continue living in pain gives a little boy and his family the strength and courage to let go and help the pet they love so much. This book shows the reader how love and death are intertwined and although it ends sadly with Jasper's death, it also was a beautiful death. There are some moments of humor as well. This book addresses old age and illness as causes of death. The idea of putting the pet "down" raises the subject of euthanasia but is not dealt with by the author other than as an act of kindness. The one criticism with this book is that in the very beginning the author says that they cannot let Jasper continue to suffer and there is only one thing left to do. Exactly what that one thing left to do is never clarified until the end when Dad takes Jasper for a shot. This beautiful book won the ASPCA Henry Bergh Children's Book Award.

**Portnoy, Rabbi Mindy Avra. *Where Do People Go When They Die?* Illustrated by Shelly Haas. Minneapolis: Kar-Ben Publishing, 2004.**

This book gently answers the one question asked by several different children to an adult "Where Do People Go When They Die?" The children illustrated represent several different cultures and a child in a wheelchair is included as well. The adults questioned include a father, mother, grandfather, teacher, and aunt. The answers that the adults provide are all wonderful ones that provide honesty, openness, and creativity. They include telling the child about burial of the body which then becomes part of the earth and nature; heaven, a place of peace; people go into our memories and become the past; they go into our hearts and stay with us as we feel and make our hearts strong; they live



on in their children and friends and become the future; they go to God. We ask ourselves the same question and the ultimate message is that we each remember them in our own way.

This book is gentle and universal, reflecting various beliefs yet still teaching children that their loved one will not be forgotten. The scenes show children with their significant adults in lovely settings primarily of nature, subliminally illustrating the continuing cycle of nature that incorporates life and death. Nothing frightening or sad is portrayed, but rather, a range of thoughts that provide comfort to the reader. Rabbi Portnoy offers suggestions for parents at the end of the book for parents who are searching for an appropriate approach to discuss death with their children.

**Rofes, Eric E. and the Unit at Fayerweather Street School. *The Kid's' Book About Death and Dying By and For Kids*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985.**

This book was written by kids and for kids about the subject of death. It was initiated by a teacher who worked with a group of fourteen students ranging in age from eleven to fourteen years. The book is written in their own words after a year of meeting together, discussing various issues, sharing feelings, going on field trips, and conducting interviews. These young authors say that death is not portrayed in realistic ways, sometimes making it more traumatic and shocking than it needs to be. They blame the media for this, at times showing only bits of information thereby confusing children. They say themselves that kids prefer to hear real words such as "death". They say that children are not taught about death in real ways. Even "the problem with television news shows is that they tell you about death without showing any emotions. This makes death seem unreal and impersonal". They say that death should be discussed clearly and honestly with kids and dealt with in schools. Discussion groups, they believe, can offer

comfort as well as serve the purpose of teaching. They believe that children are not as afraid if they are brought up in a family that discusses death. They envisioned what death would look like as a human or an animal. They write that death is inevitable but it is very important that each person examine their feelings about death so that they can accept it without fear. Moreover, they write that we should be aware of what death is, what causes it, and what happens when we die. They outline some diseases and statistics of mortality rates, euthanasia, brain death, autopsy, funeral customs, monuments, cremation, organ donation, and wills. They write that a first death experience for many kids is that of a pet loss. They even provide a table of lifespan of various animals in years. They devote an entire chapter to how to tell a child of the death of his/her pet as well as a section on kids' feelings about a pet dying. They write that death of an older relative is probably the next most common death experience for most. They reassure the reader that most children do not experience the death of a parent, however, they recognize that it is traumatic when it does happen. They give stories of young people they interviewed who had lost a parent and discuss their feelings.

As a class, they discussed various ways to tell kids about a parent's death. Many of them had strong personal opinions on this and they write about the various ideas. The same holds true for the question concerning whether a child should attend a parent's funeral. They offer stories of individuals whose parents died. They have a chapter on the death of children and its complexities. They address the death of a sibling as well as the case of the dying child. Dealing with feelings is the main focus of this chapter. There is a chapter dedicated to violent death in which the authors cover death due to accidents,

suicide, murder, and assassinations and the fear and horror associated with these tragic deaths. The students discuss life after death and reincarnation as well.

This book is a remarkable project undertaken by a very dedicated teacher and a courageous group of young people. In their final chapter they write about what they learned. They say that a lot of the mystery and fear surrounding death is due to ignorance and avoidance, and the more they learned during the year, the more comfortable they became with the subject. They describe the five stages outlined by Kubler-Ross that people experience when told of a terminal illness. They believe that being told the truth offers an individual some hope. In the end, they strongly recommend death education for children through schools, family, church and synagogues. Ignorance fosters fear, they write and it is incumbent on everyone to examine personal feelings and share them about death so that everyone can feel more comfortable with this difficult subject. This is an excellent book for young people and adults to read and is to be commended as an outstanding achievement. These young authors met together for a year with their teacher and interviewed many professionals and individuals who have experienced loss of a loved one in a variety of ways. Their candid explanations allow the reader to identify with any given situation in an honest and accepting way.

**Romain, Trevor. *What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?* Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1999.**

This book is geared to children who are ten years of age and older. It is structured as a question and answer book with straightforward responses to questions that deal primarily with feelings and fears following the death of a loved one. It has simple black and white illustrations. It ends with a section on memory, which is very positive.

**Rock, Lois. *When Good-Bye is Forever*. Illustrated by Sheila Moxley. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004.**

This book uses the concept of different types of “goodbye” as the foundation with which to explain death. Some goodbyes are for short times, others for longer times, and some are forever. It touches on sadness and on the reality that everyone will die. This book introduces God and heaven and says that in heaven God makes all things new where those we love are safe in the love of God. The approach is gentle but must be used by an adult who is prepared to discuss the notion of God with the child.

**Silverstein, Shel. *The Giving Tree*. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1964.**

This is not a book about death per se, but it is about a tree that forever gives to a young boy until he becomes an old man. The boy keeps wanting more and more from the tree who is always happy to give. In the end, the tree is nothing but a stump, having giving of itself to the boy for so many years. The boy, now an old man, uses the stump to sit on. The relationship endures into old age. It is a story of love and giving, and one that can certainly be used for a grieving child to demonstrate how much the deceased loved one gave.

**Shriver, Maria. *What's Heaven?* Illustrated by Sandra Speidel. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.**

This is a book that addresses a child's questions about heaven. It is quite a religious book, dealing with angels, the funeral, burial, and the soul of a person. The little girl who asks the questions in the end speaks to her Great Grandma (Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy) who died and says she knows her spirit will always be alive in her. The book is beautifully illustrated and really is geared to children who are older and have had some

introduction to the concept of heaven. There is a lot of information on each page and is not written for a young child.

**Simon, Norma. *The Saddest Time*. Illustrated by Jacqueline Rogers. Morton Grove, Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company, 1986.**

This book is comprised of three short stories each about a different type of death. The first story is of a boy whose Uncle Joe dies; the second is about a class dealing with the sudden death of a classmate who died as a result of a car accident; the third story is about a girl whose grandmother dies. Each story highlights the struggle of the child to find meaning to the death as well as how to offer support while dealing with their own grief. It is an excellent book to stimulate discussion about death and how to recognize feelings. Supporting others in their grief and remembering the deceased are key themes in each story.

**Smith Road Elementary School. *Angel in Blue. The Story of Ashley Martin*. New York: Scholastic, 2000.**

The fifth grade students of a school in Michigan wrote this book about their classmate Ashley Martin who died of a rare form of cancer. It is written with each page asking a question and words of Ashley's as the answer. In her wisdom, Ashley offers very profound wisdom such as "don't take your health for granted" and "make sure you show your family you love them!" Ashley's courage gives children a sense of love and hope in the face of tragedy and loss.

**Stickney, Doris. *Water Bugs and Dragonflies*. Illustrated by Gloria Ortiz Hernandez. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1970.**

This is a very small sized book that addresses the mystery of death and where people go when they die. These issues are presented in the story of how water bugs become dragonflies and the bugs left behind wonder where they go. They make a

promise that the next one who leaves the water will come back and tell the others. The bug that leaves next however, learns that he cannot go back; he physically cannot get there. A prayer for the bugs who leave the pond and a blessing for them in their new life follow the story. This is followed in turn by a section for parents on how to handle the questions their children ask about where someone goes after death. Stickney writes “I don’t know” is an honest and good answer. She adds saying “I believe” gives children confidence in the future and in a Creator who has a plan. This book is well written; the adult must be aware of the religious aspect with the prayer that is provided.

**Spero, Moshe Halevi. *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*. Illustrated by Elisheva Gaash. New York: PitsPopAny, 1997.**

This book is geared to Orthodox children who are educated in a very traditional way. The story is told by a little girl whose Bubby dies. She and Bubby have had a very special relationship and she is heartbroken. The book covers Jewish customs including *keriah*, burial, the meal of condolence, the rules of *shivah*, appropriate blessings people say, not saying hello or goodbye for the mourners, and saying *Kaddish*. The book uses some Hebrew words and concepts such as *shamayim*, *Mashiach*, *aron*, *shul*, *eishet chayil*, *neshamah*, *avel*, and *tzedakah*. They are taught in the context of the little girl’s mother who is the mourner. In the end, the little girl receives Bubby’s *Shabbat* candlesticks as a gift to be passed to the next generation. She is happy because they help her to remember Bubby and the love they had for each other. The book teaches a great deal to Jewish children, however, it is based on Orthodox practice and would need modification if used for non-Orthodox children. The pages have a great deal of printed material and the pictures are in black and white. It would be difficult to read this book in one sitting.

**Spero, Moshe Halevi. *Saying Goodbye to Grandpa*. Illustrated by Elisheva Gaash. New York: PitsPopAny, 1997.**

This book is written by the same author as *Saying Goodbye to Grandma* but is told by a little boy whose Zeydeh dies. The story is similar in that the boy and Zaydeh share a special relationship and he is heartbroken when Zeydeh dies. He learns about the rituals around mourning and asks his mother about *Maschiach*'s time. She tells him it is when those who have died will come to life again. He learns about the *mitzvot* of *Shivah* and *tzedakah* and the importance of Shabbat overriding *Shivah*. He is given Zeydeh's *siddur* as a gift to cherish and remember him by. This book is shorter than the book about the grandmother who dies, but also cannot be read in one sitting. It is similar in style with a lot of information on each page. There is less emphasis on feelings than on *halachah*. Simcha Publishing Company also published this book in 1984 under the name *Zeydeh*.

**Schwiebert, Pat and Chuck DeKlyen. *Tear Soup. A Recipe for Healing After Loss*. Illustrated by Taylor Bills. Portland, Oregon: Grief Watch, 1999.**

This is an excellent book that can be used for children and adults alike about a woman named Grandy who has had a big loss in her life. Pops, her husband, suffered also but in his own way. She decides to make tear soup that collects all her tears whether she sobs or cries quietly. She adds all her sad memories to it. She asks others if they want to join her for a bowl of tear soup and they politely refuse except for a few who really care. Many areas of grief are touched upon as Grandy makes the soup and over time, needs it less and less. The book addresses how people grieve differently, how some get angry at God, how sometimes a group of other soup makers is good to share stories about soup making, and how sometimes we need to be alone in our grief. The book is appropriate for all age groups and can be used for age appropriate discussions. In the end, Grandy puts

the soup in the freezer and will “pull it out from time to time to have a taste” because the hard work of making tear soup is never actually finished. The book has many pages of advice concerning grief and “soup making” for oneself and others, including advice on how to support children. There are also references of websites for finding help. This book is wonderful in all regards: it is well written, sensitive, beautifully illustrated, humorous, and honest.

**Techner, David and Judith Hirt-Manheimer. *A Candle for Grandpa. A Guide to the Jewish Funeral for Children and Parent*. Illustrated by Joel Iskowitz. New York: UAHC Press, 1993.**

This book is written specifically for children about Jewish death and funeral rituals. It surprisingly, covers all aspects of the funeral as the young storyteller is watching the *yahrzeit* candle for his grandfather who died one year earlier and recalling the time of death and the funeral. The family goes to the funeral home to meet with the director in order to decide whether the children would attend the funeral. The story explains *shomer*, *Chevrah Kadisha*, *tahara*, coffin, *keriah*, eulogy, *El Male Rachamim*, hearse, cemetery, shoveling earth, *Kaddish*, and *yahrzeit*. This book is written very honestly and factually with continued emphasis that everyone, rich or poor, is created equal before God. The authors provide two helpful sections at the end of the book concerning the five questions parents most frequently ask and the five questions children most frequently ask. This is a very helpful addition especially the section dealing with children’s complex questions. A glossary of terms is provided as well of words that are found in the book.

This book is well written but is not for young children. There is a great deal of printed text with black and white pictures only. The pictures are quite graphic depicting the funeral home and cemetery, not in a frightening way, but designed so that there would



be no surprises for children who attend a funeral and the cemetery. A great deal of information is offered and is well suited to the child who wants a great deal of information. It can also be read in sections. The book allows children to understand that they can have ambivalence about whether or not to attend a funeral. The children in the story observe their mother and grandmother crying but emotions are otherwise not dealt with. This is a book for information and provides the reader with a great deal of it, encompassing Jewish practices and perspectives. David Techner is a bereaved parent himself and Judith Hirt-Manheimer a child psychologist; together, they provide information they know firsthand that Jewish children want and need to know.

**Thomas, Jane Resh. *Saying Goodbye to Grandma*. Illustrated by Marcia Sewell. New York: Clarion Books, 1988.**

This book focuses on a little girl's fears and experiences at the funeral of her grandmother. It is a chapter book for older school age children who read well. The story opens as she and her family are traveling to her grandmother's funeral. The extended family spends time together with Grandpa having some fun. Then they must prepare for the visitation and the funeral. She says if they don't have the funeral maybe Grandma will come back. Her father explains this cannot happen. The book takes the reader through the visitation and funeral experience including the burial and ends with the girl saying that even though it is sad that Grandma died, the funeral was not completely sad; the family had a special time together as they celebrated the life of someone they all loved. This is an excellent book that could be read by the child but should have some adult supervision.

**Thomas, Pat. *I Miss You. A First Look at Death.* Illustrated by Lesley Harker. New York: Barron's, 2000.**

This is a very good book written for younger children but excellent for older children as well. It is about the emotions associated with loss and how difficult it can be to cope. There are some questions on several pages inviting the children to reflect on their situation and share their thoughts and feelings. It ends with the concept of memory and the last few pages include advice for adults to help grieving children.

**Volavkova, Hana....*I never saw another butterfly.* New York: Schocken Books, 1993.**

This intensely poignant book is a collection of art and poetry of children of Terezin Concentration Camp. It is for older children who have been exposed to the facts of the Holocaust and realize the horrors that happened. Children who died did some of the art and poetry. This is understandably very upsetting and therefore the adult sharing the book with a child must be prepared to deal with the questions and emotions concerning such horrendous loss. The book is powerful and an important tool for teaching about love, loss, attachment, and memory.

**Varley, Susan. *Badger's Parting Gifts.* New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1984.**

This book is about Badger who is old and knows he must die. He is not afraid and one day the other animals of the forest learn that he did die. They are very sad and miss him because he was a wonderful friend. Mole, Frog, Fox, and Rabbit get together and think about something Badger taught them that they now can do extremely well. The memory of the lasting gift they each received from Badger warms their hearts as they think of him and how he taught them to do something they are proud of. One day in spring, Mole walks to the field where he had last seen his friend Badger and says "thank

you” to Badger for his parting gift. This book is very sweet and gentle. It teaches two very important lessons: Badger is not afraid of death and accepts the reality that the time has come, and the child too can think of the “parting” gifts he or she has received from the loved one who has died.

**Viorst, Judith. *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. Illustrated by Erik Blegvad. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1971.**

A little boy’s cat named Barney died and he is distraught over his loss. His mother tells him to think of ten good things about Barney that he could say at the funeral they are planning for him. He does not like it that Barney is dead and feels confused. He thinks of nine good things about Barney but cannot think of a tenth one until he learns that Barney who is buried in the ground will help flowers grow. This book helps young children recognize their feelings about losing someone special and how to think of what made that person special. The book addresses the ritual of funerals and burial as well as memory.

**Weigolt, Udo. *Bear’s Last Journey*. Illustrated by Cristina Kadmon. New York: North-South Books, 2003.**

This is a beautifully illustrated and sensitively written book about forest animals that learn that Bear is sick and is dying. The book opens with rabbit informing them all that Bear is sick, and the entire community hurries to be with him. Bear explains that he is saying goodbye as he is preparing to go on a special journey that every animal makes at the end of his life, one that everyone makes on his own. The little fox is especially curious about death and when all the animal friends gather around Bear, the fox curls up right next to him and asks questions about what it means to die and what heaven is. Bear offers him simple and honest answers admitting that he does not know exactly but he had a dream that everyone who had loved him before was in heaven and waiting for him. The

little fox has a need to spend one more visit with Bear and distracts the badger who is guarding Bear's cave so that he can sneak in. The picture is beautiful of the two friends lying together with fox nestled in the huge body of Bear. When Bear dies, all the animals go to his den to lovingly stroke his paws for the last time and each receives one of Bear's things to remember him by. Together, they roll a large rock in front of the entrance and adorn it with flowers to make it look pretty and special. A few days later, the animals gather for a "memorial service" sharing memories of wonderful times with Bear and realizing that it hurts a little less to do so, knowing that although their beloved friend is no longer with them in the forest, he has not gone from their memories.

This beautiful book introduces the child to the natural aging process, the love that Bear gives in his goodbye and explanation to them about death, and in his courage and acceptance. Children learn of ritual and the importance of memory, that love endures even after their friend is gone, and while death cannot be truly understood, it is something that we must accept even though it causes emotional pain. Fox is angry when he first learns that Bear is going away and can't imagine life without him. With the support of the community, fox learns about death. In this way, the young reader learns that there is a mix of emotions around death and that it is OK to feel them. The lovely handling of community (very much a Jewish concept) provides a sense of comfort to the reader who sees that fox is not left alone in his grief and that Bear is surrounded by many who love him both in life and in death.

**White, E. B. *Charlotte's Web*. Illustrated by Garth Williams. Trophy Newbery. New York, 1952.**

This book for school age children depicts death as something that happens naturally in living things and also shows the reader that there are various forms of death,

including a victim who is prey to predators to teach that animals depend upon each other for survival and at times, must kill others in order to live, that there is a food chain. White uses the themes of love and death and birth and life. Seasons play an important role as birth and new life occur at this time as the book opens. Many of the characters have lots to learn. Fern and Avery and Wilbur and Charlotte are exposed to some of life's difficulties as they all develop attachments and experience love in these relationships. They also learn about loss but that love is still very much a part of loss. They learn about mourning a special friend. They also learn that some individuals (people and animal characters) are not so in tune with their feelings and do not allow them the right and respect to mourn, but they know what they are feeling and they choose to honor themselves and their loved one in mourning and allowing themselves the right to grieve.

This is a powerful book for children as White cleverly uses two animals that we usually dislike and sometimes kill for the simple reason that they are unattractive to us. A spider and a pig are among animals that many people dislike; yet in this story, we feel a great sense of love and admiration for them both. We want to cry when Charlotte dies. White teaches the young reader that there is beauty in everything in Nature and that just because a creature is unattractive, this does not render it worthy of being hated and killed. White teaches the child that sometimes death happens without a logical reason for it; sometimes death happens with no warning. Charlotte's Web offers a microcosm of life with Wilbur representing humanity and the farm representing the world, for this little pig learns, in his growing, that life consists of many happy and unhappy experiences. He attains a wide-spectrum view of life and learns about the pain of grief for a special friend

yet can experience joy at knowing her babies will be born and Charlotte will survive through them.

**Yeomans, Ellen. *Lost and Found. Remembering a Sister*. Illustrated by Dee deRosa. Omaha: Centering Corporation, 2000.**

This story is told by a little girl whose sister Paige died of cancer. She misses her terribly and does not want to do things by herself like go to dance lessons or sit alone on the school bus. The family is different now and they sell their van because they don't need a big car anymore. Her Mom does not want to go shopping with her because she can't bear to see people she knows. She cries at school in front of everybody. One night she wraps herself in Paige's blanket and feels that Paige is with her. After time passes, her parents stop crying as much. She finds a place where she can put things to remember Paige. She finds a place at school, in her home, and outside, and she realizes that they did not "lose Paige forever. She's right here in our hearts. I know where to find her." This is a very good book for young children. The pictures are lovely and some look like children have drawn them. The child is included as a principal mourner, which is a very important message; siblings often are overlooked as mourners when a child in a family dies.

Appendix M  
Films for Children On Death and Bereavement

**It Must Hurt A Lot**

5 Minutes

Story by Doris Sanford; Illustrations by Graci Evans

1990 Franciscan Communications

Distributed by Rainbow Connection

Burnsville, North Carolina

704-675-5909

A child tells this sensitive video about a little boy named Joshua who comes home one day to learn that his puppy Muffin has been hit by a car and died immediately. Joshua is very angry about losing Muffin who is his very best friend and he says he hates the person who killed her. His mother tries to reassure him that it was an accident and she was not in pain for long. But Joshua never hurt as much as he does now. She says he could get another puppy but it is Muffin he wants; he does not want another puppy. Joshua's friend Tim comes over to play but the visit is strained. Tim acts funny and never mentions Muffin, not even once; that hurts Joshua and Tim goes home shortly after. Joshua is hurt because he knows that Tim was told about Muffin and he wanted support from him.

Joshua has a very hard time over the next few weeks and cries himself to sleep every night. He says he has never felt so alone but one day he feels big changes happening and creates some secrets to share with the viewer. He realizes many things now: his mother wanted to fix the situation immediately by offering to get another puppy but Joshua's first secret is: "When I love, it hurts lots". He realizes his friends want to help but they just don't know how: "everybody handles loss in their own way". He thinks about the many times he and Muffin had fun and how he always told her he loves her: "if

you love somebody tell them now". One month later, Tim's Grandma dies and Joshua goes to visit Tim. They sit on Tim's bed and Joshua cries with him because he knows how it feels to hurt: "I can help my friends when they hurt". Over time, Joshua starts to feel better and he remembers the good times he had with Muffin. He says Muffin's death helped him grow: "good memories always stay".

This is a very poignant and sensitive video that helps a child deal with a loss that is very painful and to understand that others do not quite know what to do to help. It is important to know that sometimes doing something is not necessary; support and talking about the loved one is the most helpful thing we can offer. Although Joshua wants Muffin, he eventually realizes how much he has learned about loss by letting himself feel the emotions. He now knows how to help others and keeps Muffin in his memory for all time.

**Where's Pete?**

26 minutes

Produced by the National Film Board of Canada / AIMS Media

Distributed by Compassion Books

Burnsville, NC

800-970-4220

[www.compassionbooks.com](http://www.compassionbooks.com)

This is a film for older children, ages ten and up. Seven-year-old Chad and his friend are excited about an upcoming hockey game against third grade students and go home to Chad's house to ask his brother Pete, an experienced hockey player, if he will coach their team. However, he sees a police car outside his house and runs in to learn that Pete has been killed in a car accident. His father cries as he tries to tell Chad what happened. Chad and Pete share a bedroom and he imagines Pete coming home that night from a successful hockey game. The next morning, his friend calls on him to walk to



school together and he must tell him the news. The friend is shocked but supportive and promises to tell everyone at school.

The scene at the funeral home shows the confusion of a young child as he sees Pete in the casket and does not understand when his mother says it is Pete but Pete is not there any more. He wonders if Pete has legs because the casket is closed on the lower side of the body. His mother tries to explain cremation but Chad wonders if they will “cook” Pete. As Chad looks at Pete, he remembers time when they acted silly together and recalls a scene in which they both chewed bubble gum to annoy their mother. Chad has gum with him and slips a piece into Pete’s pocket.

After the funeral, things are difficult in the family and Chad is obsessed with not having a coach for their hockey team. His father is a ventriloquist and puts on shows for children with his puppet. He tries at times to amuse Chad but is caught up in his own grief and cannot coach the team because he does not know about hockey. Chad sees him amusing other children and then Chad says they need a coach; they need Pete. His father reminds him that Pete is dead. Chad imagines heartfelt scenes of playing hockey with Pete.

One day before the game, Chad comes home to find his mother putting away Pete’s things. He gets very angry and screams at her saying “it’s no fair!” He hides in the house and his father sees him under a table. He uses the puppet and becomes the ventriloquist to give Chad the attention he needs, giving him hope. At the hockey game, Chad is distracted by visions of Pete watching him play and cheering for him. He keeps missing the puck and makes mistakes, until he has a burst of energy and scores a goal. He becomes the star of the game. That night, alone in his room, Pete comes to him and gives

him his own hockey stick to keep. Chad says he will see him in the morning to which Pete responds, "You're never going to see me again" while reassuring him that everything will be OK. In the morning, Chad wakes up and looks in the direction of Pete's bed but there is an empty space. The hockey stick however, is there right next to him. This is a powerful and painful film that addresses many realistic issues about sibling loss. The loneliness of the surviving sibling is very well captured with less focus on the loss of the parents, which makes for the success of this film for bereaved siblings. The love between the siblings is very well captured, making the feelings of loss very real. It must be viewed with adult supervision and followed with some discussion. Adults should be aware of the potential for themselves to be emotionally triggered while watching this video.

**My Grandson Lew**

13 minutes

Distributed by Rainbow Connection

Burnsville, NC

704-675-5909

The video opens with a boy named Lew who cannot sleep. He is reminded of his grandfather and the special times they shared. He goes into the kitchen and finds his mother there. He says he misses Grandpa and his mother is surprised to hear him say that. She tells him she did not think he remembered him and since he never asked, she did not tell him that Grandpa had died. Lew remembers how Grandpa came to stay with him when his parents went away on a trip and how he called out to him during the night. Grandpa would come and rock him and kiss him with his scratchy beard. He remembers Grandpa teaching him to fly a kite and taking him to the museum. Lew wants him to come back because he misses him. His mother says she misses him also and shares the

story about Grandpa coming to visit when Lew was born. He was so very happy and as he held him, Grandpa repeated over and over “my grandson Lew”. so very proud. Lew says he wants him to come back and he misses him especially tonight. His mother tells Lew that he made Grandpa come back for her tonight by telling her his memories. Lew repeats “I miss him” and his mother says “so do I, but we can remember him together”.

This video is very heartwarming as Lew and his mother recall special memories. It touches on a very important message to adults: children grieve and must be told when a loved one dies. Children need adults who are honest with them and allow them to express their emotions about the loss of a significant person in their lives. This film is appropriate for all ages including very young children. Supervision and discussion with adults should be integrated with the viewing of the film.

**Reading Rainbow: Badger’s Parting Gifts**

30 Minutes

Produced by Lancit Media Entertainment, New York

Distributed by GPN

800-228-4630

[www.unl.edu](http://www.unl.edu)

The theme of this video is based on the book *Badger’s Parting Gifts* although the book is not read. LeVar Burton who works with a group of children from New York who are creating artwork to keep alive memories of someone they loved who has died hosts it. He tells of his grandmother who was a wonderful cook and he is collecting her recipes so that he could cook them himself. He often mentions her sweet potato pie that is his best memory of her. Each child shows what he or she has created and speaks of the person who died.

The next section of the video is about Alvin Ailey who founded the Alvin Ailey Dance Company and a dancer who studied with him. She speaks of the gifts he gave especially that of believing in yourself in addition to his ability to teach dance. The last part of the video is made up of book reviews by the children of some books that they have found to be meaningful as they cope with the loss of their loved one. This is a film for older children that touches on keeping memories alive and being in touch with the sadness associated with loss. It is a little slow moving and is not recommended for young children.

**Tear Soup**

17 minutes

Produced by Grief Watch

Portland, Oregon

503-284-7426

[www.griefwatch.com](http://www.griefwatch.com)

This video is an exact retelling of the book with the identical illustrations. The voice of the person telling the story is very sad as is the music in the background. While the book is well suited for readers of all ages, child and adult alike, the video is less geared to children given the vocal emphasis on some of the components of the book.

**The Tenth Good Thing About Barney**

13 minutes

AIMS

Van Nuys, California

This is a film version of the book by the same name. It is performed by actors as opposed to someone reading the story aloud and is very well done. The film begins with pictures of Barney the cat who died. The little boy who loved him is very sad and misses him so much that he cannot eat or watch television. His mother suggests they have a funeral the next day and that he think of ten good things about Barney. The boy lovingly

recalls what he loves about Barney but can think of only nine. At the funeral, he and his little friend Annie watch his father bury Barney. Annie says that Barney is in heaven but he insists that Barney is in the ground. The father offers a little explanation about heaven. The boy says he is angry that Barney is dead as he watches his father plant flowers in the garden. His father says everything changes in the ground and Barney will change as well and help the flowers grow. The boy realizes that is the tenth good thing about Barney: he helps flowers grow. "That is a pretty nice job for a cat". Knowing this gives him a great deal of comfort. This book is a classic favorite and the film is very well acted and sensitively told by the boy. It is very appropriate for all ages including very young children.

**Let Their Voices Be Heard: Children's Stories of Grief**

60 minutes

Produced by WBGU

This video was produced for Fernside and is a film of children, parents, and professionals who speak of grief experiences. Although sections of this film are directed more to those who work with children, the footage of bereaved children speaking of their losses is very powerful and would be of great help to bereaved children who are pre-teen to teenagers. These are children who have had help from Fernside and thus offer hope to others despite the reality that they have been changed forever by their loss.

**My Daughter's Son**

16 minutes

AIMS Multimedia

Distributed by Compassion Books Inc.

800-675-5909

[www.compassionbooks.com](http://www.compassionbooks.com)

This video is about a Jewish boy whose mother has died. The film opens with the cemetery and the shoveling of earth on casket. Jeremy shovels some earth with his own

little red toy shovel. At the *shivah* house, there are many adults who try to console him but so many adults he does not know overwhelm Jeremy. Nobody notices that he is grieving his mother. Moreover, we learn that it is his birthday. His father has forgotten and reprimands Jeremy for wanting to remove the cover from the mirror to see if he “looks older”. He looks at the *shivah* candle and explores items of his mother, searching for a way to connect with her. His father caught up in his own grief does not know how to include Jeremy. He hides under the table and is discovered by his grandfather. His grandfather has not forgotten Jeremy’s birthday and suggests they leave the house and go for a walk as he grabs a paper bag. They go to the beach and he shows Jeremy what is in the bag; it is a shell collection that belonged to Jeremy’s mother when she was a little girl. Jeremy holds the shells to his ear to hear the ocean and his grandfather suggests he search for a shell on the beach they are visiting. He reminds Jeremy that shells are often hidden under the sand and he needs to dig for them. Jeremy digs with his toy shovel and excitedly finds a large conch. As he holds the conch to his ear, he says he hears his Mom’s voice. His grandfather says, “If you listen carefully enough, you will always be able to hear her voice”. Jeremy has an idea and the next scene shows them at the cemetery in the evening. They use a flashlight to find his mother’s grave and Jeremy places the shells on the newly filled grave. He holds the big conch in his hands and says “this one I’m keeping Mom, so if you ever want to talk to me I’ll be able to listen.”

This is a very well done film on many levels. It teaches some of the rituals around Jewish mourning, specifically, shoveling of earth, the *shivah* house, the candle that remains lit for the week of *shivah*, friends and family who visit, the covering of the mirrors, and the phrase *alehah Hashalom* (“peace be upon her”). The viewer sees the

difficulty that adults have in recognizing the grief of children and allowing them to express their grief. Jeremy's father is so caught up in his own grief that he almost forgets his son. Children need a connection to the deceased and to make sense of the situation. His grandfather, grief-stricken himself, has the insight to help Jeremy. He recognizes the child's anguish and recognizes the need for special attention on his birthday that makes the loss even more painfully acute. His important message of always being able to hear his mother's voice is one that Jeremy can carry with him for all time.

### **Generation to Generation**

35 minutes

Produced by Sue Marx Films, Inc. in cooperation with Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit

Distributed by Behrman House

This video is about Jewish children and bereavement. It emphasizes the importance of children's need for honest information and participation in death rituals in the loss of loved ones. The film includes numerous children who speak of their experience as they grieve a loved one who died. Some speak of the need to know exactly what happened and others speak of the importance of participating in the rituals that allow them to say goodbye, including the shoveling of earth into the grave. Some children said they were not prepared even though they knew their loved one was ill; death did not seem to be a possibility. The video is hosted by David Techner, a funeral director, who wrote the book *A Candle for Grandpa* and also includes interviews with Rozanne Friedman, a grief therapist, and Rabbi Irwin Groner who all discuss the rationale for including children in honest ways that invite the continuity of tradition and love. They all speak about the need for children to witness the truth because imagining makes things worse for them. Going to the cemetery and shoveling earth is a beautiful *mitzvah*; hearing the sound of the earth

on the casket made one child feel comforted that her grandfather was safe under the ground. Techner instructs adults to have the children sit with the rabbi before the funeral to tell stories and listen to those of others, to laugh and cry together; this is a time that he says may be even more important than the funeral as it is truly the celebration of the person's life. The video shows scenes of prayers being recited at a *shivah* house with children included in the recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish*. There is no denying the reality that death is a difficult and frightening subject to discuss with children but as adults are honest with them, they are given permission to be honest about their own grief and express their fears and emotions.

This is an excellent film that addresses many issues confronting parents and teachers concerning how to discuss death with children and more importantly, how to include children in the important rituals that allow them to say goodbye and honor their loved one. It is intended for adults but could certainly be viewed by teenagers and even preteens who have experienced a loss. The children who participated are to be commended for their frankness, honesty, and willingness to express themselves so openly.

**Codename: Simon**

Approximately 10 minutes

Produced by Cadence Films

Distributed by the American Film Institute

[www.codenamesimon.com](http://www.codenamesimon.com)

This film opens as a young boy named Simon introduces himself as an undercover space agent sent by his planet to explore the human species. His mission is "stationed" at the home of a woman who claims to be his aunt. He spends time exploring and trying to understand interactions of those he sees. He says humans are very



emotional. He remembers being dressed in his space suit as someone (his father) takes a picture of him. The opening scene switches to Simon dressed in a suit and walking with his aunt toward a church. This scene immediately changes and a group of people is seen at a cemetery. The officiating minister, in his address, mentions the names of two individuals who died and left their cherished son, Simon. The camera moves to the two caskets that are lowered. After the cemetery scene, Simon walks around completely alone and puzzled. Adults try to comfort him but he flinches at the touch of these strangers. He says he wonders why his superiors left him behind to be stationed here alone. He thinks about the time they had on earth to search for a clue and wonders if he said the wrong thing for this to have happened, or maybe there was not any more room in the spaceship. He takes the picture of himself in his space suit and throws it into a fountain outside the church.

Later that night he has difficulty sleeping and says he wonders when the spaceship will come pick him up and his mission will be complete. At that moment, through the window, he sees a great light and a loud noise. As he runs down the stairs and opens the front door, he sees the big light was no more than a van of the neighbor next door and the noise is that of the garage door opening. He is devastated at the disappointment but he says "I know they will come. I'm sure it will be any time now" as the film ends.

This film wonderfully captures the magical thinking of young children who do not understand the irreversibility of death. This child is completely alone, having lost both parents and wonders if he did something wrong that caused this huge change in his life. Living with an aunt whom he does not know in a new environment clearly depicts some

of the secondary losses that are incurred when parents die. Simon's situation is all the more painful because of the loss of both his mother and his father. The message is very clear about the need for bereaved children to have honest information. The film is very cleverly created in the imagination of a child who envisions himself in a different dimension completely; the reality of the situation is overwhelming and he imagines he is in a different world. The world is one that most children would find captivating and engaging. This film has been screened at multiple film festivals around the world and is excellent for bereaved individuals of all ages and those who support them.

**Roll Bounce**

111 minutes

20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox

This is a full-length movie that is about an African American boy whose mother has just recently died at the film begins. He and his little sister live with their father in a middle class neighborhood where they are each trying to cope with their loss. The main focus of the film is the roller blading contest that is imminent and Xavier and his friends hope to win against the rivals from the "better" neighborhood. These rivals as well as his own friends mock him for wearing a pair of used roller blades that his mother had given him, but the skates mean a great deal to him; it is his connection to his deceased mother. The film illustrates the importance of friends for teenagers especially at the time of loss when family dynamics in their home are out of kilter.

While the emphasis in the film is on the roller blading contest and the camaraderie of the friends, there is a powerful scene in which the anger of both father and son comes to a head. The father realizes he has been "absent" from his children. Xavier misses his mother intensely and his final skate is for her. The grief component of the film plays a

secondary role to the storyline that is dominant, which is the skating contest, but the film is dramatically acted and well depicts the pattern of teenagers to keep feelings inside and not want to be different. The ratings for this movie were not very good in general, but it is well suited for teenagers who are bereaved and can elicit discussion concerning many issues of their own grief.

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