



## **Life and Death: The Spirituality and Psychology of Jewish Mourning Rites**

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Yom Kippur, our liturgy teaches us, is about life. Our Torah portion exhorts us to “choose life.” We ask to be inscribed in the Book of Life. We sing “*zochrenu l’chaim* – remember us for life, *Melech chafetz b’chaim* – Sovereign who delights in life, *Elohim chaim*, O God of life.” We began our service tonight with the *she-he-chi-anu* prayer – gratitude for having been kept in life.

But many of the customs and rituals of Yom Kippur hint of death. We abstain from core “life activities”: we do not eat, we do not go to work—and I trust that you can make it for twenty-four hours without checking your e-mail—we refrain from sexual intimacy and from personal adornment and many dress in white. Historical practice was, in fact, to wear the same white robe without pockets that one planned on eventually being buried in.

An anthropologist who studied these exotic rites and interviewed a representative sample of native speakers would correctly conclude that for the ancient tribe of the Jews, the sacred day of Yom Kippur is a ritual enactment or foretaste of death; but a death from which we return at the end, restored and renewed, to life.

But how many of us already understood all this? And does it sound authentic now that you have heard it? If we aren’t even aware of this symbolism, is it still true? My goal this evening is to deepen our collective language and understanding about death and Jewish mourning practices. Like other tribes, we have become cut-off from the ancestral wisdom which has sustained our people. My talk this evening is about our experience of being mourners and how we as a community can care for the mourners among us.

Many years ago, in an essay entitled “Religion as a Cultural System,” the anthropologist Clifford Geertz called religion a “a system of symbols” which enables people to make sense of the big picture; religion, he said, is a system for organizing and giving meaning to life. Geertz wrote that the function of religion is to create a “general order of existence” – to explain how things are the way that they are – with “such a convincing narrative” that they are true.<sup>1</sup>

But how does religion convince us of its reality? Or, in more general terms: how do we know what is so? As the sociologist of religion Peter Berger explains, most of what we know is not learned from what we have been told, but rather from what we have observed.<sup>2</sup> Let me give you an example. We had a rule in our house when I was a child that everyone must wear clothes to the table – no shirt, no pants, no dinner. This was an entirely arbitrary rule – but it was conventional. My parents believed that it was their responsibility to teach about the conventional

way of doing many things – and, in fact, every time our family went out in the world, we would notice that this general convention of wearing articles of clothing while dining was widely observed. Such societal messages about culturally appropriate behavior are conveyed by “sub-conscious osmosis.” We only become fully aware of how many of these messages we have internalized when we go to an unfamiliar location and suddenly discover how many assumptions and behaviors which are normative for us are not the standard; we call this experience “culture shock.”

We are all, therefore, simultaneously consumers and creators of culture. Our culture tells us how to organize the world, how to behave and why we should behave that way; and our participation in the culture, by doing the things we are supposed to do, helps reinforce and create the expectation that this is what we and everyone else is supposed to do. When a cultural system is integrated and whole, it is an enduring macro-feedback loop.

For prior generations of Jews, whether in Brooklyn or Bialystock, their world was overwhelmingly Jewish—and most everyone pretty much did most everything in the same ways. However much they may have been exposed to the ways of others, the lines of demarcation between how *we* do it and, what was often called in my household growing up *goyische narishkeit*, the silliness and wrongness of non-Jewish customs, were very clear, as well as the boundaries between *us* and *them*. This is the nostalgic premise of *Fiddler on the Roof*—the world used to make sense and everyone knew what they were supposed to do.

But no matter how integrated and comfortable within our cultural system we are, when death arrives, it is always a disruption of the order. The regular course of events that we are used to is not appropriate anymore. In the face of this overwhelming break in the fabric of the ordinary, the reality to which we are “acculturated,” the first comment most people make is “I don’t know what to do!” The survivor’s “I don’t know” is two-fold: first, I personally do not know what to do at this moment—whom do you call? What do I say? Suddenly, there are a million urgent things but do any of them matter?—I don’t know what to do! Further, to the extent that I do know various cultural instructions about moments like this one, I don’t feel that I truly “know” them nor do I know that I want to make them my own.

It is into the first gap—the disruption, the pain, the disarray in the social and psychic order, that Judaism has historically stepped in to resolve. In times of uncertainty, it is much easier and often comforting to follow instructions. Yet the challenge we face is that, by and large, we no longer enjoy a unified cultural system, in which both the mourners and the community around them share a common vocabulary, rites and expectations. Rather, our culture of mourning is seriously fragmented. This fragmentation occurs in three different ways.

Once, many years ago, I was meeting with the extended family of a man who had died of AIDS during the heart of the epidemic. His long-term partner was distraught by the death and overwhelmed by the myriad decisions that had to be made. I will never forget overhearing the family friend worrying the grieving survivor about what would be served at the meal after the service: “There has to be herring! It is very traditional.”

“It is traditional...” is the all encompassing term for the undifferentiated fragments of the Jewish religious and cultural heritage which have been passed down. Many of us are in possession of random symbols, rituals or gestures which have been separated from the system of meaning in which they were originally embedded; we know we are supposed to do something, but the purpose or meaning within the system is often lost; fragmentary information or expectations about superstitions, folklore, and core mitzvot are jumbled together. “Cover the mirrors!” “Permit cremation!” “Serve herring!” are all given equal weight under the heading, “This is what Jews do! It is traditional!” What is the right thing to do? Many of us know what Judaism teaches about what to do after a death. The first source of fragmentation for us when we are mourners is that we don’t have a shared, communal Jewish practice and most of us don’t feel fully competent in employing Jewish rites or in understanding their meaning.

A second source of fragmentation are the gaps between what we consider to be normative, historical Jewish practice and majority American cultural behaviors. From fancy caskets to viewing to sending flowers, long before *Six Feet Under* was showing on HBO, American Jews were socialized into the death and mourning practices of majority American culture. As contemporary, post-modern and post-melting pot Americans, we are equally owners of generic American culture and a specifically Jewish culture—and for some of us, our Jewish culture may also include Persian, Egyptian, Russian or other cultural traditions where we or our parents have roots. Most of the time, in our daily lives, our “Jewish culture” is so fully integrated into our “American” culture that, outside of the month of December, we rarely experience cultural dissonance; but when death enters our lives, we may turn to Jewish teaching and practice and suddenly become aware of previously unexplored or unresolved cultural conflicts between Jewish values and teaching and what we have learned from our wider American culture. We may experience these conflicts as sources of fragmentation and alienation.

A third location of fragmentation and distance is conflict that the mourner may experience, both within the self and within the extended family. To the extent that you as a mourner knows about historical Jewish practice and the values and teachings associated with them, you may identify with and internalize these teachings or you may be in conflict with them. The “primary” mourner—or the primary mourners—may be in conflict with the family, whether across the generations or amongst the siblings, or perhaps even with the deceased, when differing interpretations of the importance of historical Jewish teaching and accountability exist. Thus, for example, if the deceased has asked to be cremated, this may create a conflict for the survivor. I may be in conflict with my own religious convictions, angry at the deceased who made this demand, and fighting with other family members who do not understand why there is any hesitation to fulfill the very explicit wishes of our now deceased loved one.

Still, all of these potential religious and cultural fragmentations I have described pale next to the primary fragmentation of death itself. Historical Jewish practice, upon hearing of the death of a close family member, was to immediately rip the clothes one is wearing as a direct, physical expression of the disruption of loss; for most modern Jews, this has been ritualized and moved to the cutting of a *keriah*-ribbon as part of the funeral ceremony. Like the rip in the cloth, the fundamental and essential fragmentation, the death itself, cannot be fixed or restored back to the way it was before. The task of mourning is the metabolization and integration of the loss into the self; just as the torn garment can never be fully restored to its original self, but, with appropriate

care, can ultimately be rewoven into a single garment – so the loss which at first is overwhelming and all encompassing is integrated into the narrative and the fabric of the self.

What can we do, as individuals, as families and as a congregation to bring comfort and care to one another at a time of loss? Some of you are mourning a very recent loss; for others, some years have passed but your awareness of absence remains vivid; and for some of us, perhaps, we have been blessed to not yet have lost anyone who is precious to us. Yet death is a part of life: how can we prepare ourselves and our family for the inevitable reality of death touching those we love?

What the mourner needs is to be held in life in order to look at and name the reality of death. The Jewish spiritual tradition teaches us how to hold the mourner safe without seeking to fix what is beyond our power to heal. The ritual death and return to life which underlies the customs of Yom Kippur – no work, no sexual intimacy, no ordinary life activities - are enacted in real time not by the deceased but by the mourners as part of their grieving. Why? Because, according to the deep wisdom of the Jewish spiritual tradition, the mourner cannot initially accept the truth of the separation; when a loved one dies, the family member yearns to go along, to share in the experience, to die as well. But unlike some cultures in which the mourner cannot not live without their beloved, and so joins the loved one in death, the Jewish tradition recognizes and honors the wish to go along with the deceased—but does not permits its completion. Instead, the Jewish tradition creates a structured system in which the mourner ritually shares in the death but then, as on Yom Kippur, is pulled back from the edge. It is the particular task of the extended family and community to hold the mourner close and gradually summon the mourner back to the land and life of the living. But the mourners can only risk such vulnerability if they are confident that they will be held close by the extended community and caught if they fall.

The Jewish religious tradition divides the experience of mourning into several periods. Between the death and the burial, the mourners are considered to be in a state of suspended animation (Listen to those words!) *suspended animation*, hovering between life and death. The mourners are free from all expectation of engagement with the world or even the most basic human interactions; this of course is rooted in a world in which burials take place immediately after death, as they do, for example, for both Moslems and Jews in the Land of Israel today. It is when the mourners come home from the burial that the intense week of mourning, *shiva*, begins. The mourners are excused from the essential life activities—working, going out, sexual intimacy, body adornment or attention. All of these are things which only the living enjoy; these life-affirming activities are never done in the presence of the corpse; for the living to do these things in front of the deceased is called “making fun of the dead,” emphasizing what the living can enjoy and the dead do not. The mourners are indeed, temporarily, not living; they are coming as close as possible to experiencing death.

For the twenty-four hours of Yom Kippur, one **can** not eat; but not for an entire week! Yet, in Jewish practice, the mourners do not feed themselves, my herring story notwithstanding; it is the task of the extended community to provide the food for the mourners, to feed them, symbolically and literally. The mourners are in fact encouraged to regress; they are deliberately infantilized in order to create the psychic space for the necessary reawakening to the reality of

the separation. Like the infant, the mourner who suddenly touches this awful loneliness wails. And it is the task of the community to hold the mourner, to acknowledge without trying to fix the irreparable, to make it possible for the grief to be expressed.

Tonight I want to remind you of the mitzvot which have no limit—unlike most of the mitzvot, there is not upper limit to how much you can do these obligations. Comforting the bereaved is one of these mitzvot which has no limit and is, Torah teaches, the greatest of them. When a *shiva* service is announced in our congregation, we should be turning people away at the door, not worrying about making the minyan complete.

Some of you, I know haven't gone to a *shiva* minyan because you weren't sure what you were supposed to do. The answer is you don't do anything—the word *shiva* itself means “being still.” The task at the *shiva* minyan – or at the house of the mourner after the funeral – is to listen to the mourners if they want to speak and to be OK with the silence if they don't. We bring comfort with our presence; and the word for Presence in Hebrew is *Shekhinah* and *Shekhinah* is the name of God. Through our presence, the *shiva* house can become a spiritual sanctuary, a *Mishkan*, where all the fragmented pieces of the mourner's self can be brought and allowed to rest. My anger with God and the doctors and the deceased, my confusion about what to do, my ambivalence about my faith and my commitments, my yearning to do “the right thing” and my resistance to being told to do anything, my yin and my yang ... all of these need to be present for they are all true! Its not our task to take care of all this disarray and discomfort; its our task to be able to be around it. So our mitzvah, our special religious obligation, when we come to comfort the bereaved, is to be present; by so doing, we may embody in life the Divine Presence.

The prophet Jeremiah cautions us against trying to fix what is beyond our power to heal: he decries those who try to make pain go away prematurely, declaring, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying `shalom, shalom,' “wholeness, wholeness” when there is no *shalom*” (Jeremiah 8:11). Thus, when we greet a mourner, we do not say: “*Shalom aleichem*, peace unto you...” because that would be false; the mourner is not whole, is not at peace, and it is insulting to suggest otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

The rules for *shiva* are that one does not initiate conversation with the mourner. The last thing the mourner needs is for us to ask “are you OK?,” if the only acceptable answer is “I'm doing fine,” when in fact our message is to convey that mourning is a time when it is really OK to not be OK. In the hour of deepest pain, there are no words to make it better and too often the mourner is either forced to tell an untruth: “I'm doing just fine, thank you” or is required to comfort the others. The comfort we bring to the mourner is our presence, which, if we are sincere, always hints of and points to the Ultimate Presence, what Martin Buber calls “The Eternal Thou.”

At the end of *shiva*, the mourner gets up, leaves the house and walks around the block – a symbolic reentry into the life of the living.

No one suggests that all mourners' experiences are alike and that the reintegration of the mourner into daily life is necessarily complete in a week or always requires a week; but the very

structures that the tradition offers are themselves vessels which can serve to hold and give structure to the amorphous and apparently boundaryless experience of grief.

The additional markers of the stages of grief after the initial week of *shiva* are found at thirty days, one year and then annually thereafter. Each of these marking places is potentially a time for the mourners to touch the reality of their loss and to further the developmental task of integrating the loss into the wholeness of their lives and their personal narratives. The work of grief, while never done, is largely complete when the loss can be named or touched without acute pain; if, in the immediate stages of loss, the loss fills the entire field of vision, excluding all else, it is—over time—integrated into the self, neither denied nor cultivated, but woven into the very fabric of life itself.

It is my intention to continue this conversation we have begun tonight and for us to learn together more about Jewish teaching on life and death, mourning, bereavement and loss. It is my goal that we find meaning and comfort in our own lives and for our community by owning and practicing these mitzvot, when we are bereaved and when we have the opportunity to care for others—for all of us, at one time or another, will be those who are bereaved and all of us can be numbered amongst those who comfort the bereaved. Tomorrow, before the Yizkor service, I invite to attend our new custom of the Yizkor circle, a time to speak with others about your loved ones and your grief. Later this month, our member Cynthia Colvin will be facilitating a six-week bereavement support group; please watch your e-mail for the further details.

Just yesterday, my bar and bat mitzvah students and I discussed the meaning of the blessing in the morning's service: "We praise You...who has made me in the Divine Image." We studied this midrash about what it means to be "created in the Divine Image:"

R. Hama said in the name of R. Hanina: What does it mean, "You shall walk after the Eternal your God"? Is it possible for a person to walk and follow God's presence? But it means to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be. The Holy One, Blessed be, visits the sick, as it says (in Genesis 18), "And God visited [Abraham]" so you too shall visit the ill. The Holy One, Blessed be, comforts the bereaved, as it says, " And it was after Abraham died and that God blessed his son Isaac..." (Genesis 25:11), so too shall you comfort the bereaved.<sup>4</sup>

We express the divine image within in our fulfillment of these mitzvot. We therefore can more fully understand these words these words of comfort, recited when we greet the mourners on Shabbat: "May the Eternal comfort you, along with all who mourn, in Zion, Jerusalem and throughout the world." May we be the messengers of the Holy One, bringing comfort. May our presence and our consolation bring you from the edge of death and restore you to life. May these twenty-four hours of Yom Kippur increase our passion for life. May our collective compassion deepen, and our capacity to be with and comfort the bereaved among us grow.

*Ken yehi ratzon. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> “Religion as a Cultural System” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (M. Banton, ed.) 1966:4: “...1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in (people) by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality; A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 385.

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sotah* 14a.