Michael Strassfeld, A Book of Life, Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice

DEUTERONOMY/DEVARIM: DEATH

God told the first human not to eat of the tree in the center of the garden, "for in the day that you eat it you shall surely die." Having eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve and all their children were doomed to die. With knowledge comes death. Given the power to do good or evil, we have become Godlike, and yet we remain human and thus mortal.

We spend much of our lives desperately ignoring the fact that we and everyone we know—and for that matter everything we create and touch—will pass away and be no more. When we are young, death seems to dwell in another universe, only occasionally and very tragically striking down someone our age. As we reach middle age, death is no longer such an unfamiliar visitor. Enough people we know or have heard about are embraced by death that we begin to see holes in the panoramic tapestry of our individual lives. In middle age, our bodies begin to feel aches and pains. Not since adolescence, when our bodies changed so much, have we paid attention to them except for concern about our appearance and our physical attractiveness to others. Now this trusted and reliable (and therefore taken-for-granted) companion begins, just begins, to fail us. However, the future is clear. If we see our life's journey as climbing a mountain, then we are over the peak and beginning the descent. Life, which seemed filled with endless possibilities when we were young, now seems to have ever-narrowing horizons. I catch glimpses with my peripheral vision of my life's new companion, someone there but not there before, death. Death becomes only more familiar, more present, as we age. The holes from the loss of acquaintances, friends, and loved ones in the tapestry of our lives grow ever more numerous, until large gaps begin to appear, until for some there are more holes than tapestry. And in the end, we, all of us, come to THE END in the story of our life.

Death, the dark twin of life, is the great challenge to our attempt to create a life of meaning. But just as death cannot be separated from life, so our response to death cannot be taken out of the context of our whole life. Death can make "sense" in the context of the life we have led, in what we believe about our purpose in life (and thus in death), in what we believe about God, in what we believe about our souls, and in what we believe comes after death.

Imagine our world if everyone lived forever. There would be no place for change to happen. No incentive to finish anything in our lifetime. No sense of the preciousness of life itself. Or imagine a world where death was inevitable but you could choose the day of your death. The uncertainty of our lives would be removed. As much as we try to ignore death, deep down we are always conscious of death, and that consciousness is an important motivating factor in our lives.

Death is an inherent part of the life of our universe. On one level death has to happen if change and growth, and maybe even progress, are to happen. Whether in our personal lives or in work, in groups, or in a nation, things must pass away if an eternal gridlock is not to occur.

Death, then, is the way of this world, a world not of stasis but of change. Just as the natural world experiences the death of nature in winter, only to be followed by a new rebirth in spring, so everything that shares this planet comes to its end.

For humans, death is a return. Our bodies return to the earth from where they came. Dust to dust. Our spirit, our soul returns to the place it came from, to God. In one midrash there exists a place where all the souls wait to be assigned to human beings. When they are called by God, the souls resist leaving the world of the spirit to enter the world of materialism, but in the end they have no choice. At death the soul, that part of us which is in the image of God, returns to the world of the spirit and is united with God.

As much as we might see death as accomplishing our life's goal—achieving a union with God—death is never eagerly anticipated in Jewish tradition. We are called to redeem the divine sparks of this world, to make it a better place, to make ourselves better people, to strive to feel God's Presence. God says: "I have set before you this day life and death, therefore choose life." Judaism is life-affirming. It is why the emphasis even in traditional Judaism is on life in this world rather than life in the world to come. Death is the great enemy of life and the great challenge to a spiritual life, to finding meaning in life.

Faced with death, we may find some understanding in the notion of death as part of the natural process of life or of death as the return of the spirit to God. Yet when someone we care about dies we can only feel a sense of loss, a disbelief that that person will never be here with us again. Any death reminds us of our own mortality: most of us stand before this Great Unknown with fear and trembling. Death seems so unfair, most of the time coming too soon, always coming too cruelly, to the living and the dead.

Facing Your Loss

Death brings us grief. We mourn, most of all, the end of a relationship with someone who mattered to us. Death is always incomprehensible, always unbelievable, despite the knowledge buried deep within us that each of us and everyone we know will die. We grieve because of our mortality. If Judaism calls upon us to live a holy life, to repair the imperfections of the world, then a death reminds us how imperfect the world really is.

We grieve most of all because so much of our lives that has been interwoven with the one who has died is now brutally torn asunder. A piece of us is lost with each loss. A hole appears, a black hole, which is filled with an overwhelming sorrow. We look for answers but there are none. There is only comfort, memories, and life itself that goes on. You go outside and people are still hurrying to work, birds still sing, the world is the same except for you. For you, the world has changed. It will never be the same and yet it is still the world.

Beyond the ache that tells you how much you miss the deceased is the knowledge that you were together and always will be. For a time you touched hands and hearts. His voice still echoes within you. She is a part of you forever. The love that was, the memories that do not fade, are a gift that can never be lost. For their memories are surely a blessing.

Death as part of the life cycle has two stages in the Jewish view. In the first, until the funeral is over, the deceased is at the center and the mourners are the enablers for the deceased to make sure everything is done appropriately. At this stage, the community's role is only to attend the funeral. In the second stage, after the funeral, the life-cycle event is now focused on the mourners, and the community becomes the enablers and the comforters.

Kavod ha-Met, Honoring the Dead

When a person dies, her soul, that which made her who she is, that which gave her personality, is gone. Yet Judaism requires a respect for the body that was the container of the soul during its lifetime. Also, death is part of the natural cycle, and therefore a corpse is to be returned to nature. "From dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19).

These two principles have led to a number of traditional practices.

Burial Burial should take place as soon as possible. It is considered disrespectful to leave a body unburied. Burial also allows the grieving process to begin so that the mourners are not left in a prolonged limbo. It is permissible to postpone a funeral if it is being done for the sake of the honor of the deceased, that is, to let more people know about it or to allow relatives coming from a distance enough time to arrive.

The coffin A plain pine box is used as the *aron,* "coffin." The term *aron* also means "ark." An analogy is being made between the coffin and both the ark that carried all living things in Noah's time and the ark that holds the Torah scrolls. A Torah scroll and a human being are the two holiest things in the world according to Judaism's system of values. A wooden coffin is used because that will allow the natural process of the return of the body to the earth to take place. A metal coffin would slow down this process and therefore is discouraged. Another principle is operating here as well. In rabbinic times, rich families would dress the corpse in fancy clothes. It became so expensive to keep up with the Jonathans that some people were just abandoning corpses. Rabban Gamliel, a talmudic sage, declared that both the coffin and the clothes should be simple and the same whether for the poor or the rich. For death, equality and simplicity seem appropriate. (In Israel, where the earth itself is considered holy, coffins are not used, rather the covered body is simply wrapped for burial.) Some synagogues have a covering used at all members' funerals, which conceals the coffin (and so makes the choice of casket less significant).

Takhrihin, ***shrouds*** Traditionally, Jews are buried in plain white shrouds. As mentioned above, it was seen as vanity to think that wealth made any difference in the face of death; therefore everyone was buried in the same garment. (Some people will have other clothing put on over the shroud.) Some place the *tallit* of the deceased on the corpse.

Closing the coffin It is considered part of *kavod ha-met,* "honoring the dead," not to view the corpse. There is a naked defenselessness about a corpse. Also, just as with the practice of prompt burial, not viewing the body is another step in helping mourners move toward accepting the reality of what has happened. There might be a temptation to "hold on" to the body as if that would enable us in some fashion to hold on to the deceased. Rather, the deceased needs to become a memory. The soul and spirit are gone. Earthly remains are just that; they are not really our loved one.

***The* hevra kaddisha** *Hevra kaddisha,* "the holy society," is the name for the organization that prepares the body for burial. Since helping to bury the dead is considered an especially praiseworthy *mitzvah* (commandment), the society is called "holy." The *hevra kaddisha* takes care of the ritual preparation of the body. Basically a ritual of *taharah,* "purification" through washing, is performed. There are separate societies for men and women. Recently some liberal synagogues have formed these societies, which had in the past only existed in traditional communities. Ask the funeral home director or your rabbi how to request their services. The funeral home often does not provide a traditional funeral (*hevra kaddisha,* shrouds, and plain pine box) without a direct request.

Shemirah Out of respect for the dead and for the body, the corpse is not left alone, even overnight. *Shemirah,* "watching," is the term used for the process of ensuring that the body is not alone until the funeral. Traditionally psalms are recited by a *shomer,* a "watcher." The *hevra kaddisha* or the funeral home can arrange for *shemirah*. Unlike *taharah,* which requires knowledge of the specific rituals, *shemirah* can be done by friends who desire to express their affection to the deceased in this manner. (The corpse is in a casket during the *shemirah*.)

The First Stage of Mourning

Traditionally, on hearing of a death, you should say *barukh dayan ha-emet,* "Praised be the True Judge." Even at the moment of death, a Jew is called upon to affirm her belief in God, creator of life and death.

There are a number of steps in the mourning process. While everyone who knew the person who died will grieve, the mourning customs are incumbent upon the immediate relatives. We are to mourn for our parents, siblings, spouse, and children.

Aninut The first stage of mourning is called *aninut,* "bereavement." It encompasses the time from death until burial. It is a time of shock and disbelief; therefore, the tradition exempts the mourners from the standard daily religious obligations related to prayer such as wearing *tefillin* and the act of prayer itself. The tradition recognizes that the mourners will not "have the head" to perform these *mitzvot*. This also allows them to devote their time solely to the arrangements for the funeral.

Planning a funeral is difficult, though for some people it provides a needed focus during this period. If the deceased made plans ahead of time, by discussing what kind of funeral he or she wanted, or by leaving written instructions, the planning process is easier. It is also useful to have a friend who is not so emotionally overwhelmed help with the arrangements. This can be especially helpful when dealing with the funeral home. Other friends can be given your personal address book to contact people to let them know of the death and the time of the funeral.

During this period, the rabbi will visit to gather information from the family for the eulogy and the funeral service.

Halvayat ha-met, ***accompanying the deceased*** It is considered a great *mitzvah* to accompany the dead on the final journey back to the earth. It is considered a mark of love and respect. In ancient times (when communities were smaller), the whole community would stop working to accompany the dead.

The funeral service The funeral service, as mentioned, takes place as soon as possible. The service is simple and brief. It includes the recitation of a psalm or two; an appropriate reading; the *hesped,* "eulogy"; and *el maleh rahamim,* "the memorial prayer."

The immediate family usually arrives forty-five minutes to an hour before the funeral. Customs vary about what takes place before the service. One custom is for the mourners to sit in a reception area rather than where the service itself will take place. As friends arrive they sign a booklet that is later given to the mourners (often the mourners are in a daze and are unsure of who was present). If friends arrive early they will stop to see the mourners. People should simply shake hands or hug the mourners, express brief condolences, and then go to the chapel for the service. Right before the service begins, everyone will be asked to proceed directly to the chapel, leaving the family alone in the reception room. (Funerals start promptly.)

Keriah Traditionally, the mourner tears an article of clothing, either upon hearing of the death, immediately before the funeral, or at the cemetery. This is called *keriah,* the Hebrew word for "tearing." Most commonly today it is done right before the funeral service begins.

The mourners stand and recite the blessing: *Barukh atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam dayan ha-emet,* "Praised are You, Eternal One, our God, source of the universe, the True Judge." The mourner then tears the garment. Usually the garment is a shirt, a blouse, or a sport jacket, and the tear is made near the lapel. Some people will tear a tie or scarf. The initial cut is made by a razor or knife (the funeral director has one) and then the mourner should extend the tear by pulling at the two sides. The garment is torn on the left side for a parent, on the right side for all other relatives.

There are a number of other physical acts and sounds that are part of the mourning ritual. The act of tearing a garment clearly expresses the inner tearing that the mourner is experiencing. The heart, as it were, is exposed. Wearing the garment later during the *shivah,* the seven days of mourning, reminds both the mourner and anyone who sees her of her status as a mourner. It starkly states that outer appearances are unimportant in the face of death.

A more recent custom is the wearing of a black ribbon or performing *keriah* on a black ribbon. While capturing some of the symbolism of the traditional *keriah,* some people feel it lacks the personal connection that gives the ritual of *keriah* its power.

The service After *keriah,* the family enters the chapel as everyone stands. After introductory remarks, readings, or psalms, the person officiating will give the *hesped,* "eulogy." Often this is a rabbi, though anyone can give the eulogy (or, for that matter, lead the funeral service). Sometimes a number of friends or relatives will speak, in addition to or in place of a rabbi. The eulogy should try to capture what was special and characteristic of the person who died. While it may be tied into that week's Torah portion, or speak of Jewish attitudes toward death and grief, good eulogies will make vivid the character and life of the deceased. They will present a picture of the whole person, including her faults, while stressing her good qualities. A good eulogy should make those who didn't know the deceased wish they had.

The service concludes as everyone rises for *el maleh rahamim* (named for its first three words, "God, full of mercy"). This is the memorial prayer that asks that the soul of the deceased be bound up in the bonds of life and come to rest in peace. Following informational announcements about the burial, *shivah,* and/or donations to *tzedakah,* the pallbearers either carry or accompany the coffin to the hearse. Customs vary whether the mourners precede or follow the casket. Friends can again briefly greet and console the mourners before they enter the cars that will take them to the burial. (As the funeral parlor will tell you, it has become standard for mourners to use a limousine. Obviously there is no Jewish requirement to do so. On the other hand, it should be equally obvious that an immediate mourner should not be driving.)

Burial The service at the cemetery is brief. Though many state laws now require or encourage cemetery workers to carry the casket from the hearse and lower it into the grave, traditionally mourners and friends did this. The pallbearers sometimes carry the casket from the hearse to the grave. (Some cemeteries require the pallbearers to sign a waiver for injury insurance claims. This should be done upon arrival at the cemetery, at its office.) In traditional communities there is a custom to pause seven times on the way to the grave while reciting Psalm 91. One interpretation of this custom is to show a reluctance to say goodbye to the deceased.

The coffin is lowered into the grave, sometimes with the aid of a mechanical device. Of the various tasks during the burial, this is the one most frequently done by the cemetery workers, because it needs to be done carefully. A recent practice is to lower the casket and cover the grave with a grass cover before the mourners walk to the grave. This seems an unnecessary attempt to mask what is happening—a burial. Life is not all green.

After being lowered, the casket is covered with earth. Everyone who wishes should place a shovelful of earth into the grave. It is the final sign of love and respect and a last act of service for the deceased. The sound of the earth hitting the casket is one of the powerfully affecting sounds of the funeral service. There is a custom that the first person to put earth into the grave turns the shovel upside down to pick up the first earth. This is both an expression of reluctance to accept this reality and a metaphor for their world being turned upside down.

(Traditionally, those attending the burial fill in the whole grave. However, it is hard work and takes a fair amount of time, and can be emotionally difficult for the mourners. Therefore, some have the custom of putting in only enough earth to cover the casket. Others put in as many shovelfuls as people want and then stop. In either case, the cemetery workers will finish filling in the grave after the burial service.)

In very traditional services, a long prayer called *tzidduk ha-din,* "a justification of the heavenly decree," is recited. At most funerals this is not said, but rather a reading or short prayer such as Psalm 23 is recited. The *el maleh,* memorial prayer, and the recital of *kaddish* often follow this. For mourners this is the first time they recite *kaddish,* a prayer associated with mourning. The *kaddish* is a prayer that praises God and nowhere mentions death or mourning. Yet, over time, it has become the central ritual associated with mourning. *Kaddish* has a number of versions (see "*Avodah:* The Path of Prayer," pp. 176–205); this one is called *kaddish yatom,* "the mourner's *kaddish*" (literally, "the orphan's *kaddish*"). The mourner's *kaddish* is usually not recited at the funeral service at the chapel unless there is a concern there won't be a *minyan,* a quorum of ten, at the cemetery. (There is another version of the *kaddish* specifically for recital at the burial, but since its additional words are less familiar, many people recite the mourner's *kaddish* instead.)

There is a custom of ending the burial service by having everyone (except the mourners) form two rows, an effort to make mourners feel supported and embraced. The mourners pass between the two rows. People can offer condolences, or a comforting touch or glance, or recite the traditional expression "May you be comforted among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." This custom helps the mourners leave the grave and head back to the car, and also symbolizes the shift in focus. During the funeral the focus has been primarily on the deceased; now the focus shifts to the mourners.

A recent notion has arisen that only relatives and close friends should go to the cemetery. Traditionally, everyone would go to both the service and the cemetery. Nowadays, some cemeteries are a fair distance away and more difficult for many people to travel to. People will make their own judgments whether to go or not. However, people should not feel that they are intruding by going to the cemetery unless the family specifically requests a private burial.

Some people wash their hands upon leaving a cemetery. Some cemeteries have an outdoor faucet near their entrance. Other people will wash their hands before entering their homes or the house of *shivah*. This custom is a remnant of biblical laws of *tum'ah*, "impurity." Contact with the dead was a primary source of impurity in the Bible and required rites of purification. Nowadays the laws of impurity are no longer observed, but the custom of hand washing enables us to mark the transition from a place of death back into the world of life.

Cremation Death is seen as part of the natural process of life. Therefore, the tradition not only advocates wooden rather than metal caskets but also opposes cremation. The tradition maintains that the body should naturally decompose. Many rabbis will not officiate at a cremation and some cemeteries will not allow the burial of the ashes. Some rabbis will officiate at a funeral service if the cremation takes place after the service.

Embalming and autopsies The body should be left in its natural state. Embalming is not allowed (except in unusual circumstances). Traditionally, an autopsy is considered a violation of respect for the body. Therefore, autopsies are to be avoided unless (1) required by law when the cause of death is unclear or (2) a doctor maintains that new medical knowledge might be acquired that could help future patients. In North America, autopsies are often routinely performed, partly to give medical students an opportunity to learn about the human body. Some states allow families to refuse autopsies for religious reasons in most situations. Organ transplants that will be of benefit to other human beings are a *mitzvah* and in a different way *kavod ha-met*, "respectful of the dead."

Flowers While some rabbinic traditions allow for flowers at funerals (see Talmud, *Berakhot* 53a, *Bava Kamma* 16b), the contemporary traditional practice in North America is to discourage their use at funerals. This lack of flowers reflects the themes of simplicity and starkness at the funeral. Some rabbinic opposition to flowers seems to have been based on flowers' being an imitation of Christian funeral practice. Flowers are commonly used in funerals in Israel. Many families encourage people to donate to the deceased's favorite charity in lieu of sending flowers.

The Second Stage of Mourning

Shivah Once the burial service is over, a new period begins with *shivah*, the traditional "seven" days of mourning. The focus shifts; the mourners are now placed center stage. The tradition recognizes that grief takes place in stages and encompasses many deep emotional feelings. These include not only grief but also anger, guilt, despair, and even relief. *Shivah* is time set aside for the mourners to experience and express all those feelings. The mourners begin to move past the initial shock of the death with all the feelings of disbelief. Reality begins to set in, but a reality that is too painful to be believable at times.

The tradition has created this time for the mourners, and the community is called upon to help make this experience possible. The community is asked to take care of the mourners' needs, especially preparing meals for them. The community is also asked to be a comforting presence during the *shivah*. But the style, tone, and emotional ups and downs of those seven days are to be set by the mourners. Traditionally, you enter a house of *shivah* in silence and sit down in the room with the mourners. You wait for the mourner to begin the conversation. Many people feel awkward during a *shivah* visit and struggle for appropriate words of comfort. Yet the wisdom of the tradition is to ask us to focus not on our awkwardness but on what the mourners need. Silence, crying, expressions of grief, laughter, sharing of fond memories, the repetition over and over again of how the death occurred, and talking about everything else but what has happened, will all occur at a *shivah* as the mood or needs of the mourners change.

Shivah can sometimes be a challenge for a mourner who is accustomed to acting as a host or hostess. During *shivah*, lots of people will visit your home, but you are not supposed to focus on their comfort. (Traditionally, you do not offer them food or act in any regular hostly manner.) As a mourner, your concern is focused inward. It can be difficult for those who are used to being caregivers to accept being cared for. *Shivah* is an extraordinary time created to deal with extraordinary circumstances. As a mourner, you should allow yourself this time just to be present to all the feelings that will inevitably arise.

What follows is a description of the laws and customs regarding mourning, yet it should be noted that each situation is unique. Each mourner will respond to a death based on their own emotional makeup and relationship with the deceased. Some deaths are more tragic than others. In some there was a long painful illness or a period when the person was no longer really aware of their family. There can be feelings both of relief and of guilt for those emotions. There can also be a sense that the mourning has already taken place.

You can experience guilt for not having done enough or not being there at the end or having had a recent disagreement with the deceased or because you are alive and they are not. You can also feel guilty for making a decision to terminate extraordinary care or for not making that decision. You can experience anger at them for abandoning you, or at the doctors for not having done enough, or at a relative for not coming through, or at God for causing or allowing this happen. You can experience depression at your loss or because you have come to acknowledge your own mortality by staring death in the face.

This is a period of great emotional stress, and mourners will sometimes direct these feelings at one another. Old competitions between siblings might be reawakened. People will compete in the "best child" contest or the "who suffered most" contest. The opposite also happens. People who have been at odds sometimes reconcile when they perceive the pettiness of their differences in the face of death and loss.

The Jewish mourning ritual does not resolve all of these feelings and tensions. It could be argued that a traditional *shivah* could exacerbate tensions by keeping all the mourners together in tight quarters for seven days. On the other hand, it does gently force the mourners to face this process with each other and with all the people who come to visit them. Otherwise certainly some people would retreat into a bleak solitude and either try to deal with this all on their own or make strenuous efforts to ignore what has happened. In general, there is much wisdom, health, and healing in the mourning practices. *Shivah* does create both a space and a structure to allow for and call forth both grieving and comfort. Being confronted with a steady stream of visitors, though at times overwhelming, provides both you and the visitors an opportunity to share memories of the deceased. The visitors assure you that you are not alone in your grief and loss. They provide what may be the only comfort possible, the love and concern of friends and community. Facing death, the living join together in affirming life. Facing death, we humans huddle together, giving warmth to one another to keep out the cold of the surrounding night.

Shivah ***laws and customs*** Upon returning from the cemetery, as mentioned, there is a custom of washing your hands before entering the house. Once home, the special candle for *shivah* should be lit. (The funeral home will provide one.) Candles are seen as symbols of the soul because of the verse "The light of God is the soul of a human" (Prov. 20:27). The candle will burn for all of *shivah*. There is no blessing said for lighting this candle.

The meal eaten upon return from the cemetery is called *seudat havra'ah,* "the meal of consolation." Often friends prepare the meal while the burial is taking place. There is a tradition of serving hard-boiled eggs as part of this meal. One interpretation is that eggs have no mouth and thus are like the mourner silenced by grief. Another is that the roundness of the egg symbolizes the unending cycle of life and death. Friends may also prepare the home for the *shivah* by putting a pitcher outside the door for washing and by covering the mirrors.

Covering the mirrors is an old custom. One explanation of it cites an old folk belief that the departing soul might be trapped if it looked in a mirror. Another is that during *shivah,* a mourning period, there is no need to be concerned about how you look to the world.

Traditionally, the mourners remain at home during the *shivah* period. The effect of this is to keep the mourner within a world of mourning. It can be disconcerting to go out into the world and be greeted with "Have a nice day!" by people who are unaware of your loss. Since the reciting of the mourner's *kaddish* begins with the burial, a *minyan* for morning and evening services is sometimes held at the *shivah* house so *kaddish* can be said. As a symbol of the low state of feelings, mourners sit on low chairs or on "boxes" (provided by the funeral home). Since leather shoes were traditionally considered a luxury, slippers or sneakers are worn instead. As mentioned, friends prepare meals for mourners. Mourners continue to wear the torn garment or black ribbon from *keriah*. They do not cut their hair or shave.

During the Shabbat of *shivah* the public observance of mourning is suspended. Friends do not pay *shivah* calls. Mourners sit on regular chairs and are allowed to go out to attend synagogue services. The ribbon or cut clothing is not worn. (No *shivah minyan* is held during Shabbat.) However, Shabbat still counts as one of the seven days of *shivah*. (In some traditional synagogues, mourners are formally greeted during the Friday night service.)

Shivah ends on the morning of the seventh day. The day of the funeral counts as the first day of *shivah,* so if the funeral takes place on Thursday, *shivah* concludes Wednesday morning following the morning service or the equivalent time.

Mourners conclude *shivah* by taking a walk "around the block." This symbolizes their reentry into the world, since it is the first time they have gone out (except for Shabbat) during *shivah*. Upon returning, the *shivah* ceases, including all its rituals.

Our description so far is that of a traditional *shivah*. There are many people who observe *shivah* differently. Some do not observe *shivah* for all seven days—a frequently used alternative is three days, which has some basis in rabbinic tradition. Some will observe *shivah* (or at least encourage visitors) only during certain hours, such as the evening. Others will observe only a day or just an evening of *shivah*. While everyone will make their own determination of what is right for them, I would urge you to err on the side of more time for *shivah,* no matter how private a person you may be. It can be helpful not only to you but to people who knew the deceased and want to mourn as well. There was an elderly man in my congregation who had no close relatives. He was someone toward whom I felt fondly as well as grateful for his generosity to the synagogue, though we were not close. When he died, his business associates neglected to notify the synagogue. We found out weeks later. Those of us who knew him felt cheated of the opportunity to say good-bye to him at his funeral and mourn his passing. As the immediate mourner, your needs come first, but you should understand that other people also want to mourn even if it is on a very different level of intensity. As much as the *shivah* is for the mourners, it is also a structured way for anyone who knew the deceased to mourn as well.

Some people will begin the *shivah* at the home of the deceased, but then want to return to their own home in their local community to share the loss with their friends. A practical suggestion: transporting a lit *shivah* candle is not a good idea, but people feel uncomfortable about blowing it out and relighting it. Ask the funeral home for an extra candle that you can take with you when you return home midweek and light the new candle when you reach your house.

Not everyone observes all the traditional *shivah* rules. Some people will sit on regular chairs or will go outside during *shivah*. Despite the fact that it is only a custom, many people cover the mirrors.

Menaheim aveilim, ***comforting the mourners*** It is an important deed of loving-kindness to pay a *shivah* call. Your role is to comfort the mourners. This seemingly impossible task is accomplished simply by your presence. It is not by saying some magic words that will ease the mourners' pain. To be surrounded by friends and family enables the mourner to feel connected to the web of life despite feelings of grief. Your presence, your physical touch, the sympathetic expression on your face, will make a difference. Unfortunately, we sometimes say the wrong things out of awkwardness or a desire to be helpful. Comments such as "Everybody has to die sometime," "Well, he was ninety-two," "Time heals all wounds," or "I know how you feel because I went through this when my mother died" may be partly true, but they are of little comfort to the mourners. Their world is destroyed; the fact that everybody dies is irrelevant to them. Someone mourning the death of her mother does not really care about all the other people who have lost their mothers. Such statements are only helpful if the mourner feels that they are true. If the mourner feels the deceased lived a long life or went quickly without pain, etc., then you can echo back those sentiments. Otherwise it is possible that the mourner feels the opposite. "My father was ninety-two but he still had many good years to live."

What should visitors say? You should be sympathetic. "This must be so hard." "I feel so sorry for you." "Is there anything I can do?" You want to affirm the mourners' feelings rather than appear to deny them by minimizing the loss. Visitors should contradict the mourners only, for example, when the mourners are feeling unreasonably guilty for not having done enough for the deceased. Share stories about the deceased if you knew him or her. If true, remind the mourners how much the deceased loved them. Remember, it is your presence that brings some comfort in a situation where ultimately there can be no complete comfort.

The length of your visit depends on your relationship to the family, the number of mourners present, and the cues given out by the mourners. An average visit is no more than an hour. While it is a traditional custom to say, "May you be comforted among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem," upon leaving, many people say good-bye using their own words. Visitors show themselves to the door.

Sheloshim The next stage of mourning is the *sheloshim,* the "thirty"-day period. It is actually only twenty-three days, since the *shivah* counts as the first seven days. Basically, the mourner's life returns to its normal routine, such as going back to work. *Kaddish* is still recited. Traditionally, mourners will not attend celebratory events like parties or weddings during *sheloshim,* especially if there is likely to be live music and dancing. Some traditional Jews continue not to shave or get a haircut. *Sheloshim* ends on the morning of the thirtieth day. For all relatives, except in the case of the death of a parent, the ritual of mourning, including the saying of *kaddish,* is over.

The year When a parent dies, the mourning practices of *sheloshim* continue for a year. Traditionally, you do not attend celebratory events. You continue to recite *kaddish*. The custom has developed of saying *kaddish* only for eleven months, not twelve. There is a tradition that the deceased go to a purgatory to cleanse themselves of their sins. The holier you are, the less time this takes. The maximum amount of time in purgatory is a year. Thus to say *kaddish* for a year implies your parent needed a whole year to be purified. Whatever its origin, saying *kaddish* for eleven months has become the widespread practice. Observing it means that we experience nearly a complete year's cycle for the first time without our loved one. Jewish holidays, secular family holidays, or birthdays are all particular markers of the loss.

Why are the mourning practices longer for parents than for a spouse or any other relative? The tradition does not give a reason, but it can be surmised that it is an acknowledgment of all that parents have given to you and another reflection of the ideal of "honoring your father and mother."

Unveilings The unveiling of the gravestone is a recent ritual; therefore, it has no real traditions attached to it. Many people do it around the first anniversary of the death, but it can be done earlier or later. There is no set liturgy and many rabbis now encourage families to do the unveilings on their own. A typical unveiling could include a Psalm or two, a brief sharing by those present, and the recital of the *el maleh* memorial prayer. Only family members and sometimes close friends attend an unveiling.

Yahrzeit *and Yizkor* The anniversary of the death (not the funeral) is known as the *yahrzeit* (from the German for "year time"). It is customary to light a candle that burns for twenty-four hours (commonly known as a *yahrzeit* candle). It is also customary to recite *kaddish* on that day. If the Torah is read on that day, it is customary to ask for an *aliyah* and have *el maleh,* the memorial prayer, recited. In many synagogues you can also do this on the Shabbat preceding the *yahrzeit.* Some traditional Jews fast on a *yahrzeit. Yahrzeit* is observed every year.

Yizkor (from the word for "remembrance") is the communal memorial service that is said on Yom Kippur and on the final day of festivals—Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot. (In the case of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret is considered the final day.) It is an opportunity for the community to remember all of our deceased loved ones. While some have the custom not to say Yizkor during the first year after a death, you can say Yizkor as soon after the death as you want.

Festivals and mourning It should be noted that festival days (*yom tov* days) bring to an end *shivah* or *sheloshim.* The rules about this are complicated, and you should consult with your rabbi for guidance. If a funeral takes place during *hol ha-moed,* the intermediate festival days, *shivah* begins only after the festival is over.

Non-Jewish relatives If your parent is not Jewish, you can still recite *kaddish* and observe mourning practices. In fact, *kaddish* can be said for anyone you feel very close to. For example, the Talmud tells of students saying *kaddish* for their teachers.

Suicides According to the tradition, suicides cannot be buried in the regular part of a Jewish cemetery. This is because suicide is seen as a terrible violation of the sanctity of life. Contemporary practice diverges from this and allows such burials to be treated regularly. This is based on a better understanding of and sympathy for what might cause someone to commit suicide. Technically, it is justified by the principle that a person can only be punished for something done through an act of free will. This would not apply to someone who is "driven to suicide."

Abusive parents While the tradition strongly encourages the honoring of parents, it recognizes that in extreme cases parents can forfeit that honor because of behavior such as sexually abusing their child. As mentioned earlier, there are halakhic opinions that a child does not have to say *kaddish* for such parents. Consult with your rabbi.

Life After Death

Judaism has a number of beliefs about life after death. Scholars maintain that there is little evidence of an elaborate notion of life after death in the Bible. There only seems to be a vague notion of a shadowy underworld known as Sheol. By the rabbinic period, a complete doctrine of life after death is developed, in part as an explanation for the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked in this world. The rabbis answer that everything is set right in the world to come. The righteous are rewarded and feast and study with God. The wicked are punished in hell. Accompanying this belief was a notion of a messianic era, when Israel would be restored to its land. There would come a time of peace when the lion and the lamb would lie down together. This notion was based in part on some of the prophetic visions for the end of days. Added to this notion was a belief in the resurrection of the dead. In the end of days, all the righteous would be brought back to life by God to live forever in this messianic time. Among some mystics there was even a belief in some form of reincarnation. Different rabbinic teachers stressed different aspects of these notions over time. Some downplayed the supernatural elements; others elaborated on the details of the afterlife and the end of days. In modern times these notions have not been as central to Jewish thought.

The scientific rationalism of the modern world has been a challenge not only to the belief in the resurrection of the dead but to all the beliefs connected to life after death. Future salvation has receded as the reason to be Jewish. Instead, emphasis has been placed on living a moral life in this world. Still, there is a range of beliefs about the afterlife, from its nonexistence to some version of the traditional view. In between, some people believe that while the deceased are no longer individuals with individual consciousness, the souls of those who have died become part of a universal human consciousness or become once again part of the Divine "soul" that encompasses everything.

Facing Your Own Death

For some of us, death will catch us unawares. For others, we will hear its footsteps long before it comes to our door. For those who will have time to prepare for death, what should be done? Whatever your belief about afterlife, death is a potentially terrifying journey into the unknown. Frankly, it is with some hesitation that I talk about what might be done to prepare because I have not faced it myself. Yet, with that acknowledgment, let me share some wisdom that I have gleaned from the tradition and experience.

There is a tradition of saying *vidui,* the "confessional" (usually associated with the High Holidays) in the moments before death. Hearing a final prognosis often gives a person a great deal of clarity. Suddenly, many things that seemed important become trivial. Old hurts and feuds in the valley of the shadow of death seem petty and pointless. It often becomes clear what needs to be done and said in the time remaining. Perhaps it is repairing broken relationships or ensuring that family and friends know the love you have for them that too often remains unexpressed. In the face of death, we move beyond assuming that people know how we feel about them to making sure they know how we feel. Letters can be written to be read after we are gone. There are of course practical things that can be done to make the "afterward" simpler for the survivors. Even more important are the nonpractical things that you can do.

If you have family, what can you do to ensure that your death or your inheritance does not become a divisive experience for your family? Would not Jacob have done his family a service by gathering all his sons together before his death to ensure that the brothers understood that Joseph was not interested in revenge after he was gone? What can be repaired? What bad feeling will be taken with you to the grave instead of left behind? What questions can be answered about what you said in your will while you can still answer them? How can you make clear that you love your family members equally and in your mind the vase for Susie and the chair for George are of equal worth? Which of your possessions have no particular meaning so that your family can dispose of them if they so choose without feeling guilty?

One of the challenges in facing death is to move beyond seeing it as a clever enemy out to get you, to move past a superstitious notion that to say the word out loud is to invoke it. Death, while in many ways the enemy of all we hold dear, is also part of the natural rhythm of life. Death does come to us all. We are not to welcome it, but we do need to face it. How? By talking without hesitation about our preferences for our funerals. By making a will and telling family members where it will be. By not pretending it is still far away and therefore not doing and saying what needs to be done and said.

There is a tradition of writing an ethical will that gives expression to what you would like your legacy to be. What are the values you want to encourage? What is the wisdom that you want to leave behind? What are the important stories of your life or people that you want to be remembered? What are the regrets and mistakes? What are your possessions that have significance because of what they mean to you? What are causes or charities that you would like to be supported after your death? Wonderful examples of such wills that date from the Middles Ages to contemporary times are found in *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them,* edited by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer (Jewish Lights, 1991). Like a regular will, it makes sense to write an ethical will long before it is obviously necessary.

Ultimately facing death involves coming to terms with your life. It means realizing that despite your failures, you tried and often succeeded in doing the best you could. It means trying to enjoy the moments, no matter how few, with loved ones or just with life itself that you still have. It really is a time to see the glass as half full rather than half empty. It is a time to have faith—faith in yourself and faith in the One who waits to embrace you on the other side.

A CONCLUDING TEACHING

> Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord blessed Abraham *ba-kol,* in all things. [Gen. 24:1]

What does it mean to be blessed "in all things," *ba-kol*? After all, Abraham's life, like that of all human beings, was filled with triumph and tragedy. Sarah has just died. Why now is Abraham described as being blessed in all things?

Let me suggest that to describe Abraham as blessed with the aspect of *ba-kol* is a reflection of the spiritual greatness of Abraham. Despite everything that had happened to him in life, he experienced his life as full with blessings. Abraham is the person of faith who is willing to leave everything behind to journey to an unknown land. It is his faith in God that carries him throughout his life and brings to him, near the end of that life, a sense of years well lived and a life blessed with everything.

Can each of us achieve that same sense of blessing? Perhaps, but it is a very difficult spiritual state to attain. Instead, we are to strive for the spiritual state encapsulated in the Hebrew word *emet,* "truth." Psalm 145:18 (the *ashrei* prayer) says, "God is near to all that call upon God, to all that call upon God in truth *(emet).* What does it mean to call upon God in *emet,* thus enabling us to come close to God?

The word *emet* is made up of three letters: *aleph, mem,* and *tav.* If you take away the *aleph,* which, as the first letter of the first word of the Ten Commandments, *anokhi,* "I," stands for God, you are left with the word *met,* meaning "death." If you take away the last letter, *tav,* which stands for Torah, you are left with the word *im,* meaning "if." Without one you are left without God, without the other you are left with a world that is conditional. Everything is "if," there are no rules, no set definitions. *Emet* then, as truth, encompasses everything from *A* to *Z,* from *aleph* to *tav,* the whole Hebrew alphabet. Truth is all-inclusive.

When we come to pray to God, we need to come in truth. The truth about ourselves is everything. Sometimes we bring forth only the good parts of ourselves. Other times all we can focus on is how terrible we are, how much a failure. Yet the truth about us is not just the extremes; it is everything. It is both what we proudly display and what we try to hide in the shadows. It is not just the extremes; it is the extremes plus everything in between. The everything in between is represented by the other letter of *emet,* the letter *mem.* All together they make up *emet,* the truth. When we can perceive clearly who we are in all our complexity, then we can come close to God through that truth.

To make this explanation of the word *emet* perfect then, the letter *mem* should be the middle letter of the Hebrew alphabet. *Mem* then could say that truth is found when we come to the exact middle point of our selves. To find truth, then, would mean to be completely balanced. To achieve Maimonides' ideal of the golden mean of not being too generous or too stingy but rather being perfectly balanced.

But *mem* is not the middle letter. *Mem,* then, as it were, tells us that we need to strive for balance and the clarity that comes with it, but most of us will not achieve it. At best, we will reach the letter *mem,* which is close to the middle of the alphabet. So *Emet* is not a perfect truth but an imperfect truth about ourselves.

What is the middle letter of the Hebrew alphabet? Since the alphabet has twenty-two letters, it actually has two middle letters, *khaf* and *lamed,* the two letters that make up the word *kol,* everything. Thus we have returned to our starting point.

Abraham at the end of his life has achieved the blessing of *ba-kol,* of everything. His whole life is framed by the letters of *lamed* and *khaf.* At the beginning with those two letters he is told *lekh lekha,* "go forth"; at the end of his life these two letters are reversed, so he is blessed with *kol,* "everything." The blessing of *ba-kol* means that Abraham has achieved a clarity of vision to see all of life as a blessing from God. He has attained the golden mean; thus he has "everything." He has an equanimity about life. For us, who may never achieve that level, we strive for a coming close to God in truth. A truth that validates who we are in both our failures and our successes. Yet even as we come close to God, we desire to move beyond the acceptance of our present flawed reality and strive to be one of the children of Abraham. We seek nothing less than to be blessed with *ba-kol.* Then, like Abraham, we too "shall be a blessing . . . and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."