

# 15

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## A Time to Mourn: Traditions for Death, Grief, and Healing

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Judaism teaches us to approach life's hardest moments with compassion and community. In this class, we'll explore the sacred practices that help us navigate grief and heartache, and move from sadness to renewed life.



# Bikkur Holim: Visiting the Sick

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill, and Rabbi Yohanan went to visit him. He asked him: “Do you want your suffering?” He answered: “Neither my suffering nor its reward.” He said to him: “Give me your hand.” He did, and he raised him up to health.

Rabbi Yohanan fell ill, and Rabbi Hanina went to visit him. He asked him: “Do you want your suffering?” He answered: “Neither my suffering nor its reward.” He said to him: “Give me your hand.” He did, and he raised him up to health.

Is this really so? Why could Rabbi Yohanan not raise himself up?

It is as they say: “A prisoner cannot free himself from jail.”

Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 5b

## Mi She'berakh (with English lyrics by Debbie Friedman)

Mi she'berakh avoteinu, m'kor ha-brakha l'imoteinu

May the source of strength, who blessed the ones before us,  
help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing, and let us say, Amen.

Mi she'berakh imoteinu, m'kor ha-brakha l'avoteinu

Bless those in need of healing with *refuah shleima*,  
the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit. And let us say, Amen.

# At the End of Life

In American law and ideology, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and reinforced by American constitutional law and court rulings, we each own our own bodies and, short of harming someone else, we all inherit the liberty to do with our bodies what we will.

In sharp contrast, according to Judaism God created and therefore owns the entire universe, including each person's body, and we therefore do not have the right unnecessarily to destroy or damage God's property. In fact, we have a fiduciary responsibility to God to preserve our life and health.

## Rabbi Elliot Dorff

*Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics* (2003)

It is forbidden to do anything which will hasten the death of one who is in the process of dying. However, if there is something external that is causing the delay in the exit of the soul like, for example, if nearby there is the sound of wood being chopped or there is salt on his tongue — and these things delay the soul's leaving of the body — it is permitted to remove these obstacles.

## Shulchan Aruch

Yoreh Deah 339:2

**Life Support**

**Suicide/Euthanasia**

**Organ Donation**

**Autopsy**

# Kavod Ha-Met: Honoring the Dead

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## **Kavod ha-Met**

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## **Cremation vs. Burial**

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## **Preparation of the Body**

Hevre Kadisha

Taharah/Takhrikhin

Shmirah

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## **K'riah**

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## Funeral Service

Psalms

El Maalei Rachamim

Hesped

Shoveling (Hesed shel Emet)

”  
אל מלא רחמים שוכן במרומים המצא מנוחה  
נכונה על פני השכינה...  
“  
God, Source of Compassion, Who Dwells on High,  
May the soul of our loved one find shelter under Your wings...

# Nichum Avelim: Comforting the Living

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## **Aveilut**

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## **Kaddish**

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## **Stages of Grief**

Aninut

Shiva

Shloshim

Yartzeit

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## **Yizkor**

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## **Unveiling**

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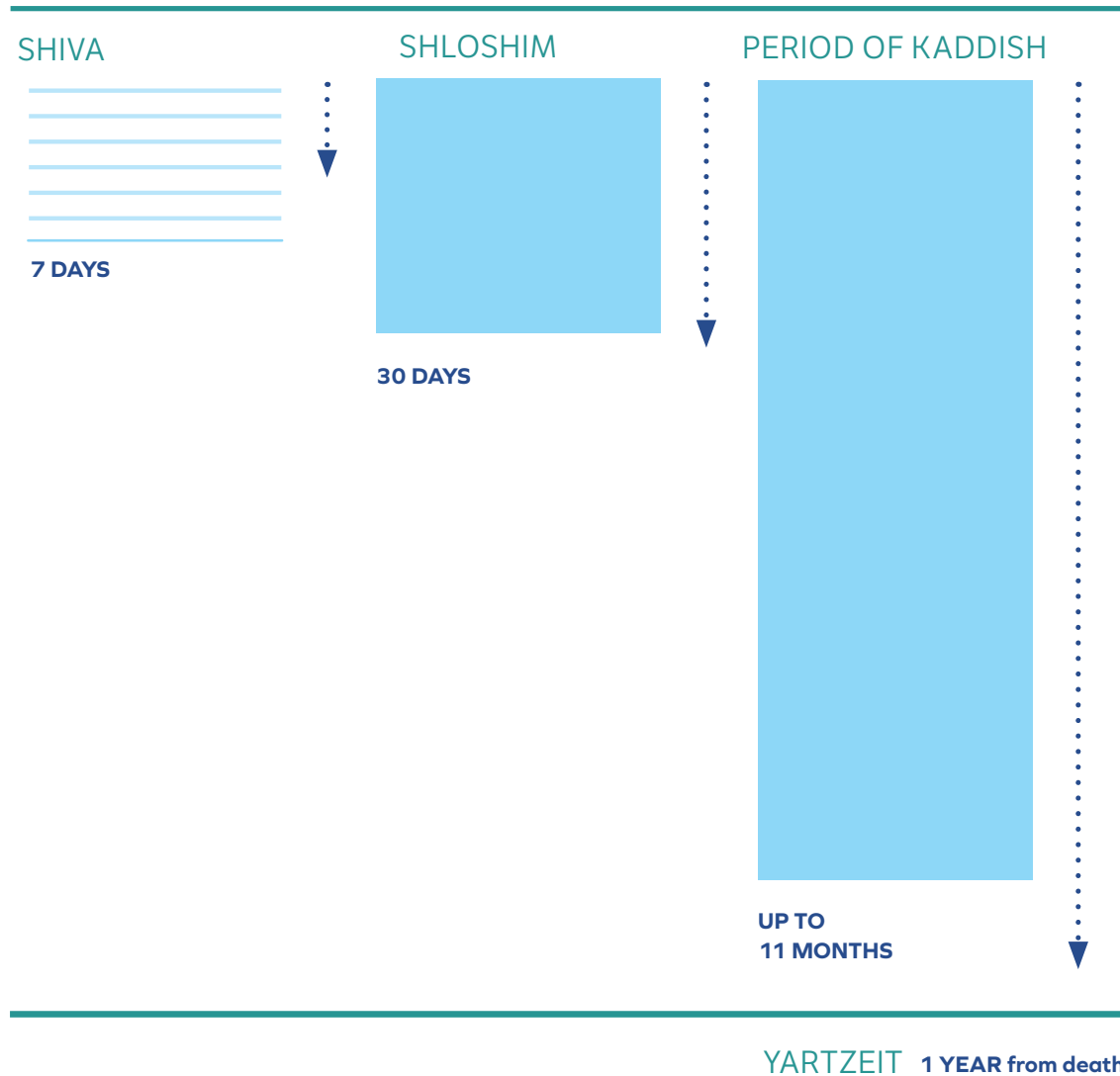
# The Mourner's Path

## Death



**Aninut** (No more than 72 hours)

## Burial



YIZKOR - Yom Kippur, Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot

# Stepping Back to Move Forward

Kaddish isn't – as so many name it – the prayer for the dead.

Kaddish is for those who survive after the loss of a loved one. It's a script that we recite, proclaiming our faith, which we may not have at that moment.

But the hope is, by the end of our year of Kaddish, we will have regained our faith and reasserted our place in the community. That year is a training regimen, building our belief until we're ready to relinquish our mourner's status and rejoin the populace — scarred, but surviving.

My first Kaddish minyan was in my childhood home in New Jersey during shiva — no excuse not to go. Then, during the shloshim — the first thirty days of the mourning process — I continued, first in Los Angeles at Temple Beth Am, where I counted in the daily minyan and conveniently located between my home and my work, then in Jerusalem, finding a small Orthodox synagogue that was tolerant of women

saying Kaddish (as long as men were also present and reciting it). Once, I remembered sitting alone in the women's section at an Orthodox synagogue — it felt as if I were going blind. I took dark delight in the metaphor before realizing that they hadn't bothered to turn on the lights in the women's section.

My mother would have been simultaneously appalled and proud of the fact that I made it through a year of saying Kaddish, sometimes twice a day. I kept hearing her in my head, asking why I was spending so much time in shul. "Don't do it on my account," the voice said. "It's not doing ME any good. Why don't you go to the gym instead? That at least may do some good for someone."



I wish I could have explained to her that going to minyan did do some good for someone. At a time in my life when I had to remind myself to move forward, it was a responsibility that got me out of bed in the morning, not just eventually, but early. I went not because it was always meaningful but because it was there.

**Sometimes, I could get through Kaddish, even the long one, without crying. Other times, the simplest of phrases would send me spiraling into sorrow. Sometimes, I was struck by the communal devotion of those who attended daily, even if they had not recently suffered a loss. Other times, I noted congregants muttering with little passion or projection.**

At the center of every minyan is the Amidah, the standing prayer, which begins with three steps back and then forward again. For me, that moment began to symbolize the back-and-forth of grief, starting as a setback before finding the path, paved by Jewish tradition and community, for moving forward again in small, tentative steps.

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But by surrounding myself with friends, family and community, online and off, I found a grounding counterweight to life's definitional instability. Minyan provided an anchor, contextualizing personal loss and pain within the universal human experience.

Not every service resonated. Not every Kaddish helped me feel better. But the structure gave me a template

for living and provided a connection to others whose hearts had at some point been cracked open by grief. They had grieved and survived; they once wept from the depths of their souls, but now show us all how to rediscover meaning and laughter after loss.

When we are low on strength, we can borrow against the collective, each withdrawal its own promise that, when our reserves are replenished, we will give back to those who support us — sharing embraces, tears, experiences and words. This privilege, this community covenant, is a miracle that I know my mother would have understood. Especially now that I've rejoined the gym.



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# Mourner's Kaddish

## The mourner says:

*Yit'ga'dal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba, b'alma di ve'ra khir'oo'tay v'yamlikh malkhu'tei, b'kha'yay'khon uv'yo'may'khon uv'khayei d'khol bayt Yisrael, ba'agala u'viz'man kariv; v'imru: Amen.*

## The community responds:

*Y'hei shmei raba m'vorakh le'olam ul'almei almaya.*

## The mourner says:

*Yit'barakh v'yish'tabakh v'yit'pa'ar v'yit'romam v'yit'nasei, v'yit'hadar v'yit'aleh v'yit'alal, shmei d'kudasha*

## The community responds:

*B'rich hu*

## The mourner says:

*L'ayla min kol beerkhata v'sheerata, tush'be'khata v'nekhemata, da'am'ee'ran b'alma; v'imru: Amen.*

*Y'hei shlama raba min sh'maya, v'khayim aleinu v'al kol Yisrael; v'imru: Amen.*

*Oseh shalom bim'roh'mav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu, v'al kol Yisrael; v'imru: Amen.*



Use your smartphone's QR reader to hear the Kaddish.

# Jewish Perspectives on the Afterlife

This world is like an entrance hall before the World to Come. Prepare in the entrance way so you can go into the great hall.

Mishnah, Avot 4:16

Religion in its traditional form assures us that God does not create to waste, and that no good deed is permanently lost, and that the individual soul which pursued goodness in this life will have it for his own and be Godlike for all eternity.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs

*A Jewish Theology* (1973)

God is the ocean and we are the waves. In some sense each wave has its moment in which it is distinguishable as a somewhat separate entity. Nevertheless, no wave is entirely distinct from the ocean.

Rabbi Richard Rubenstein

*Morality and Eros* (1970)

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## T'hiyat ha-Meitim (Resurrection)

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## Olam ha-Ba (World-to-Come)

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## Gilgul ha-Neshamot (Reincarnation)

# Reflection on Chapter 15



**Something we discussed in class today that I appreciated:**

**Something we discussed in class today that challenged me:**

**Something we discussed in class today that I would like to know more about:**

# Additional Readings

## Books

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- Anne Brenner, *Mourning and Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path*  
Rooted deeply in the Jewish Tradition and her own life experiences, this interactive guide speaks to the place where ritual and psychology intersect, and is a relevant tool for to all those who have suffered a loss.
- Anita Diamant, *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew*  
An accessible introduction to the customs of Jewish grief. While her primary focus is the “how-to” of mourning rituals, she gives sensitive attention to the universal experience of grief.
- Ron Wolfson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement*  
A sensitive, easy-to-read guide to Jewish mourning customs and the grieving process.
- Elie Spitz, *Does the Soul Survive?*  
A fascinating case for recovering the long-standing Jewish belief in reincarnation and life after death, written in a warm, inviting style.
- Elliot Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics*  
A thorough, readable, and authoritative introduction to Jewish bioethics, including those issues raised by illness and end-of-life decisions.
- William Cutter, *Midrash and Medicine*  
A collection of essays covering illness, suffering, end of life, and healing through the lens of Jewish traditions and texts.