

Yad b'Yad: Holding the Hand of Mourners in Comfort

Book 4



**Dale Oller, MD
Congregation Neveh Shalom
Portland, Oregon**

A PRAYER

*Help me, God, to listen with my entire being. When I am in pain, give me the courage to trust others enough to bare my heart to them. And when there is no one who will listen, hear me, God. Hear me and heal me.
Amen.*

NAOMI LEVY, in *To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times*, 2011

A Year of Mourning: Introduction

Upon completing a year of mourning, the four seasons have come and gone. A year may pass too quickly for some or too slowly for others. Though time is passing, it may feel as though it stands still.

Certainly, the Jewish perspective does not presume that an individual will “get over” grieving after a year. One truly is never the same after a loss of a loved one. However, our religion is for the living, and thus, Judaism encourages integrating the loss and grief and reengaging with the world. As life goes on, joy replaces sorrow. Your loved one will always be a part of your life, but their role has now changed. As you accept the finality of death, the grieving process leads you to revisiting life goals and plans, changing perspectives and behavior, and reentering life again.

Matzevah: The Headstone

Sometime after the end of *Shloshim* (the first 30 days of mourning), you received information from Congregation Neveh Shalom regarding the choice of a headstone. In my experience, this was a startlingly early time to ask me for this decision so soon after Earl’s death. However, as you likely have discovered, the process of having the rabbis agree to its accuracy and appropriateness, combined with the actual engraving of the stone, takes many months. You chose both a stone and also the words “to be written in stone.” It is a surreal, emotional experience. As the unveiling ceremony approaches, you might prepare to revisit those same emotions that you felt then.

WHEN MY FATHER DIED

I didn't realize that it would be such a physical thing. A death...especially the sudden death of a loved one...is a violent act on our body. I felt very much as if I'd been hit by a plank around the shoulders and the chest. My head felt heavy. It was a stunning experience...I felt like someone stole him from me in the middle of the night... There's such a compelling wish in all of us to be reunited with the people we love. It's so unfathomable when people you love aren't here anymore.

MARLO THOMAS, about the death of her father, Danny Thomas

It is a mitzvah to erect a memorial marker. Simplicity and dignity are encouraged, as they are in all parts of the Jewish tradition surrounding death.

Dedicating this marker is done through the unveiling ceremony. The unveiling is considered praiseworthy of the family, but it is not required in Jewish tradition. If you choose this ceremony, it can be done any time after *Shloshim* and before the first *Yahrtzeit*. Many people in our community choose to conduct the unveiling ceremony around the eleventh month. This would not be the case in Israel, where communities tend to unveil just after *Shloshim*.

Some fear that the unveiling will open old wounds. In contrast, for me, there was a powerful, positive psychological aspect to this ceremony. It was yet another “marker” (literal and symbolic). It was a time for me to preview the end of the mourning period.

As I prepared for the unveiling of Earl’s stone, I was struck by a number of circumstances that may indeed be something others may resonate with. The time surrounding the death and the funeral is filled with making plans and arrangements, visiting with *shivah* callers, writing thank you notes for contributions, and attending morning *minyan*. In direct contrast to the funeral, the unveiling was quieter, less hectic, contemplative, and more reflective.

Personally, I found the weeks before the unveiling a very melancholic time. The reality set in that my husband truly had died. As the unveiling date gets closer, don’t be surprised if you have physical symptoms. These symptoms may range from fatigue, changes in sleep and appetite, difficulty with

People do not die for us immediately, but remain bathed in a sort of aura of life which bears no relation to true immortality but through which they continue to occupy our thoughts as when they were alive. It is as though they were traveling abroad.

MARCEL PROUST, Remembrance of Things Past

concentration and focus, irritability, anxiety and sensitivity. The brain-body connection is powerful.

Prior to the unveiling, I took the liberty to create a non-traditional ritual at Earl's gravesite. In lieu of bringing cut flowers to a cemetery, Jews mark a visit with a stone. However, Earl's love of roses was compelling. Therefore, I invited his family and close friends to transplant some of his rose bushes to his gravesite.

The Unveiling Ceremony

The unveiling ceremony can be private or open to friends and extended family. It can be officiated by a rabbi or by the family. It is an individual choice. The rabbis have a lovely book of prayers for this brief service. It may be a time for sweet stories to be told of the deceased. It may be a time for renewed tears. It may cause anticipatory sadness that the year of mourning is coming to a close.

As the unveiling was about to begin, I had an odd thought. I remember thinking that I did not want this ceremony to end. It was a once in a lifetime ritual. Then seeing the words I had chosen many months earlier "cut in stone" was not only powerful but also final. We all used this opportunity to talk again about Earl. When the unveiling ceremony was over, I used the glass from the seven day memorial candle and made it into a vase to hold Earl's favorite flowers (roses!) for our gathering at home afterwards.

The First Yahrzeit

"Yahrzeit" is a German word meaning "the time of year." It

A MEMORIAL PRAYER

I haven't forgotten you, even though it's been some time now since I've seen your face, touch your hand, hear your voice. You are with me all the time.

I used to think you left me. I know better now. You come to me. Sometimes in the fleeting moments I feel your presence close by. But I still miss you. And nothing, no person, no joy, no accomplishment, no distraction, not even God, can fill the gaping hole your absence has left in my life.

But mixed together with all my sadness, there is a great joy for having known you. I want to thank you for the time we shared, for the love you gave, for the wisdom you spread.

Thank you for the magnificent moments and for the ordinary one, too. There was beauty in our simplicity. Holiness in our unspectacular days. And I will carry the lessons you taught me always.

Your life has ended, but your light can never be extinguished. It continues to shine upon me even on the darkest nights and illuminates my way.

I light this candle in your honor and in your memory. May God bless you as you have blessed me with love, with grace, and with peace.

Amen.

NAOMI LEVY, in *Talking to God*, 2002

is observed on the anniversary of the death, not the date of the funeral. It is a mitzvah to observe the anniversary of the day of death by saying *Kaddish* in synagogue, and by lighting a *yahrtzeit* candle in the home. Our *Yad b'Yad* committee will bring you your first *Yahrtzeit* candle. The candle is lit at sundown on the anniversary of the Hebrew date of death. It will burn for 24 hours.

Reciting *Kaddish* may be a combination of: 1) honoring your loved one, 2) renewing a commitment to Judaism, and/or 3) a spiritual opportunity. As you stand to recite the words, you may be acutely aware of your role as a mourner. Therefore, saying the last *Kaddish* at the end of your mourning period might feel like another poignant loss...the loss of your identity as a mourner. Waiting an entire year to stand again to say *Kaddish* seemed eternal for me.

Both the unveiling and the first *Yahrtzeit* observances may bring back waves of sadness. You may not even want those waves to stop. You have survived a year of experiencing the emotional, physical and psychological impact of grief. For some, this renewed melancholy might be frightening, but I would suggest it is a normal response, as are all anniversaries of important dates. However, if you find yourself in such deep sorrow that it seems excessive, it is certainly a goal of *Yad b'Yad* to help you find someone to talk to about these feelings. Clergy and mental health providers are available, and a referral can be arranged confidentially by your volunteer.

As the end of the mourning period approaches, many mourners get mixed messages from those around them. The message may encourage “a time to move back into life” or “a time you should be back to normal”. However, these well-

One doesn't know another's sorrow.

YIDDISH PROVERB

A PRAYER FOR THE POWER TO RETURN FROM THE
DEPTHS OF SORROW

*Teach me always to believe in my power to return to life,
to hope, and to You, God, no matter what pains I have
endured, no matter how far I have strayed from You. Give
me the strength to resurrect my weary spirit. Revive me,
God, so I can embrace life once more in joy, in passion, in
peace. Amen*

NAOMI LEVY, in *Talking to God*, 2002

meaning messages may not coincide with the tempo of your mourning process.

As Americans, we may also be reminded of the Gregorian calendar date of the death. How to mark that date can be as individual as each death. You may choose to spend the day doing an activity your loved one enjoyed, such as a journey to nature, planting a tree, or gathering with friends and family.

The first *Yahrtzeit* can also lead to gratitude for the time you had with your loved one. It might also promote gratitude for those in our lives with whom we now want to nurture relationships...the living. Awareness that over the last year there has been a shift in the family dynamics is often helpful. This is sometimes overlooked after a death. It is frequently underappreciated that family roles reorganize. The new balance of the family system may take time and adjustment. It will never be the same again.

Aliyah and Tzedakah

A ritual little known to our community is an opportunity to be called to the Torah at a morning minyan around the *Yahrtzeit* date to accept an *Aliyah*. Being part of the Torah service is a more concrete acknowledgement than simply remembering the date. Daily morning minyan is usually from 7:15-8:00AM. Torah reading takes place on Monday and Thursday mornings. This could be a meaningful opportunity for you, even if your Hebrew skills are minimal, and/or you have never accepted an *Aliyah* before. There is a transliteration card to help you say the blessings. And as the name of our *Yad b'Yad* program implies, the morning minyaners will hold your hand in accepting your *Aliyah*. This is a small and non-intimidating

UPON COMPLETING A PERIOD
OF MOURNING: AN IMMERSION
CEREMONY

Intention: Kavanah
(To be read before preparing for
immersion)

I come here today to mark
the end of aveilut, my time of
mourning.

Now, as I stand here ready to
immerse in mayyim hayyim,
living waters,
I prepare to move beyond the
formal mourning period, into
life with _____

Immersion: T'Vilah
FIRST IMMERSION

(Slowly descend the steps into
the Mikvah waters, and immerse
completely so that every part of
your body is covered with water.
When you emerge, recite the
following blessing:

Baruch atah, Adonai Elaheinhu,
Melech ha'olam
Asher kidshanu bi-t'vilah
b'mayyim hayyim.

Blessed are You, God, Majestic
Spirit of the Universe who
makes us holy by embracing us
in living waters.

SECOND IMMERSION
(To be read before you
immerse)

To everything there is a season,
A time to be born, a time to die,

A time to weep, a time to laugh.

As I have been in a time of
mourning, now may I move into
a time of healing.

(Take a deep breath and exhale
completely, while gently and
completely immersing for a
second time.)

THIRD IMMERSION
(To be read before you
immerse)

Time flows through us like
water:

The past and the dead speak
through us.

Blessed is the memory of the
one whose life touched mine.

May _____'s memory be a
blessing.

(Relax and let your body soften,
as you slowly and completely
immerse for the third time.)

FOURTH IMMERSION
(Take a moment for personal
reflection)

(Take a deep breath, exhale
completely, and immerse for the
fourth time.

When you emerge, recite the
following:)

I emerge from these living
waters, strengthened to move
forward into the fullness of life.

As the Torah says: I have put
before you life and death...

(Therefore) choose life.

group.

Another traditional ritual is to give *Tzedakah* at the time of the *Yahrzeit*, just as one does during *Shloshim*. The concept is that your loved one can no longer give *Tzedakah*, so we must do this for them and in memory of them.

The Mikveh

Over the last few decades, the use of the *Mikveh* in non-traditional ways has grown across our country. One of these ways is to use it to mark the completion of the mourning period. Just as the *Mikveh* is filled with living waters, the ritual of immersion in the *Mikveh* to mark the end of the mourning period promises transition into a time to engage with those in your life who are living. In 2017, Portland's new *Mikveh* was constructed in a private corner adjacent to the Mittleman Jewish Community Center, across the highway from Congregation Neveh Shalom. If you are interested, a Yad b'Yad volunteer will escort you to this new and sacred facility. The ceremony shared in this booklet may be meaningful for you.

Personally, I have found the use of the *Mikveh* a very soothing and spiritual activity. For a number of years, I have marked the month of Elul in preparation for the High Holidays with a *Mikveh* ceremony specifically written for the New Year by a group in the Boston area named *Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters*. Similarly, this group has provided the ceremony shown on the adjacent page of this booklet and gives permission to copy and share it. They also have a ceremony of immersion prayers for the completion of *Shloshim*.

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Acceptance

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a 1960's pioneer in talking openly about dying and death, wrote of the five "stages" of grieving. While this concept has been questioned and revised, her description of the stage of "acceptance" is hard to dispute. The role "acceptance" plays in helping a mourner move on in life is consistent with Judaism's ritual practices. This word, "acceptance," is not an easy one to "accept". It can be very gradual and associated with intermittently easier or more difficult times. Acceptance can lead to finding a "new normal," which may include feeling functional, creative, and happy. While you never forget your loved one, life does go on. Comfort comes from thinking that your loved one would wish you joy, happiness, and connection to the world again.

This is not to say grief is something one "gets over." Phyllis Silverman studied grief and bereavement much of her life. At the age of 88, she was in hospice care herself while her final work was accepted for publication. She helped us to see bereavement as not only a process that never ends, but also that shapes life. Finding your own personal strategies and coping mechanisms to care for your vulnerabilities is of utmost importance during this time.

Prolonged Grief

Grief and bereavement are universal. Barbara Roberts, former Oregon Governor, offers some wonderful, honest, and personally sound advice in her book, "Death Without Denial, Grief Without Apology: A Guide for Facing Death and Loss." She wrote, following the death of her husband, Frank Roberts: "Grief is hard to bear. It feels as if you will never be whole

The Jewish mourning cycle allows for a phased recovery from loss. In fact, this cycle continues throughout the life of the mourner through the vehicles of Yizkor and Yahrtzeit. Judaism, however, is a religion focused on the living, not on the deceased. Thus, Jewish tradition cautions the mourner against excessive grief.”

DR. RON WOLFSON

again. The permanence of death and the finality of the loss can leave you feeling as if you can never be happy again. And to some degree that is true. You will never be able to share happy times again with the deceased person you love. The memories, pictures, and perhaps some belongings are all you have left. And for a long time, these memories and mementos may bring you more pain than comfort.” “But while grief is a difficult experience, there is much to be learned from those who have been through the work of grieving, facing the pain and finally learning to live again.”

It would seem perfectly “normal” after the mourning year is complete to continue to have yearning, longing and preoccupation with your loved one, sorrow and pain from the death, and an excessive focus with the circumstances around the death. Judaism understands this and therefore encourages moving into the world of the living.

A Final Few Words: Conclusion

These four booklets have identified what the *Yad b'Yad* program of Congregation Nevah Shalom has to offer in “holding your hand” through the first year of mourning the loss of a loved one. They are intended to: 1) provide basic information about the role of Jewish rituals surrounding death, 2) share how I incorporated these rituals into my own personal experience, and most importantly, 3) offer support from our congregation. Other rabbinic, scholarly resources are available.

Your *Yad b'Yad* volunteer was not picked at random from a list of volunteers. Instead, an effort was made to match you

You can't prevent birds of sorrow from flying over your head....but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.

CHINESE PROVERB

with a volunteer who has experienced a loss “similar to yours”, although it could never be the same. Losing a spouse is a different kind of relationship loss than losing a parent. Losing a sibling is a different kind of relationship loss than losing a grandparent. Losing a child is a loss only another parent who has lost a child could imagine. Losing a loved one after a long illness is very different than through a sudden death. Losing a loved one to suicide is surrounded by an entirely different set of emotions.

Our hope is that reading these booklets and being in contact with a matched volunteer has brought comfort, empathy, information, compassion, and assistance. While the program ends with your volunteer bringing you the first *Yarhzeit* candle, Congregation Neveh Shalom welcomes any additional requests of clergy meetings or a referral to other resources. Please feel free to contact the synagogue or me, through your volunteer, if we can be of any additional help.

Acknowledgements

I owe a great deal of thanks to Nancy Prouser for her hours of editorial help. She helped me think more deeply. She helped me reframe stories to be clear. She was tireless with structural corrections.

I am also deeply grateful to Earl, my wise husband of 47 years, who helped prepare me to write these booklets upon his death.

This bibliography may be useful during your mourning period. Some of these references have been used to compile the Yad b' Yad Booklets.

Schrag, Mort; *Recovering From Your Child's Suicide*, 2002, (Compassionate Friends of Westside Jewish Community Center, Los Angeles, CA)

Schrag, Mort; *Walking Through the Valley of the Shadow: When a Jewish Child Dies*; 2003

Akner, Lois; *CSW, How to Survive the Loss of a Parent*, 1993 (A Guide For Adults)

Mandell, Sherri; *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*, 2009 (National Jewish Book Awards Winner)

Roberts, Barbara K; *Death Without Denial; Grief Without Apology*, 2002 (Former Oregon Governor's Guide for Facing Death and Loss)

Kumar, Sameet M; *Grieving Mindfully: A Compassionate and Spiritual Guide to Coping with Loss*, 2005 (psychologist at the Memorial Healthcare System Cancer Institute in south Broward, Florida)

Psychiatric Annals, Bereavement, Depression and the DSM-5; June 2013 (Academic journal)

Brener, Rabbi Anne; LCSW; *Taking the Time You Need to Mourn Your Loss; Life Lights*, 2000 (series of Jewish help for wholeness and healing)

Brener, Rabbi Anne; LCSW; *Mourning Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing*; 1993/.2001

Olitzky, Rabbi Kerry M; *Grief in Our Seasons: A Mourner's Kaddish Companion*, 2007 (daily readings from sacred Jewish texts; meditations)

Hauck, Kenneth C; *Journeying through Grief*; 2004 (series of 4 books used by Stephen Ministries)

Lamm, Rabbi Maurice; *Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*; 1969.

Goldstein, Rabbi Zalman; *The Jewish Mourner's Companion*; 2006 (Guidance. Comfort. Liturgy.)

McGrath, Tom; *CareNotes for Teens: When Your Grandparent Dies*; 1999; Abbey Press Publications

Cowan, Rabbi Rachel; *Coping with the Death of a Spouse; Life Lights*, 2000

Isaak, Rabbi Daniel; *Death & Mourning: A Jewish Guide to Grieving & Comforting the Bereaved*; Congregation Neveh Shalom; Portland, OR

Matlins, Stuart M; *The Jewish Book of Grief & Healing: A Spiritual Companion for Mourning*; (Newly edited book with preface by Rabbi anne Brener and Foreward by Dr. Ron Wolfson)

Wolfson, Dr. Ron; *From Death through Shiva: A Guide to Jewish Grieving Practices*; *Life Lights*, 2000 (series of Jewish help for wholeness and healing)

ORourke, Meghan; *Good Grief: Is there a better way to be bereaved?*; *The New Yorker*, February 1, 2010

Winant, Katey Geyer; *One Washcloth, One Towel*; 2011 (short piece of wisdom after the death of a spouse)

Diamant, Anita; *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead & Mourn As a Jew*, 1998

Grollman, Earl; *Living When a Loved One Has Died*, 1977

Kelman, Rabbi Stuart and Fendel, Dan; *Nihum Aveilim: A guide for the Comforter*, Gamliel Institute, 2015

McNees, Pat; *Dying: A Book of Comfort, Healing Words on Loss and Grief*, 1996

Chodron, Pema; *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, 2005

Olds, Sharon; *The Dead and the Living*, 1992

Wolfson, Dr. Ron; *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005

Shenker, Lois; *A Blessed Dying: A Memoir*, 2011

Levy, Naomi; *To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times*, 1998

Levy, Naomi; *Talking to God: Personal prayers for times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration*, 2002

Friedman, Rabbi Dayle A; *Jewish Wisdom for Growing Older*, 2015

Falk, Marcia; various publications

Levy, Naomi; *Hope Will Find You: My Search for the Wisdom to Stop Waiting and Start Living*; 2010

Brother Toby Reflection; Starcross Monastic Community, Nov. 2016

Hensley, Paula and Clayton, Paula; *Psychiatric Annals* 43:6/ June, 2013

Olitzky, Rabbi Kerry M; *Grief in Our Seasons: A Mourner's Kaddish Companion* (Jewish Lights Publishing,), 2000

Reynolds, Chas. F. III, et al; *Diagnosis and Treatment of Complicated Grief*, UPMC, 2011

Kubler-Ross; *On Death and Dying*, 1969

Silverman, Phyllis, *Widow to Widow: How the Bereaved Help One Another*, 2004

Homer, *The Iliad*, circa 1260-1240 B.C.

Angelou, Issokson and Kummer; *Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh*; Boston; "Your Completing a Period of Mourning".



Dale Norma Oller, MD, has practiced clinical psychiatry in Portland, OR for over 25 years, specializing in Women's Mental Health issues. On March 9, 2016, her husband, Earl, died. She wrote these booklets as an outgrowth of her personal journey of bereavement, integrated with the experiences of the journeys of others. She expresses gratitude for the rabbinic guidance at Congregation Neveh Shalom (CNS), for the stories of grief that her patients have shared through the years, and for the voices of the women in her Widows Group.



CONGREGATION

NEVEH SHALOM

2900 SW PEACEFUL LANE PORTLAND, OR 97239

(503) 246 8831

WWW.NEVESHALOM.ORG