

Yad b'Yad:

Holding the Hand of Mourners in Comfort

Book 1



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The First Thirty Days: Introduction

The purpose of this booklet, and those to come, is to offer you support, comfort, and guidance as you begin to cope with the loss of a loved one. Judaism can offer a valuable roadmap to help you transition through your grief. Contained in this booklet are some suggestions and examples of ways to do this.

Jewish tradition is committed to life and joy. It helps us acknowledge the sadness of loss, and also provides us with rituals to mark the milestones that help us to move through the mourning process. But Judaism also mandates that in this period, we move toward life and hope. Well known psychologist Erik Erikson offers us: “Hope is the favorable ratio of basic trust over distrust.” Judaism, a religion of optimism, teaches us about the Power of Hope.

Bereavement is a classic topic among psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists. From Freud, who wrote “Mourning and Melancholia” in 1917, to the present day, clinicians have developed an array of theories that touch on many aspects of this phenomena. After 25 years of practice as one of those clinicians, I recognize that Judaism’s ancient sages have offered us sound practices and rituals that, to me, are important to consider alongside these theories. Judaism and therapeutic principles, incorporated together, have created a valuable framework within which the mourning process can help you move toward life.

I Recall

(In memory of lives that touched one's own)

*I call her/him to mind and heart,
the texture of his/her life,
its presence in mine.*

*Images rise up
and fall away,
moments in the current of time---*

*tender, harsh,
extraordinary,
mundane,
that which gives pleasure in recollection
and that which hurts, yet resists
being forgotten.*

*May the threads of memory be woven
Into the fabric of my life
And bring healing.*

---MARCIA FALK

The Three S's: Shomrim, Shivah and Sheloshim

Shomrim:

Shomer, the Hebrew word for “guardian,” is part of our 2000-year-old Jewish tradition to honor the dead. We do not want to leave our loved ones alone from the time of death until burial. The *shomer*, either a family member or a dear friend, will watch over the body until the funeral begins. Those who participate in this *mitzvah* remain anonymous. The *shomer* might recite Psalms or other religious texts. This sweet tradition of guarding the body is the beginning of the soul’s ascent on its journey to heaven.

This concept was not new to me. For 35 years I have volunteered in the *Chevra Kaddisha* (“Holy Committee” or Burial Society). We perform *tahara*—we prepare Jews for their casket in a tender, traditional, purification ceremony. As part of the *Chevra*, we sit with the body until they are taken to the cemetery. Frequently I did not know the person in the casket but, nonetheless, I have performed this loving act with serious and honorable attention to what our tradition prescribes.

However, it was not until my husband’s death did I appreciate the power of this time honored Jewish tradition. When asking our family and friends to participate as *Shomrim* for him, I was so pleased that everyone who was asked was indeed willing to sit with him at the funeral home. Waiting for *Shabbes* to end required some to spend hours at night with him and others to arrive at early morning shifts around the clock. The feedback I received from all who participated was

*Unable are the loved to die. For
love is immortality.*

---EMILY DICKINSON

astounding! They shared what a positive experience it was for them. It provided a time to reflect on their relationship with my husband. It was a time to cry, to smile and to recall their lives together. It was a time to think about their own mortality. No doubt, there were those who chose not to read psalms, but instead, chose to talk with my husband's body. I thought that was perfectly acceptable and what my husband would have wanted. Over and over, I was thanked for such a meaningful *mitzvah* opportunity.

Two months later, when I became a *Shomer* for my aunt, I felt the sacredness of this ritual even more deeply. This act of loving-kindness following a death was gratifying. Knowing that this lovely role was a way to help the soul of a loved one reach the Garden of Eden was indeed very satisfying.

Rabbi David Kosak wrote on one *Shabbat* about the concept of a "Doula of the Soul". When the doulas are friends and family, theirs is a heightened connection in performing this *mitzvah*. It can be a meaningful experience, a comfort to the mourners, and a personal way of understanding our tradition's valuable lessons.

Congregation Neveh Shalom is grateful that Holman's Funeral Home has assisted our community to perform its rituals around death and mourning for several generations. I encourage you to consider the powerfully positive experience in trying to arrange for *Shomrim*. Our Program volunteers are available to help you with this arrangement.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul, He leads me on the
paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death, I shall fear no evil,
for thou art with me;
Thy rod and they staff they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies:
You anoint my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of
my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for
ever.*

---PSALMS 23

Shiva:

Shiva is a familiar word to most of us. It means “seven,” which relates to the first 7 days of mourning after the burial of a first-degree relative. The term “sitting *shiva*” comes from the low, uncomfortable benches, which some communities provide for the mourners in their home following a death. While Congregation Neveh Shalom does not provide these low benches, it is ready to help the mourner arrange for *shiva minyanim*. The rabbi will bring a rolling suitcase full of prayer books and *kepot*. The *minyan* in the home can be beneficial for the mourning family. It is an opportunity to say *Kaddish* with a communal presence. It is an opportunity to stay within the home for the first week following a death. It is an opportunity to further talk about the person who has just died. Sweet stories, remembrances and further focus following the more formal funeral give voice to honoring this loved one. Grandchildren might get to know their beloved grandparent better through these stories. Friends offer memories that may make the mourners smile. The informality is psychologically helpful after both the strained wait for the funeral and burial.

The mourners are not hosts to those attending *shiva minyanim*. In fact, someone is obligated to fill the plate with the condolence meal and serve the mourners. Some mourners wear slippers. After all, it is a week of mourning and of staying within the home.

You may choose to have *shiva minyan*, multiple *minyanim*, or none at all: it is completely up to the family. Our busy lives are often scheduled with nighttime meetings, classes

*Worship is a way of seeing the world
in the light of God.*

---ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

and activities. By choosing to hold several nights of “*shiva minyanim*,” it allows all friends and relatives to participate in one or more of these gatherings.

It is a mitzvah to comfort mourners. Our Program and volunteers are dedicated to helping you with these arrangements. Whether it is answering questions about what foods are traditionally served, answering requests for help in setting up folding chairs and/or traying foods, covering mirrors if desired-- our volunteers are available. For many mourners, this might be their first experience with this process and at a time when they are feeling the most vulnerable. We do understand that and want to be of help during this initial phase of mourning. There is a tradition, which I found quite meaningful: at the end of the 7 days of *shiva*, the first leaving of the home is often a walk around the block. Our volunteers will be by your side to make this first entrance into the world again.

Multiple nightly *minyanim* are exhausting, even if food preparation and clean up is managed by others. However, the purpose of *shiva* is clear—it is to surround the mourners with community. Like the “Wings of Shechina,” the *shiva* ritual lifts you out of bed each day and wraps you protectively like a *tallit* around your shoulders. It is this support and warmth of being surrounded by relatives and friends that will help you to move toward living again. This is the basis of all Jewish traditions of death and mourning.

I would encourage you not to allow the emotional and physical exhaustion that one encounters following a death to deter you from asking for help with *shiva minyanim*.

*There is a time and a season
For every desire beneath heaven.*

*There is a time to be born
And a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to uproot.
There is a time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to cry and a time to laugh,
A time to eulogize and a time to dance.
A time to throw stones
 and a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain.
A time to seek and a time to lose.
A time to keep and a time to discard.
A time to rend, and a time to sew.
A time for silence, and a time for speech.*

ECCLESIASTES (Kohélet 3:1-7)

Congregation Neveh Shalom's Yad b'Yad Program is available to help you, guide you, and mentor you through this difficult transition. I personally reflect on this ritual as a time when my friends and relatives took time out of their lives to be with my family. They told stories and shared memories, some of which I had never heard before! Months later, I could grasp the power in this ancient tradition. I began to trust the wisdom of Judaism's rituals as a comfort at this time of shock and loss. When it is difficult to truly know what to do, the formula is spelled out for us. We are completely free to participate in any, all, or none of these prescribed rituals. Congregation Neveh Shalom is willing to accommodate the needs of your family.

Shloshim:

The word *shloshim* means 30. In this case, it refers to the 30 days following burial, and it includes the *shiva* week. Judaism wisely helps the mourner along the journey of intense grief and shock to living again by marking periods of time. One could say that the sages of long ago were much like the present day psychologist treating grief. Marking periods of time with gradual return to living is sound psychologically. Counting is a frequent theme in Jewish practice. We count the *omer*. We count the days of a week until *Shabbat*. We count the nights of Hanukkah. Counting the 30 days of *Shloshim* takes on a rhythm of its own after a loss. It gives us structure--a beginning and an end.

When the loss is of a spouse, child or sibling, it is the tradition to recite *Kaddish* for 30 days. This is different than the loss of a parent, when *Kaddish* is to be said for approximately a year

There are stars whose light only reaches the earth long after they have fallen apart. There are people whose remembrance gives light in this world, long after they have passed away. This light shines in our darkest nights on the road we must follow.

THE TALMUD

(eleven months and one day). As with all of the prescribed traditions, the mourner in our congregation is encouraged to do what feels best for him/her. If saying *Kaddish* for a spouse for the year is preferred, the mourner is certainly welcome to do so. If attending morning *minyan* every day for 30 consecutive days is helpful, the “morning *minyaneers*” are delighted and welcoming. If attending morning *minyan* on a particular day of the week (ie. every Tuesday) is the personal commitment, this, too, provides rhythm.

Attending morning *minyan* may be a completely new experience and, thus, one that is intimidating. For this reason, our Yad b’Yad volunteers are available to sit with you, show you when to stand, when to recite *Kaddish*, when to bow and when to bend. You are welcome to wear a *kepah* and *tallit*, or you may choose not to. Our volunteers will arrange a ride if that is needed, or help in any other way we might make this powerful ritual possible.

The Morning *Minyan* “regulars” are a warm, friendly group. Completely non-judgmental of your familiarity or lack thereof with the service, they will be delighted that you join them. On some mornings you may make that 10th person to be a “*minyan*,” which will permit the saying of communal prayers. They are there each morning for each of their own reasons, but one is to comfort you. They say a loud “Amen” during the segments of the *Kaddish*, an auditory comfort and a message that is to convey, “we are sorry for your loss.” I looked forward to their welcoming smiles, greetings of “good morning,” playfulness, and of course, their reliable presence permitted me to say *Kaddish*. Their presence was an unexpected gift at a time when I felt vulnerable.

THE KADDISH

Let God's Name be made great and holy in the world that was created as God willed. May God complete the holy realm in your lifetime, in your days, and in the days of all the house of Israel, quickly and soon. And say: Amen.

May God's Great Name be blessed, forever and as long as worlds endure.

May it be blessed, and praised, and glorified, and held in honor, viewed with awe, embellished, and revered; and may the Blessed Name of Holiness be hailed, though it be higher than all the blessings, songs, praises, and consolations that we utter in this world. And say: Amen.

May Heaven grant a universal peace, and life for us, and for all Israel. And say: Amen.

May the One who created harmony above, make peace for us and for all Israel, and for all who dwell on earth. And say: Amen.

Also inherent in *shloshim* is a time for *tzedakah*. Inaccurately translated as “charity”, it literally means righteousness or justice. It is a time to think about donating to organizations or causes to which the person who died is now unable to donate.

After the death of my husband, I created my own rhythm of *shloshim* that felt very satisfying and was a poignant way to mark the 30 days. Attending *minyan* each morning, I returned home and wrote a check to a different organization for each of the 30 days. It was a way to combine both saying *Kaddish* and fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *tzadakah*. From years of practicing psychiatry, I knew at some level there were two important aspects of moving along in the grieving process that could be accomplished by the rhythm of *shloshim*: (1) creating a personal ritual, and (2) marking time in a thoughtful way. I chose with intention the amount of \$18 to gift each of the 30 organizations. The *gematra* of the number 18 is CHAI--LIFE. How fitting to think about LIFE as I plodded through the first 30 days after DEATH.

Even if you are not a “morning person” and 7:15 AM is not your best time of day, I highly recommend you try saying *Kaddish* at morning *minyan* for the comforting experience it may, indeed, provide. In my case, since it was the loss of a spouse, after *shloshim*, I was permitted to be given an *aliyah* (called to the Torah). Torah service occurs on Mondays and Thursdays. It was a powerful moment to be able to mark the end of *shloshim*, touching the Torah with my *tallit*, saying the prayer before and after the Torah reading. All of the rituals in Judaism have a specific purpose, and this marks

*Grieve not,
Nor speak of me with tears,
But laugh and talk of me
As if I were beside you...
I love you so—
'twas Heaven here with you.*

---ISLA PASCHAL RICHARDSON

the time to move on to the next stage of grieving, which was, for me, to go back to work. I thanked the friendly Morning *minyan* “regulars” for the help and love with which they surrounded me. I even committed to being a once a week “regular” myself!

My Hebrew skills are modest, but the morning *minyan* “regulars” never seem to mind if during the *Amidah*, I simply close my eyes and did my own meditation, which brought me calmness. The *Ashraie* is chanted too quickly for me to follow along, so I used that time to again close my eyes and smile at my memories. The stained glass windows in the small Zidell chapel are of the exact colors of the impatiens that my husband planted each year. They, too, caught my attention each morning, and I vowed to plant his flowers in the early summer.

Morning *minyan* can be a very personal time to reflect on what has happened in your life. It is a place that encourages mindfulness. All of this in a short half hour early each morning, is a way to begin another day that can still feel unreal, painful, and even “unbelievable.”

Not to have had pain is not to have been human.

---YIDDISH PROVERB

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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.





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