ב״ה

There is Life

AFTER LIFE



written by
Rabbi Lazer Gurkow

“We are alive long before our bodies are born, and we live on long after our bodies die.”

Life after Life

The soul is from Heaven, and the body is from the earth. While on earth, the body serves as the soul's garment. After our allotted lifespan, the soul lives on in Heaven while the body remains on earth.

It follows that as birth is a relocation from Heaven to earth, so is death a relocation from earth to Heaven. This is why we call it a passing.

Thus, birth and death are not the bookends of life. We are alive long before our bodies are born, and we live on long after our bodies die.

This unique attitude toward human mortality informs the Jewish view of death, burial and mourning presented in this pamphlet.

This pamphlet raises many central principles and key points but is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject.



A frank discussion

Let's have a frank discussion about life and death.

Discussing our mortality can be painful and sensitive, but it is an important discussion to have.

Our passing will be heartbreaking for our loved ones. Yet in their fog of pain, they will be summoned to make irreversible decisions. When our loved ones do not know our wishes, these decisions can become excruciating for them. This is why we must think about these questions and leave our loved ones with clarity about our wishes. This will ease their burden during a very difficult time.



Interment

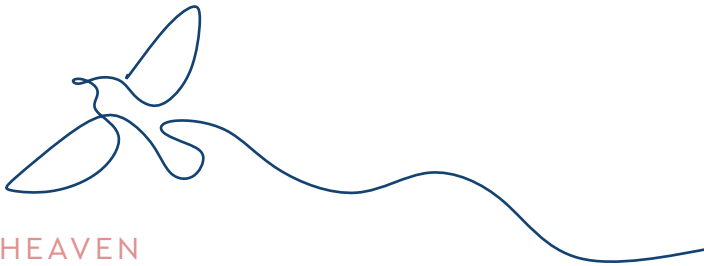
ON LOAN

The first and most difficult choice our loved ones will make is between interment and cremation. What is Judaism's view?

The Torah tells us that G-d formed the body of the first human, Adam, from the dust of the earth. Shortly after G-d brought Adam to life, G-d told him, "From earth you were taken; [thus] you are dust and to dust you will return."

WHY?

Think of yourself as a composite of body and soul. You *are* a soul; you *have* a body. Judaism teaches that our body doesn't belong to us. G-d forms each body lovingly in its mother's womb and presents it to us upon birth. We dress in it, and it serves us faithfully (it is hoped) for many delightful decades. In the interim, we are entrusted with preserving it, but it never becomes ours. When we pass on, the time comes for us to return it to G-d, intact. Interring the body, as G-d instructed Adam, returns the gift to G-d.



IN HEAVEN

If you live in a cold climate and visit Florida in the middle of the winter, you leave your coat behind. You don't burn it or discard it. You hang your coat carefully in the closet where it will remain until you return and need it again. The same is true for the soul. Where we are going, we won't need a body of flesh. In Heaven, we will be given a body of light.

For now, we lovingly return our earthly body to earth, where it will remain until we need it again.

The Jewish prophets foretold that in the messianic era, for which Jews pray three times daily, G-d will resurrect the dead. Our souls will return from Heaven, G-d will reconstruct our body from its remains on earth, and the two will marry again. Like our coat in the winter, we will need our body again, so we are careful and respectful with it in the interim. We place it lovingly and securely where it belongs—the earth from which it was taken—until it will serve us again.

THE TORAH SCROLL

There is another reason to treat our body with reverence: Judaism views the person as a Torah scroll; the parchment is the body, and the letters are the soul. As the sanctity of the letters seep into the parchment and render it holy, so does the sanctity of the soul permeate the body and render it holy. If the letters fade and disappear, the holy parchment is not discarded. It is laid to rest in the ground. The same is done for the sacred body that serves us so well in life. When the soul departs, we don't discard or destroy the body. We lay it lovingly to rest.

"Where we are going, we won't need a body of flesh. In Heaven, we will be given a body of light."



INTERSECTION OF HEAVEN & EARTH

Judaism teaches, "The body returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to G-d Who gave it." This means that the spirit returns to Heaven only after the body returns to earth.

The soul doesn't depart its loved ones at the time of passing and ascend immediately to Heaven. Instead, it remains near the body and is present with the family during the eulogies and the funeral. Though we can't see our loved ones during this time, we can often feel their comforting presence. At the end of the funeral, when we lower the body into the grave, the soul takes leave of the body and ascends to Heaven.

While the soul is willing to linger, remaining in a sort of twilight zone can be uncomfortable. It is, therefore, important to conduct the funeral as soon as possible.



The Grave

A PERMANENT MARKER

The grave is a permanent marker that stands for generations and serves as a memorial of our presence on earth. The script on our gravestone will tell future visitors about us. It is also the place where our loved ones gather to remember us. Think of our matriarch Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem. It has stood for centuries, and Jews the world over stream to it to pray and to connect with her. Such markers don't exist for those who are cremated. Urns are often left at the funeral home or emptied on a hillside or a body of water. Even when they are brought home, they are not usually preserved for more than one or two generations. Before long, no earthly marker remains of our time on earth.

The grave is not only the point from which we ascend to Heaven, but also the place through which we return to earth.

When someone visits our grave, we descend from Heaven to visit with them and to derive pleasure from the connection. Only a grave can serve as our touchpoint on earth because it is where our

bodies lay in repose. Cremated bodies are destroyed rather than laid to rest. This leaves the soul with no touchpoint. When someone visits the urn, the soul is unable to descend.

ENVIROMENT

The dust-to-dust approach is environmentally friendly. Unlike cremations, funerals don't consume fossil fuels and exude toxic fumes into the air for many hours. Moreover, by Jewish tradition only plain wooden caskets and simple linen shrouds are used, to ensure that everyone can afford to be interred. This has the added advantage of being biodegradable and environmentally green.

Many are concerned about the space crunch of sprawling cemeteries.

The truth is that there is plenty of cemetery space on the planet and we won't run out anytime soon. It might be a little further away from the urban centers than we prefer, but they do exist.

Many people worry about the financial burden of funerals. Many funeral homes are willing to pare down the costs to make it more affordable. Many communities also have municipal or communal funds to help defray these costs. Contact your local Chabad Lubavitch rabbi or rebbetzin to discuss these details.

It is critical that we consider our final plans while we are healthy and that we communicate our wishes for interment to our families. By telling them precisely what we want, we will spare them the agony of guessing.

“ The grave is not only the point from which we ascend to Heaven,

but also the place through which we return to earth. ”





Practices & Rituals

TIME OF PASSING

There are several rituals related to the moment of passing. In the moments prior to the passing of a Jewish person, all who are present proclaim, *"Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad"*— "Hear O Israel, G-d is our L-rd, G-d is one."

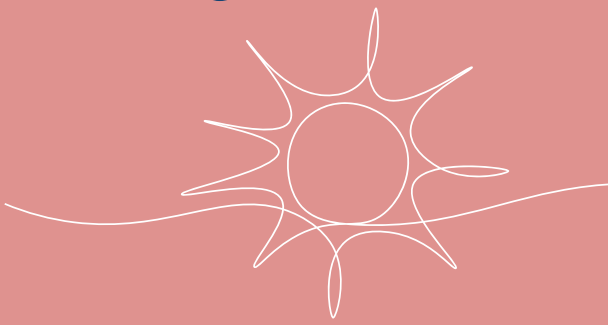
After the passing, we cover the face of the deceased and open a window in the room. We then light a candle to honor the soul. When the body is transported to the funeral home, the flame may be extinguished, and a new flame is kindled in the funeral home.

THE CLEANSING

By Jewish tradition, we return the body to G-d in a pure state. Therefore, preparation of the Jewish body for burial entails a thorough, gentle, and respectful cleansing during which special memorial prayers are recited. The body is then dressed in traditional shrouds.

These rites are performed at a dedicated facility by a chevrah kadisha—a Jewish burial society. Contact your Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi or rebbetzin to ensure this is done for you too.

"For now, we lovingly return our earthly body to earth, where it will remain until we need it again."



The Funeral

RENDING

We rend our garments to demonstrate our grief over our loved one who has been torn from us. This act of tearing/cutting declares that in the face of our loss, mere possessions are not precious to us. There is also a comforting note in this: we rend the garment, not our person, to proclaim our belief that only the body, the garment of the soul, has died. The soul—the core of our loved one—continues to live. Pinning a black ribbon to our lapel—even a ribbon that has been cut—fails to articulate these points.

In the Jewish tradition, the eulogy is an opportunity to remember the good deeds of our loved one and to encourage the assembled to emulate them, thus continuing in their path, keeping their lagacy alive.

BURIAL

A Jewish funeral should only take place at a Jewish cemetery. The greatest kindness we can offer the deceased is to accompany them on their final journey.



It is a privilege to bury our own and we line up to do so by hand. Rather than hand the shovel to the person behind us, we place it in the mound of dirt, it is then collected by the next person in line.

KADDISH

After the grave is filled, mourners recite the heartfelt Kaddish prayer. The Kaddish acknowledges G-d as the true judge and proclaims that we believe death to be a temporary stage. Before long, G-d will fulfill the prophecy of messianic redemption, and the dead will return to life. At that time, we will be reunited with our loved ones.

In addition, the collective purpose of our good deeds is to declare G-d's sovereignty over the world. With their passing, our loved ones leave a void in this area. This void is filled when others—especially those raised by them—recite Kaddish, which proclaims G-d's sovereignty. Thus, our Kaddish continues the work and elevates the soul of our loved one in Heaven.

COMFORTING THE MOURNERS

After the interment, the focus shifts from the deceased to the mourners. The assembled form two lines from the gravesite to the road. The family walks between the lines while the assembled offer words of consolation.

SHIVAH ETIQUETTE

Thus begin the seven days of mourning called shivah. During this time, friends and family visit the house of mourning to offer comfort. The first shivah meal eaten by the mourners is called the meal of consolation. By tradition, this meal includes bread and eggs. The oval egg reminds us of the cycle of life. The guests provide this meal for the mourners. The mourners are not expected to provide a meal for the guests.

Shivah is not a party. Shivah etiquette calls for visitors to sit silently until the mourner initiates conversation. If the mourner remains quiet, visitors remain quiet too. Nothing is more comforting than the silent support of family and friends. The Talmud says that in a house of mourning we are rewarded, above all, for our silence. Before taking leave, it is customary to

say, “May G-d comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

If possible, ten men gather at the shivah home, morning and evening, to form a minyan (quorum) for prayer services. During these prayers, mourners recite Kaddish in the memory and merit of their loved one.

Shivah is a cathartic period that allows us to grieve and to celebrate our loved one’s life. After shivah we make an active effort to shift from grieving and to embrace life. Our loved ones can never be forgotten, so we embrace life in a manner that brings their memory to life by following in their footsteps and continuing their good deeds.

“ The Talmud says that in a house of mourning we are rewarded, above all, for our silence.”

POST-SHIVAH

Our sages taught that even after the soul ascends to Heaven, it visits with the family during shivah to enfold them in its loving embrace as they mourn. After shivah, the soul returns to Heaven and the family rises from mourning to embrace life. The Kaddish will be recited for eleven months as counted on the Jewish calendar. If you are unable to recite the Kaddish daily, contact your local Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi or rebbetzin to arrange for Kaddish to be recited on your behalf.

"It is said that reciting Kaddish is like sending regards, studying Mishnah is like sending a letter, and donating to charity is like sending a care package"



Yahrtzeit

Every year on the yahrtzeit—the anniversary of our loved one's passing, per the Jewish calendar, it is tradition to:

Light a twenty-four-hour candle

Recite Kaddish and study Torah in the merit of our loved ones.

Study the Mishnah (a part of the Talmud) because the word Mishnah is an anagram of the word neshamah—the Hebrew word meaning soul.

Donate to charity to elevate your loved one's soul.

Recite Yizkor in addition to the yahrtzeit, Yizkor, a special memorial prayer, is recited in the synagogue four times annually. On Yom Kippur and on the final days of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot.



Conclusion

The rituals and traditions discussed in this pamphlet are all driven by the central belief that the soul lives on. We mourn the loss of our loved one's physical presence but are forever comforted by their perpetual soul. Throughout, we remember that the period of separation is temporary. The day will come when G-d will wipe the tears from every face, resurrect the dead, and reunite us with our dear departed loved ones. May that time come speedily in our days, Amen.

About this booklet

Written by Rabbi Lazer Gurkow.

Shared by EverJewish, with gratitude to the author, as part of the reading we make available to families and to the rabbis, chaplains and community leaders who care for them.

Every Jewish cemetery and funeral home in the country, the facts confirmed by their own offices, and help settling your plans from home. Always no fee to families.

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Your own rabbi, chaplain or chevra kadisha is the right address for questions about the customs described here.