

AFTERLIFE IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH PRACTICE TOWARDS A RENEWAL OF JEWISH DEATH RITUALS

1. DEATH AS A TRANSITION TO THE WORLD BEYOND - RACHEL'S DEATH:

And it came to pass, when she [Rachel] was in difficult labor, that the midwife said to her, Fear not; you shall have this son also. And it came to pass, as her soul was departing - **b'tzait naphsha**

בצאת נפשה - for she died, that she called his name Benoni; but his father called him Benjamin. And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Beth-Lehem. (Gen. 35:17-19)

2. GOSES AND THE "NEARING DEATH EXPERIENCE": -

One in a dying condition is considered a living being in all respects. We may not tie up his jaws, nor anoint him with oil, nor wash him...nor may we remove the pillow from under him, nor may we place him on sand, clay-ground or earth...nor may we hire pipes and lamenting women, nor may we close his eyes before his soul departs. (Yoreh Deah, 339.1)

Much of what occurs during [the "nearing death experience"] is beyond words..subtle and deeply inner: intuitions, recognitions, experiences of realms of being and understanding, realms of depth and light and truth that words cannot grasp." Kathleen Dowling Singh, *The Grace in Dying – How We Are Transformed Spiritually As We Die*, p. 17.



3. SUPERNAL VISIONS OF THE DYING

Lying on the deathbed, preparing to leave the world, she is granted an additional supernal spirit that she never had before, and sees what she has never been worthy enough to see throughout her life, because the additional spirits given to her. Once this has been granted her, and she sees, she departs from this world (Zohar I, 218b).

4. TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE VIDUI (DEATHBED CONFESSION)

If one feels death approaching, they are instructed, 'Confess [your sins]!' And the person is told, 'Many confessed [their sins] and died not, and many who have not confessed, died; and as a reward, should you confess, you will live; and one who confesses [sins] has a portion in the world to come.' And if the person is unable to make confession with the mouth, they should confess in the heart. If they do not know what to confess, instruct the person to say, 'My death should be an expiation for all my sins.' (Yoreh Deah, 338.1)

5. PRAYER AS SOUL-GUIDING - CONTEMPORARY TECHINAH FOR DEATHBED

(Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael, *May the Angels Carry You* CD)

O Great Guardian of the Gateway between life and death,
I come before you as witness to this sacred moment in time
In gratitude and with humility
I honor the mystery of holy transition.

Just as Jacob buried his beloved Rachel on the road to Bethlehem,
and as loving family surrounded Jacob and Joseph as they were gathered to their ancestors
may I gracefully escort the soul of _____ with compassionate love.

As the midwives, Shifra and Puah brought forth new life,
may I help birth this soul into the luminosity of the world beyond

As the breath wanes and the body is released,

O Holy Shechinah carry this soul on your shimmering wings into the radiant light of Gan Eden.

Simcha Raphael, Ph.D., 2020

6. ANINUT - A BEREAVEMENT “TWILIGHT ZONE”

An Onen who suffered a bereavement... does not eat reclining, and he eats not meat nor drinks wine, nor does he recite the benediction before meals, nor does he say grace after meals... (Yoreh Deah, 341.1)

“for seven days the soul goes to and fro from his house to his grave from his grave to his house, mourning for the body” (Zohar I, 218b)

7. LEVIYAH - FUNERAL AS SOUL-GUIDING

Rav told his colleague Rabbi Samuel ben Shilath: “Be fervent in my funeral eulogy, for I will be standing there” (Shab. 152b). 3) Shloshim

8. SHIVAH - A SOUL-GUIDING RITUAL

HALACHIC - As soon as the deceased is buried and the grave is filled with earth, *aninut* ends and mourning (*aveilut*) begins. The seven days of shiva and thirty days are counted from then. *Mourning in Halacha*, p. 148 (based on *Yoreh Deah*, 375.1)

MIDRASHIC - And [Joseph and his brothers] came to the threshing floor of Atad ...and **there they mourned [Jacob] with a great and bitter lamentation; and he made a mourning—evel—for his father seven days.**” (Gen. 50:10)

HISTORICAL

Mourning for the dead last seven days.” (Ben Sira 22:12)

SOUL-GUIDING “for seven days the soul goes to and fro from his house to his grave from his grave to his house, mourning for the body” (Zohar I, 218b)

9. SHLOSHIM - A SOUL-GUIDING RITUAL

According to Rabbinic Law, a mourner should observe some of the mourning practices for 30 days. Which source did our Sages use as a support for the concept of 30 days? [Deut. 21:13] states: ‘And she shall cry for her father and mother for a month.’ Implied is that a mourner will feel discomfort for a month. [Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchot Evel*”, 6.1]

In Lower Gan Eden there is a repository of all “soul garments” .. inscribed with all the good works done by a person while embodied in this world; and in each case a proclamation resounds saying: this garment belongs to so and so... after which the soul of the person in Gan Eden is clothed in such a garment, so as to become a replica of person’s personality whilst in this world. This takes place not less than thirty days after a person’s death...for the first thirty days there is no soul that does not have to undergo some type of purification before entering Gan Eden.. [Zohar II, 210a].)

10. KADDISH - A SOUL-GUIDING RITUAL

Rabbi Akiva once saw in a vision the shadowy figure of a man carrying a load of wood upon his shoulders. “What ails you?” asked the rabbi. “I am one of those forlorn souls condemned for his sins to the agony of hell- fire,” replied the shadow. “And there is no hope for you?” inquired the rabbi further in great compassion. “If my little son, who was a mere infant when I died, could be taught to recite the Kaddish, then and only then would I be absolved.” The rabbi took the boy under his care and taught him to recite the Kaddish. He was then assured that the father had been released from Gehenna.

[Sanhedrin 104a; Isaac B. Moses of Vienna [1180-1250], *Or Zarua*, Hilkhoth Shabbat, #50]

10. Yahrzeit - A Soul-Guiding Ritual

Reciting Kaddish at the time of a Yahrzeit "elevates the soul every year to a higher sphere in Gan Eden."
*Isaac Luria

11. A MEDITATION/KAVANNAH FOR YIZKOR (from *Kol Haneshamah - Prayerbook for the Days of Awe*, p. 1005):

Jewish tradition, in its wisdom, teaches us that between the world of the living and the world of the dead there is a window and not a wall. Unfortunately, in our culture of scientific materialism, we often believe that dead is dead, and after death, the channels of communication between us and our loved ones who have died are forever ended - a brick wall! But, like the rituals of *Shiva*, *Kaddish*, and *Yahrzeit*, *Yizkor* opens windows to the unseen worlds of the dead. *Yizkor* creates a sacred space and time wherein we can open our hearts and minds to the possibility of a genuine inter-connection with beloved family members and friends who have left behind the world of the living. *Yizkor* is a window. Prepare to open that window...

As you recite *Yizkor* prayers let your senses and imagination serve as the vehicle of inter-connection. For whom are you saying *Yizkor* today? Can you imagine that person's face before your eyes? See their smile, visualize how they might be carrying their body standing next to you. Do you recall the sound of their voice? Hear their words as you stand in prayer. Feel their presence right in this moment. In your mind, in your heart, allow a conversation between the two of you to unfold. What needs to be communicated this year? What's the message you need to hear today? What are the silent prayers of the heart? What remains unspoken? Speak. Listen. Take your time. There is no reason to hurry. This is a timeless moment. Let all the radiance of their love to be with you right now.

Yizkor teaches us to remember the dead. Long after people die, their legacy lives on inside of us. Within the wellsprings of our infinite souls we find the window of connection between the living and the dead.

