

## A Guide To Jewish Practice - Facilitator's Guide

Nathan Weiner

The Life Cycle – The Journey of Mourning (vol. 3, pp. 411-415)

**Essential Question:** What are the primary mitzvot at the time of death, and how do we balance them against pressures of the moment at the end of life?

**Objectives:** Participants will be able to:

- Think about how they might personally balance Jewish tradition with contemporary demands
- Define terms: *Avelut*, *K'vod Hamet*, and *Nihum Avelim*.

**Materials Needed:** A copy of the poem “Remember Me” by Elizabeth Tragash found on RitualWell at <http://ritualwell.org/ritual/remember-me>. A downloaded copy of the song “Tribute” by Safam. (Can be downloaded from [www.oysongs.com](http://www.oysongs.com)). Marker, flip-chart.

**Set Induction:** (15 minutes) As participants enter, have the song “Tribute” by Safam playing. As participants enter, ask them to sit quietly. Once everyone is seated and quiet and the song has finished, read aloud the poem “Remember Me” by Elizabeth Tragash. (Note that this poem may bring up some intense emotions among participants.) Remind participants that this unit, which focuses on rituals pertaining to death, burial and mourning, may be deeply emotional for some. Invite a participant to read aloud the ground rules established in the previous lesson.

**Exploring the Text:**

1. (10 minutes) Explain that there are three primary mitzvot at the time of death. They are listed on page 414. Invite a participant to read the descriptions aloud. Once the reading is completed, ask participants to share their initial knowledge of Jewish customs pertaining to each section. Sort them accordingly.
2. (15 minutes) Invite a participant to read aloud the comment by Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz (D.E.) at the bottom of page 413. Explain that there are many Jewish laws, customs and practices pertaining to the end of life. Invite participants to share their personal experiences in regard to balancing these laws, customs, and practices with their perceived needs as mourners. This will allow you to assess participant knowledge of, and interactions with, Jewish traditions around end of life.

**Wrapping It Up:** (10 minutes) Share with your group what the process is that the rabbi goes through in guiding a family through end of life. This can help participants get used to what will happen at that stage of the mourning process.

### **Exploring the Sources:**

1. Nadav and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his firepot, put fire therein, laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before God, which God had not commanded them. Fire came forth from God and devoured them, and they died before God. Then Moses said to Aaron: "This is it what God said: 'Through those who are close to Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron was silent. (Leviticus 10:1-3)
2. They came to the threshing-floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, and there they wailed with a very great and sore wailing; and Joseph mourned for his father Jacob for seven days. (Genesis 50:10)

## A Guide To Jewish Practice - Facilitator's Guide

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The Life Cycle – The Journey Of Mourning (vol. 3, pp.415-423)

**Essential Question:** What are the mitzvot associated with the first stage of mourning, *aninut*?

**Objectives:** Participants will be able to:

- Understand that people respond differently to grief, but that Jewish tradition offers multiple stages of mourning to help manage grief
- Define *aninut* and articulate some of the mitzvot associated with this period of mourning

**Special Lesson Note:** In advance, request that participants bring an internet-enabled device, such as a laptop (preferred), smart phone or tablet.

**Materials Needed:** Ability to project sound and video from the internet;

**Set Induction:** (10 minutes) After participants are seated, show the music video for the song, “I’ll Be Missing You” by Puff Daddy and Faith Evans:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0iCnhg78z0>. Explain to participants that this song was written by Puff Daddy after the death of his friend, colleague and collaborator, Notorious B.I.G. After viewing the video, ask participants to share their initial reactions. It is obvious that the loss of someone whom we care about can be incredibly difficult. Different people react to such a loss differently. Despite these differences, there are five fairly universal stages of grief, first described by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. In order, they are: Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Judaism, too, offers stages of mourning to deal with our grief. They are: *aninut* (the period between death and burial), *shiva* (seven days after burial), *shloshim* (thirty days after burial), and *yahrtzeit* (anniversary of the death). Together, we will explore these Jewish stages, along with rituals and customs associated with them.

**Exploring the Text:**

3. (15 minutes) Invite a participant to read aloud the main text on page 416. Afterwards, open up a discussion in which you discuss whether participants are comfortable with the traditional language of the blessing. Ask: Why/why not? Does saying the blessing with the Reconstructionist reading of it change our feelings about it? What power is harnessed through saying this blessing? If you could change the language of the blessing in any way, how would you change it? Remind participants that this is said immediately upon hearing of a death. How does this help frame our understanding of death? How does it frame our understanding of things that occur in the world that we do not like, but are outside of our capacity to control?
4. (15 minutes) Divide your participants into groups. Explain that each assignment is a component of the first stage of *avelut* (mourning) called *aninut* (deep sorrow), which is the state one is in between the death and burial of a parent, child, sibling, or partner. Assign each group a topic: *k'ria* (tearing one's garment), *shomer/shomeret* (guardian who sits with the body during this period), *tahara* (ritual purification and washing of the body), *hevra kadisha* (sacred society), *takhrikhim* (humble burial shrouds), and *nihum avelim* (comforting the mourners. Ask each group to use the text (pages 415-423), along with their internet-enabled devices to plan a one-minute teaching on their assigned mitzvah.

**Wrapping It Up:** (10 minutes) Groups present their teachings.

## Exploring the Sources:

1. “Jacob charged them and said to them: 'I am to be gathered unto my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite for a possession of a burying-place.’” (Genesis 49:29-30)
2. “God, full of mercy, who dwells in the heights, provide a sure rest under the Divine Presence's wings, within the range of the holy, pure and glorious, whose shining resemble the sky's, to the soul of ---- son/daughter of ----, for charity was given in memory of his/her soul. Therefore, the Master of Mercy will protect him/her forever, from behind the hiding of God's wings, and will tie his/her soul with the rope of life. The Everlasting is his/her heritage, and he/she shall rest peacefully upon his/her lying place, and let us say: Amen.”  
(Traditional *El Maley Rahamim* Prayer)
3. “And, behold, a great wind came from across the wilderness and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead; and I alone escaped to tell you.' Then Job arose, tore his shirt, shaved his head and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped. And he said, 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; God has given, God has taken away; blessed be the name of the God.’” (Job 1:19-21)

## A Guide To Jewish Practice - Facilitator's Guide

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The Life Cycle – The Journey of Mourning (vol. 3, pp.423-434)

Funeral and Burial: Special Four-Lesson Unit with Field Trips

**Essential Question:** What are the traditional Jewish funeral and burial processes, and how can they be forces for healing after the death of a loved one?

### **Unit Objectives:**

4. To familiarize participants with traditional Jewish funeral and burial processes
5. To empower participants to think both about ways in which these practices can be forces for healing and about ways that they can be reconstructed
6. To provide participants with an insider's look into the funeral and burial processes that increases their sensitivity when comforting mourners.

### **Special Lesson Notes: General**

5. This four-lesson unit involves field trips to a Jewish funeral home and a Jewish cemetery. Depending on your time limitations, use your discretion to divide the lessons as you see best. You might need to find your own comfort zone as well if you don't have a high level of familiarity with funeral homes and cemeteries.
6. Be sure to reach out to a funeral home/director with significant notice. Note that due to unavoidable changes in scheduling, the funeral home/director may need to cancel at the last minute due to a funeral.
7. Funeral homes and cemeteries do not require payment for visits such as these; if possible, it is helpful to reach out to those with whom you have already developed relationships.
8. If you are not a rabbi, it may be helpful to invite your rabbi to join you on your trips.

### **Special Lesson Notes: Funeral Home**

- Before visiting the funeral home, confirm with the funeral director that he or she will address these questions during the presentation and discussion:
  - When and how is a family initially in contact with a funeral home?
  - How is the time of the funeral scheduled?
  - Are there rules about what can and cannot be included in the funeral process?
  - What are the choices in caskets?
  - Request a visit and tour of the room in which the deceased is prepared for burial.
  - For all aspects of the presentation, invite the funeral director to explain the Jewish tradition, and to explain the various options.
  - Last, request that the funeral director explain some of the different sensitivities mourners bring to funeral planning and some strategies used to comfort the mourners.

### **Special Lesson Notes: Cemetery**

2. Note that this section may require more facilitation on your part than the funeral home since burial arrangements are usually made with funeral homes that have funeral directors who manage burials, which are primarily facilitated by rabbis.
3. Before visiting the cemetery, confirm with the representative there that he or she, in conjunction with you, will address the following questions during the presentation and discussion:
  1. What are the different options for lowering the casket / covering the casket with dirt and what influences mourners' decisions?
  2. What is the custom of stopping seven times during the processional?

### 3. What are some obstacles to burial?

## Funeral and Burial – Special Four-Lesson Unit

### Lesson 1: Preparations for Field Trips

**Materials Needed:** 3 pieces of easel-sized post-it notes, markers, paper, pens.

**Set Induction:** (5 minutes) Explain that we are beginning a four-lesson section of Journey of Mourning on funerals and burials. During this unit, we will visit both a Jewish funeral home and a Jewish cemetery. In anticipation of these trips, we will need to define some terms and assign some specific roles for participants.

#### Exploring the Text:

- (5 minutes) Explain that the entire funeral and burial process is called “*halvayat hamet*,” literally, “accompanying the deceased” on his/her journey to the final resting place. Within the concept of *halvayat hamet* there are three primary categories of mitzvot. The three categories are: *avelut* (mourning), *k’vod hamet* (honoring the deceased), and *nihum avelim* (comforting the mourners). Have these categories each written in large letters on top of individual pieces of large easel paper. Ensure that participants understand the basic distinctions among the three categories. Then divide participants into three groups and assign each group a subsection of *halvayat hamet*.
- (10 minutes) Distribute the assigned easel-sized post-it note and a marker to each group. Invite each group to use the text and commentary of *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Volume 3* pages 423-434 to research the mitzvot associated with their assigned subsection. Encourage them to take notes on the large piece of paper and to generate questions. Inform participants that at the conclusion of their research, they will present their findings to the group for two minutes.
- (10 minutes) Direct each group to give a two-minute presentation on their findings. After they have finished, allow for one minute of questions and clarifications from the other groups.
- (10 minutes) Instruct participants that the next lesson will take place at a Jewish funeral home. The subsequent lesson will take place at a Jewish cemetery. (Note: participants may have special sensitivities/memories about visiting a particular funeral home or cemetery. Thus, if you are a rabbi, be sure to make yourself available to provide individual counseling prior to the trips. If not, ask your rabbi to make him/herself available for counseling. Explain that you have already sent questions to the funeral director and the representative from the cemetery. In *hevruta*, instruct participants to think of some questions that they have for our guides.

**Wrapping It Up:** (5 minutes) Share the questions generated in *hevruta*. Inform your participants that you will pass them along in preparation for the trips.

## **Funeral and Burial – Special Four-Lesson Unit**

### **Lessons 2 and 3: Field Trips**

**Set Induction:** (5 minutes) At each location, (first the funeral home, then the cemetery) introduce the speaker and state where you are. If you are a rabbi, perhaps share a personal anecdote about an experience you have had at this location.

**Activities:** This is more free-form than any other lesson. Take a tour of the facilities and allow the presenter to present. Ensure that there will be time at the end for additional questions. Remind participants to keep in mind their group: *avelut* (mourning), *k'vod hamet* (honoring the deceased), and *nihum avelim* (comforting the mourners). At the cemetery, leave ten minutes for participants to wander among the graves and read tombstones.

## **Funeral and Burial – Special Four-Lesson Unit**

### **Lesson 4: Debrief and Moving Forward**

**Materials Needed:** Paper, pens, construction paper, markers

**Set Induction:** (10 minutes, or more) Thank participants for their thoughtfulness and participation during the previous field trips. Encourage participants to share reflections, clarifying questions, or issues generated by the field trips. Allow participants to take as much time as they need to process their learning.

#### **Exploring the Text:**

1. (25 minutes) Break participants into *hevrotot*. Distribute paper, pens, construction paper, and markers to each *hevruta*. Explain that since Jewish tradition is always evolving and these participants are a link in the chain of Jewish tradition, you are empowering them to come up with a helpful ritual to augment what Jewish tradition already offers. *Hevrotot* can also choose to introduce an existent Jewish ritual into their local/synagogue community. Each group will generate an idea on paper and then use the construction paper to create a marketing notice for their idea. For example, if the community currently does not offer meals for mourners upon their return from a funeral, a group can decide to introduce this to the community. A group may decide that they want to create a ritual of a caravan home from the cemetery for the mourners, and may choose to write a blessing for this. The possibilities are endless.

**Wrapping It Up:** (10 minutes, or longer) Direct each sub-group to present their idea to the group.

**Exploring the Sources:**

“Do not comfort mourners whose dead lies before them.” (*Pirkey Avot* 4.18)

“At daybreak, (we) are like fresh grass...(B)y dusk, it withers and dries up.” (Psalms 90:5-6)

“God remembers that we are but dust.” (Psalms 103:14)

"Earth you are, and to earth you will return." (Genesis 3:19)

## A Guide To Jewish Practice - Facilitator's Guide

Nathan Weiner

The Life Cycle – The Journey of Mourning (vol. 3, pp.435-442)

**Essential Question:** What are the rituals and customs associated with the *shiva* period?

**Objectives:** Participants will be able to:

- Experience a “mock” shiva, complete with its rituals and customs
- Consider ways that they can most effectively comfort mourners

**Materials Needed:** See Below

**Special Lesson Notes:**

4. This lesson involves a mock shiva in a participant's home and requires preparations by both the facilitator and the participants.
5. Request in advance that participants read the main text of pages 435-442 of *A Guide to Jewish Practice Volume 3 – The Life Cycle*.
6. Roles need to be assigned in advance.
7. This session would ideally include at least ten Jewish adults.
8. Email your participants and send them the blurb below about the “deceased.”
9. This session will take longer than the usual 45-minute session (plan for approx. 1.5 hours).

**Volunteer Roles:**

9. 1 Mourner (or a couple) who will host the mock shiva
10. 1 Guest who will be primarily responsible for greeting guests, setting up food, and tidying up
11. 1 Guest (or the rabbi/facilitator) to bring the siddurim (prayerbooks) and to lead *ma'ariv* (the evening service)

**Pre-Session Instructions for Mourner (Volunteer Role 1):**

Before guests arrive:

- Put a sign on the door inviting guests to refrain from knocking and to simply enter.
- Cover mirrors.
- Remove cushions from seating surfaces, including couches.

**Instructions for Greeter/Helper (Volunteer Role 2):**

7. Arrive early to the session in the mourner's home.
8. When you arrive, assist in the arrangements to prepare the home (setting the table, covering mirrors, removing cushions, etc...).
9. As guests arrive, help guide them to the appropriate room, accept their food and help set it up.

**Instructions for Guests:**

- Do not knock upon entering the home.
- Try to observe the custom of not speaking until the mourner addresses you.
- Allow the mourner to set the tone for the energy in the room.
- Bring some sort of food/gift offering.
- Ask mourner(s) about the deceased and their relationship; request stories.

**Description of Deceased:** Joseph Cohen was the parent of Volunteer 1. (Write as much detail as you deem appropriate to create a fictional character appropriate for mourning who will not

traumatize participants.)

**Set Induction:** (45 minutes) Participants arrive and act out a shiva based on their prior reading of *A Guide to Jewish Practice Volume 3 – The Life Cycle* pp. 435-442. After 30 minutes of arriving, discussing, snacking, and fully acting out a shiva, the assigned service leader leads the group in *ma'ariv* (the evening service).

### Exploring the Text:

1. (15 minutes or more) Invite your participants to share initial reactions to their experiences during the mock shiva. Some guiding questions might include: Did you feel prepared for this experience? Was it comfortable or uncomfortable? Did your experience match your expectations? How did participating in Jewish rituals during the shiva enhance or detract from your experiences? If participants have visited a shiva before, how was this similar/different?
2. (20 minutes) Explain that each Jewish ritual has layers of history and layers of meaning. Together, we will focus on one ritual in particular. Ask a participant to read aloud the paragraph beginning “In many shiva homes...” on page 438. Then, read aloud the commentary on page 439 by Miriam Klotz (MK). After an initial read, go back through the commentary and read each sentence individually, pausing to discuss participants' reactions to each line.

**Wrapping it up:** (10 minutes or longer) Brainstorm with participants a list of community “best practices” for comforting mourners during shiva. After creating your list, disseminate in your community, if possible.

### Exploring the Sources:

1. “The human soul is the light of God” (Proverbs 20:27)
2. It is an important commandment to comfort mourners, and we find from the Holy One, Blessed be God, that we should comfort mourners, as it is written, "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham that God blessed his son Isaac," and this is an act of loving kindness to the living and to the dead. The comforters are not allowed to start talking until the mourner begins, because we find in Job where it is said: "and none spoke a word to him" and it is written, "After this Job opened his mouth," then returned and answered Elifaz the Temanite. When the comforters see that the mourner wants them to go, they are not allowed to stay with him. (*Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* 207:1)
3. One shouldn't say to the mourner, "What can you do? It's impossible to change what the Holy One, Blessed be God, decreed," for this is akin to blasphemy, meaning that if it were possible to change (the decree), one would change it. A person needs to accept God's decree, blessed be God's name, in love. (*Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* 207:4)

## A Guide To Jewish Practice - Facilitator's Guide

Nathan Weiner

### The Life Cycle – The Journey Of Mourning (vol. 3, pp.456-477)

**Essential Question:** What are some issues related to Jewish mourning practices, and how can we best comfort mourners?

**Objectives:** Participants will be able to:

- Name some potential issues related to mourning
- Utilize a technique called focused listening to comfort mourners

**Materials Needed:** None

**Set Induction:** (15 minutes) Explain that today we hone our skills at being supportive companions for mourners through the use of a practice called focused listening. Throughout the course of today's session, we will remember real and imagined people and use storytelling and focused listening to provide comfort for the bereaved. Break your participants into *hevrutot*. Explain that each person in each pair will have three minutes to share about someone in their lives whom they have lost. The listener must only listen and must refrain from responding. Nonverbal responses are welcomed, including touch, smiles, hugs, etc... The process is as follows:

- Consoler asks mourner to share for three minutes about someone in their life who has died. Be sure to share how you knew him/her, how you met him/her, and something memorable about him/her.
- Consoler is quiet during these three minutes. Consoler then has two minutes to reflect back what he or she heard the mourner say about the deceased.
- Switch roles.

Explain that this section explores instances in which traditional Jewish practice surrounding end of life is called into potential question. The issues explored are: cremation (p. 465), Jewish holidays and shiva (p. 467), infant death (p. 470), and interfaith issues (p. 471). Ask for a show of hands from participants for who have had to deal with issues pertaining to each topic.

#### **Exploring the Text:**

- 12.** (25 minutes) Break participants into groups of four. Explain that they will be continuing to practice active listening, though this time they will need to create characters. Each participant can speak in character for four minutes. The listeners then have two minutes to ask follow-up questions. The focus of the listeners is to be present and to listen supportively to the mourner. Remember that the mourner is the expert and that there can be no judgment. Each participant in the small group gets assigned one of the characters below:

**a. Doreen** is the youngest of three daughters of Bess, who passed away last week. Bess had asked to be cremated, and Doreen, who is deeply involved in Jewish community, knew the Jewish prohibition on cremation and did not approve of it. Her sisters outvoted her, and her mother was cremated. Doreen shares about her mother and her feelings about her cremation. (For more information, see p.465)

**b. Barbara**, who lives in Los Angeles, had always had a strained relationship with her brother Tom, who lives in Maryland. When Tom passed away two days before Rosh Hashanah, Barbara chose to wait until after Rosh Hashanah to visit her brother's family. Her sister-in-law was furious that Barbara would prioritize the holiday over being there with her family. Barbara is sad that this resulted in a fight, and though her relationship with her brother was not great, she misses him greatly. (For more information, see p. 467)

**c. Samuel** and Sarah had been trying to have a child for a few years. Sarah became pregnant and carried their child to term. It was a shock to everyone when their baby was still-born. They sought a way to mourn the loss, but their rabbi advised them that the requirements of mourning only apply when the deceased has lived beyond 30 days. Samuel needs to find some way to mourn. (For more information, see p. 470)

**d. Joseph** had been married to Kiera for over 30 years, and together they had raised two wonderful children, and were expecting their first grandchild when Kiera died suddenly from a heart attack. Joseph is Jewish, and Kiera is not. Joseph is very confused about his obligations to mourn his deceased wife, and he wants to honor both his own tradition and her tradition. (For more information, see p. 471)

10. (5 minutes) As a small group, discuss how it felt to just listen and not be allowed to respond. Was it challenging? Was it rewarding? How did you use non-verbal cues to assist the mourner? Do you have any critiques for any of the others in your group?

**Wrapping It Up:** (5 minutes) Explain to participants that each year Jews recall the memory of those who are deceased, on the anniversary of their passing, which is called the *Yahrzeit*. In addition, four times a year, Jews gather to remember their deceased during a service called *Yizkor*. As a large group, discuss how returning to the memories of those we have lost can help us to come to peaceful terms with the loss. Remind participants that just as we heard beautiful stories of those lost today, each year we can return to these memories to keep their legacies alive.

### Exploring the Sources:

#### 10. God Gives, and God Takes

God gives opportunities for us to love but not forever. God takes opportunities away after a while. So don't hesitate or delay or curse the darkness while remaining mired in sadness and hopelessness, because God gives; and God takes away. Blessed be the name of the LORD. But why bless the LORD when God takes away? Because if the opportunities were always there, we would wait until the time was just right and never make the leap, and more of life would slip away. So God gives and God takes; Blessed be God's name.

**Rabbi Allen S. Maller**

11. "For everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born and a time to die; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to grieve and a time to dance; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to let go; a time to tear and a time to mend." (Ecclesiastes 3)
12. **One in Sorrow** Let me come in where you are weeping, friend, And let me take your hand. I, who have known a sorrow such as yours, Can understand. Let me come in -- I would be very still Beside you in your grief; I would not bid you cease your weeping, friend, Tears can bring relief. Let me come in -- I would only breathe a prayer, And hold your hand, For I have known a sorrow such as yours, And understand.

**Grace Noll Crowell**