Religious Approaches to Death and Dying: The Jewish Approach

Benjamin W. Mintz
The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.edu/scholar

Part of the Other Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at CUA Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Articles and Other Contributions by an authorized administrator of CUA Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact edinger@law.edu.
RELIGIOUS APPROACHES TO DEATH AND DYING:  
THE JEWISH APPROACH

BENJAMIN W. MINTZ*

I begin with a prayer from the Siddur, the Jewish prayer book:

Oh my God! The soul which you placed within me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me, and You preserve it within me. You will one day take it from me, but will restore it to me in the hereafter. So long as the soul is within me, I will give thanks to you, O Lord, my God and God of my fathers. Master of all works, Lord of all souls, blessed are You, the Lord, Who restoreth the souls to the dead.1

This prayer is part of the Jewish daily morning service. It appears, almost verbatim, in the Talmud2, and thus goes back almost 2000 years. The prayer constitutes a succinct statement of the Jewish approach to life and death.

We are given life by God and we treasure every moment of life. Inevitably, death will come, and our lives will end. We can never know when that event will take place. We believe that we will have some kind of existence in olam haba, the world to come, but the precise nature of that existence is not revealed to us. This is the essence of the prayer that traditional Jews recite each morning.

Judaism is a religion that celebrates life. It is not a coincidence that one of the most popular phrases from Yiddish and Hebrew that has entered into the English language is Le'Chayim, “to life.” This idea is carried forth in many prayers. For example, during the Days of Awe, the High Holidays, the following is said throughout the service:

Remember us for life, O King who desires life, and inscribe us in the book of Life, for your sake, O Living God.3

* Professor of Law, Columbus School of Law, Catholic University of America.
1 The prayer, of course, is in Hebrew. This translation, as well as other translations of prayers in this article are, unless indicated, taken from The Authorized Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (London: Kuperard, an imprint of Bravo Ltd., 1998) (hereafter referred to as Prayer Book). The translation is by Rev. S. Singer and Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits. This prayer appears in Prayer Book, 16.
2 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot (Blessings), 60b. (London: The Soncino Press, 1948). All references to the Talmud are to the Babylonian Talmud.
3 Prayer Book, 76, italics added.
At the same time, the Jewish tradition does not flinch from the reality of death. The rabbis instruct us to repent one day before we die. But, it is asked, how do we know what that day will be? Therefore, we are told, one should be penitent throughout our lives. “Readiness is all,” says Hamlet.

Geoffrey Gorer, a British anthropologist, wrote a book in the late 1960’s called Death, Grief, and Mourning. He observed that in Britain, talking about death and mourning was at that time like talking about sex in polite society—one just doesn’t do it.

This attitude has certainly changed in the last thirty-five years, in Britain and elsewhere. Today, we seem to be reading about death in the media all the time. But reluctance to face death was never true in the Jewish tradition. This realism about death derives from the Bible itself. Jacob tells Joseph that he is approaching death, and then gives Joseph specific instructions to bury him with his ancestors in Hebron. The Jewish medieval codes of law contain detailed rules on individual conduct during final illness, on dying, on burial, and on mourning.

A very popular book in the Jewish religious tradition which has been reprinted numerous times is called Crossing the Jabbok. It contains many prayers and petitions connected with death and dying. The allusion in the title is to the River Jabbok mentioned in the Book of Genesis. It is there that Jacob, after crossing the river, wrestled with an angel until dawn and was given the name “Israel.” The metaphor is that each of us, in death, must cross the river separating this world from the next, and there, struggle with the angel in order to gain our eternal life.

In talking about the Jewish approach to death and dying, I intend to underscore three major topics: First, the practices that are followed in the

---

4 Mishna, Tractate Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:15: Prayer Book, 487.
5 William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act V, scene 2, line 223.
7 Genesis 49, 29: “I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, touching Mamre, in the land of Canaan…” All translations from the Hebrew Bible are from JPS, Hebrew-English Tanakh (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999).
8 The book, in Hebrew, Ma’avar Yabok, has not, to my knowledge, been translated into English. However, a recent study discusses the book at length. See Sylvie-Anne Goldberg, Crossing the Jabbok (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). The author of Ma’avar Yabok is Aaron Berachia of Modena, Italy. The book was published in the seventeenth century.
9 Genesis 32, 23–33.
Jewish community. What behavior is prescribed for the end-of-life cycle—illness, dying, death, burial? In this area the halacha—the rules of Jewish law—will be paramount. And, we must also consider customary practices, how members of the Jewish community conduct themselves, the traditions that are consistent with, but go beyond, the halakah.

Second, I will talk of the religious beliefs that provide a framework for these practices. Since formal theology plays a lesser role in Jewish life, we will have to seek these ideas indirectly—for example, as we have just seen, through the liturgy. Sometimes, even a Hebrew word, or a group of words, traditionally used may reveal important ideas. For example, when a person hears of someone’s death, the prescribed form of reaction is to say Baruch Dayan Emet—Blessed is the Righteous Judge. The idea—blessing God in the circumstances on hearing of death—goes back to the Book of Job. “Should we accept only good from God and not accept evil?” Job asks his wife after he receives the news of his children’s death and is stricken with disease.

Finally, as a third major topic, we must look to the structures of the Jewish community that are designed to make the prescribed practices a reality. Society needs institutions to encourage and organize individual behavior. An important example in Jewish life, one which we will discuss today, are the Chevra Kadisha groups—the Holy Societies comprising volunteers from the community—charged with the primary responsibility of caring for the body of the deceased, making burial arrangements, and arranging for the needs of the bereaved family.

The Chevra Kadisha groups are currently functioning in many communities, and under various names. I recently saw a document containing the rules of a Chevra Kadisha group in Minneapolis—it is called Chevra Kavod Hamet—The Society to Give Honor to the Dead—whose purpose is to assist members of the congregation to arrange for a traditional Jewish funeral.

---

10 The Hebrew word halachah derives from the verb halach, meaning, to walk. In other words, the halachah is guidance on the way a person should “go,” that is, how he or she should conduct himself or herself.
11 Prayer Book, 752. The Prayer Book translates the Hebrew phrase as the “true judge.” The Hebrew word, emet, literally means “truth.”
12 Job 2, 10. The Talmud states that a person is required to bless God both on hearing good news and on hearing bad news. Tractate Berachot (Blessings), 54a.
13 This Chevra Kadisha is attached to Adat Jeshurun Congregation, Minneapolis, Minnesota. I thank Mrs. Marcia Goldberg for bringing this material to my attention.
Moses ben Nachman, a thirteenth century Bible commentator and codifier in Spain, wrote a historic book on Jewish religious practice. He called it *Torat Haadam*. I have difficulty translating the words; in effect they mean “Laws Relating to Life and Death.” In this work, Ramban—that’s the popular acrostic of his name—says that a person should always pray that he or she should not become ill, but if illness occurs, then all members of the community become obligated to fulfill the positive commandment—the *mitzvah*—of *Bikur Cholim*. These words are usually translated “visiting the sick,” but they mean more than that. This obligation includes taking care of all the sick person’s needs: medical attention, food, psychological reassurance, even cleaning his or her house, whatever the situation demands.

The obligation of *Bikur Cholim* is derived in the Talmud from biblical verses. The Talmud says, “Rabbi Hamah, the son of Rabbi Haninah, asked: ‘What is the meaning of the biblical verse: Follow none but Lord your God. How does one follow God?’ He answers; ‘It means that you should follow God by emulating His virtues. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick. So too, you shall visit the sick.’” We know that God visited the sick because He, through His angels, visited Abraham when he was recovering from his indisposition following his circumcision. And the Talmud goes on, “The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners so you shall comfort mourners. The Holy One, blessed be He, buried the dead, so you, too, shall bury the dead.”

What are the rules governing *Bikur Cholim*? They are stated in the great code of Jewish law, the *Shulchan Arukh*, translated, “the Prepared

---

14 On Moses ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides, see, generally 12 Encyclopedia Judaica 774–782 (“Nahmanides”). His biblical commentary and his works on Jewish law are studied to the present day.

15 This work has not been translated to English.

16 These laws are discussed in detail in the various codes of Jewish law, many of which have not been translated. A useful summary of Jewish law in this is in Chaim Binyamin Goldberg, *Mourning in Halachah, the Law and Customs of the Year of Mourning*. (New York: Art Scroll Publications, 1991). On visiting the sick, see *Mourning in Halachah*, 21–33.

17 Talmud, Translate *Sotah* (Unfaithful Wife), 14a. The biblical verse on which this interpretation is based is Deuteronomy 13, 5.

18 The story of Abraham’s circumcision appears in Genesis 17, 23–27. Immediately following Genesis 18, 1–5, Abraham is visited by the angels. See, Talmud, *Tractate Baba Mezia* (“Middle Gate”), 86b.

19 Based on biblical texts, the rabbis infer that God comforted Isaac after the death of Abraham. God buried Moses. See Deuteronomy, 33, 6.
These regulations cover many details: even a prominent person must visit a humble person who is sick; there are preferred times of the day for visiting; there are regulations on where the visitor should sit and what he should say. There’s a difference of opinion on whether an enemy should visit a sick person. On the one hand, the sick person may think that the enemy is rejoicing at his misfortune and therefore the visit is inappropriate; on the other hand, the visit may lead to reconciliation. Technology must also be taken into consideration. Can one fulfill the mitzvah by telephone? Yes, if there’s no other way. What about E-mail? The answer to this question is surely forthcoming.

There is yet another fundamental obligation in relation to the sick. One must pray for the sick person. Special prayers have been devised for this purpose. In the daily prayer book there is a generalized petition for the sick: “Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed.” These words trace back to the prophet Jeremiah, except that in the Book of Jeremiah, the prayer is for the individual, “Heal me,” but in the daily liturgy, we pray for the healing of the entire community.

This same idea, that an individual’s illness affects the entire community, is reflected in the special prayer for the healing of a specific individual. We ask God to send a complete recovery to such-and-such named person, among “all the sick persons in Israel.” The rabbis explain that we include the sick person among others who are sick so that the prayer will be heard by virtue of the merit of the entire community.

20 Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah, Sec. 335. The author of the Shulchan Arukh is Rabbi Joseph Caro, who lived in the Ottoman Empire and Palestine in the sixteenth century. The Shulchan Arukh, only a small portion of which has been translated, remains the preeminent work on Jewish law to this day. The work is discussed in Isadore Twersky, “The Shulhan Arukh: Enduring Code of Jewish Law,” Judaism 26 (1967) 141–158.


22 Prayer Book, 80.

23 Jeremiah 17, 14: “Heal me, O Lord, and let me be healed: save me and let me be saved; For You are my Glory.”


25 Talmud, Tractate Shabbat (Sabbath), 12b, and explanation by Rashi (“because the ill person is included with other sick persons, the merit of the others will lead to the hearing of this person’s prayers”).
In fourteenth century Spain, the Jewish community organized societies to institutionalize the caring for the sick. The first one we know of was in Saragossa, Spain. Others followed in Italy, and eventually, by the sixteenth century, they existed in the rest of Europe, particularly Galicia and Russia. These were called *Bikur Cholim* Societies and these societies arranged for visiting of the sick and also for medical care in the broadest sense, providing nurses, midwives, hospital attendants, and drugs. These societies were organizations supported by the entire community and comprising individuals who volunteered to perform their religious obligations. It is, by the way, improper to take payment for performing a *mitzvah*, a religious obligation. This tradition goes back to Moses in the Bible.

These societies continue to operate to the present day. When I visit New York, I attend the Lincoln Square Synagogue—my son is the rabbi—and there an announcement is made at each Saturday morning service that a group of worshipers will meet in the afternoon to go to the nearby Roosevelt Hospital to visit the sick. A few days ago I came upon an announcement in the circular by the Washington Jewish Healing Network inviting the public to a “spiritual support group” to “explore theological, spiritual, psychological, and personal issues through the study of Jewish texts relating to illness.”

We pray for health, but we note only too well that sometimes the illness becomes more critical. Although we spend much of our lives preparing for death, when it finally comes, death is a frightening and lonely experience. The Jewish tradition mandates that every step be taken to strengthen the ill person for that ordeal, and that special care be taken so as to avoid in any way adding to his or her fears or demoralizing the ill person. For example, a specific law prohibits informing a seriously ill person of the fact that a member of his or her family has died, for fear that the news would cause mental breakdown.

---

26 See, generally, 14 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1498–1499 (“Communal Sick Care”).
27 Deuteronomy 4, 5: Moses says to the Jewish people, “See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me,” And the Talmud interprets this to mean that Moses is saying that just as Moses taught the Jewish people without payment, so they must teach others, a *mitzvah*, without payment. Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate *Nedarim* (Pledges), Ch. 4. Law 3.
28 *Mourning in Halachah*, 30–31, citing *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah*, Sec. 337. Ordinarily, it is required that a person be informed of a relative’s death so that appropriate mourning rituals may be followed.
If death is approaching, the critically sick person is encouraged to say a prayer called Vidui. The word Vidui is traditionally translated as "confession," but the prayer is, strictly speaking, not a confession. It is more a last statement of belief. In urging the seriously ill person to say the Vidui, he is told, so as not to distress him, that many ill persons say the Vidui and live, and many do not and nonetheless die; and that in the special merit of a person having said the Vidui, God will have mercy.  

The text of the Vidui is translated as follows:

I acknowledge before you, O Lord and God of my fathers, that my cure and my death are in your hands. May it be your will to send me a complete healing; yet, if my death is fully determined by you, I will in love accept it as your hand. May my death be an atonement for all the sins, inequities, and transgressions which I have committed before you. Grant me of the great happiness that is stored up for the righteous. Make known to me the path of life. In your presence is fullness of joy. At your right hand, bliss forevermore. O Father of the fatherless, defender of the widow, protect my dear family with whose soul my own soul is bound up. Into your hands I commend my spirit. You will redeem me, O Lord, God of truth. Amen, Amen.  

The Vidui prayer contains basic beliefs of Judaism. Our lives are in God’s hands. We pray for health; we must be prepared to accept death. If death comes, we hope for a portion in olam haba, and we are concerned about the welfare of our families, after we depart.

The last verse of the Vidui, “into your hand I commend my soul,” is a quote from the Book of Psalms. But the statement is more familiar. It is also part of the popular hymn called Adom Olam, Lord of the Universe, that is sung by the congregation—adults, children, everyone sings it—at the conclusion of the Sabbath morning service. And it’s also part of the daily service. The hymn goes this way:

---

29 The laws of Vidui are summarized in Mourning in Halachah, 34–40.
30 Prayer Book, 811. There are other versions of the Vidui, some much lengthier than the one quoted in the text. See Mourning in Halachah, 37–39. There is also a shorter version for exigent circumstances.
31 Psalms 31, 6: “Into your hand I entrust my spirit, You redeem me, O Lord, faithful God.”
Into your hands I commend my soul,  
When I am asleep and awake,  
And with my soul my body too,  
God is with me, I will not fear.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus, the same prayer that one says in the final moments of life is a familiar prayer that is part of our daily lives. We live our lives with the full realization of the reality of death. On \textit{Yom Kippur}, the Day of Atonement, a person wears the \textit{kittel}, the white robe which is similar to the burial shroud. On the holiest day of judgement, Yom Kippur, we think of the day of death.\textsuperscript{33}

There is a special obligation for others to remain by the side of a dying person so that his soul shall not depart while he is alone. Indeed, once a person dies, it is traditional for there to be a \textit{shomer}, a person to watch over the body of the deceased, continuously, until the burial takes place.\textsuperscript{34}

Those who witness a death are mandated to rend, to tear, one of their outer garments near the heart. This is called \textit{Kriah}. Family members are so mandated whenever they hear of the death. The symbolism is clear: death is a tear in the fabric of existence. A garment is not the same after being torn; so, we are not the same after the death of one close to us. After the mourning period, the garment can be sewn, except that the members of the family must sew the garment in an irregular fashion. It is not possible for life to be neat and proper, as might have been before.\textsuperscript{35}

Upon death, the critical considerations in the Jewish tradition are respecting the dignity of the dead person and concern for the bereaved. An entire network of rules comes into play with respect to the treatment of the dead person. In other articles in this issue Rabbi Freundel addresses those rules and Mr. Wachtel deals with the history of the \textit{Chevra Kaddisha}—the Holy Societies—and their role in assuring that the dead person will be treated with respect and dignity.

I will make only a few additional comments. The Jewish tradition accords a high place to conduct called \textit{G'milut Hasadim}—acts of loving

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Prayer Book}, 9–12.
\textsuperscript{33} The \textit{kittel} is a white garment worn during the prayer on the High Holidays. See, 10 \textit{Encyclopedia Judaica} 1079 ("kittel"). It is also prescribed as the garment to be placed on the deceased person. Jack Riemer, "Introduction" in \textit{Jewish Reflections on Death}, 9.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Mourning in Halacha}, 55. The author quotes from \textit{Ma'avar Yabok}: "We have cautioned those who watch over the deceased to be careful not to engage in \textit{lashon hara} (slander) arguing, fighting... and they should keep conversation to a minimum... ."
\textsuperscript{35} The laws of K'riah are summarized in \textit{Mourning in Halacha}, 83–102.
kindness. In serving a deceased person and in assisting his or her family, special merit is ascribed. This is called chesed shel emet; again, it is hard to translate; but it means “disinterested kindness.” For, after all, a person who acts generously at death has no expectation of any repayment from the deceased. This concept is derived from the Book of Genesis, where Jacob instructs his son Joseph about Jacob’s burial; in these biblical verses Jacob makes the request with these very words: perform for me, he says, chesed ve’emet chesed—kindness—and emet—disinterested.

The funeral service is called L’vaya, literally, “accompaniment.” We are obligated to accompany the deceased to burial. Even after death we do not want the deceased to be alone. The obligation to attend the funeral procession falls on everyone. The Talmud says that one who sees a funeral and does not join violates the injunction, stated in the Book of Proverbs, against mocking the powerless; for who is more powerless than a dead person.

Yaffa Eliach has written about the shtetl—the town in Poland—where her family lived before the town was destroyed and its population murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. She describes the preparations for the L’vaya, the funeral, with these words:

Prior to the funeral, the Chevra Kadisha representatives appeared at the marketplace, the synagogue courtyard, and on all major streets to make the announcement, “Jews go to the funeral.” For the duration of the funeral, all the shops in the shtetl were shut down, all businesses were suspended, all the schools were closed. Everyone joined the funeral procession as it passed their home, shop, or school, with the exception of the Kohanim, who are prohibited from doing so.

---

36 Genesis 47, 29. The Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew Bible supra, n. 7 translates the phrase as “steadfast loyalty.”
37 The rules regarding the conduct of the L’vaya, the funeral, are summarized in Mourning in Halachah, 123–147. The use of the word “accompaniment” in describing the obligation of participation in the funeral service was originally stated in the Mishna, Tractate Peah, 1:1, as one of the acts of kindness required of an individual. See, infra, n. 40, and accompanying text.
38 Talmud, Tractate Berochot (Blessings), 18a. The Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah, sec. 361. The rule against mocking the unfortunate derives from Proverbs 17, 5: “He who mocks the poor, affronts his Maker.”
39 Yaffa Eliach, There Once was a World, A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok, 245–250, 246–247.
The technology now is more advanced, but the goal is the same. In our large cities, where a synagogue may have hundreds of members, telephone and E-mail messages are promptly dispatched to inform members of the congregation of a death, the time and place of the funeral, and where the family mourning will take place.

The importance of participating in the L'vaya goes back to the Mishna, the earliest layer of the Talmudic literature. It is said that a person who participates in a funeral enjoys the fruits of his or her conduct—the practical rewards of kindness and generosity—in this world, but that the ultimate reward, literally, the principle, the keren in Hebrew, is reserved in the world to come. Participation in the funeral is similar in this respect to such other acts of kindness as hospitality for strangers, visiting the sick, and reconciling those who are hostile with one another.  

The Talmud addresses itself to the way an individual is to be buried. The central ideas are simplicity and equality. Here are the words of the Talmud:

Formerly, they used to bring out the deceased for burial, the rich on a tall bed ornamented with rich covers, the poor in a plain box, and the poor felt ashamed. Therefore, a law was passed that all should be brought out in a plain box in deference to the poor... Formerly the expense of burying the dead was harder for a family to bear than the death itself, so that sometimes family members abandoned the deceased and fled to escape the expense. This was so until Rabbon Gamliel, disregarding his own dignity, ordered that he be buried in a plain linen shroud instead of expensive garments. Said R. Papa, since then, people have buried their dead in a simple shroud worth very little.

The excerpt emphasizes equality. The Mishna—Ethics of the Fathers—emphasizes simplicity. It says:

At a person’s departure from this world, neither silver nor precious stone, nor pearls accompany him—only his Torah study and his good deeds.

---

40 The Mishna is in Tractate Peah, 1:1. It is recited in the daily prayers and is quoted in Prayer Book, 13–16.
41 Talmud, Tractate Mo’ed Katan (“Minor Festival”), 27a and 27b.
42 Mishna, Tractate Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), 6:9. The statement is based on the text of Proverbs 6:22: “When you walk, it [Torah teaching] will lead you; when you lie down, it will watch over you; and when you are awake, it will talk to you.”
The rules governing the period of mourning are among the most extensive in the Jewish codes. The Shiva is seven days: when does it start; when does it end? Where does the mourner sit? What does the visitor say? Page after page of detailed rules are contained in the books of rules on mourning. Rabbi Jack Riemer, who has written extensively on death and mourning, remarked: this system of law "gives form and order and structure to our grief and keeps it from becoming wild or shapeless or uncontrolled."

If I had any doubt about the wisdom of the legal form which the Jewish rules of mourning articulated—and I did not—, they were dissipated when I read recently the United States Congress enacted in 1996 an Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act, mandating that government agencies and air carriers take specific actions in order to assist families of individuals involved in aircraft accidents in bearing the burden of death. Detailed requirements on notification, providing transportation and support services, are imposed in legal terms. We know that the reason these laws were articulated in such detail was the chaos that existed before. This is the purpose of the Jewish legal codes.

The basic obligation of the community is to visit the mourners who remain at home for the week of Shiva. The mourners may not work; they do not shave or take haircuts; they sit on low stools; no shoes are worn. There are other indicia of mourning. In visiting mourners, we emulate God. The Hebrew word for visiting mourners is Nichum Avelim, often translated as "comforting" the mourner; the word Nichum has the further meaning of reconciliation—we seek to reconcile the mourner to the fact of death.

There is a traditional greeting for the mourner: "May the Almighty comfort you among the other mourners for Zion and Jerusalem." Once again, the prayer is both an individual prayer and a community prayer. The mourner is one among many mourners. The community of mourners

---

43 There are numerous books in English that present the numerous laws regarding mourning. See, for example, Mourning in Halacha, supra.; Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning. (New York; Jonathan David 1969).
45 49 United States Code, Secs. 1113 and 41, 113.
46 The laws of Nichum Avelim are summarized in Mourning in Halacha, 192–196. Visiting mourners is one of the acts of kindness for which a person is rewarded both in this world and in the world to come. See supra, n. 40.
47 This greeting is also said to the mourner during the Friday evening service in the synagogue during the Shiva period. The text appears in Prayer Book, 233–234.
goes back in history and includes the national mourning for the destruction of Zion and Jerusalem. This is a measure of comfort.

The mourning period has three stages: the first period, from news of the death to burial, is called Aninut. During that time, the individual is freed from any religious obligations, such as praying. The second period—when the bereaved individual begins to resume contact with society—is the Shiva period, the seven days of mourning. The mourners remain at home and are visited by members of the community. Daily prayers are recited in the home, usually led by the mourners, and specially selected portions of the Talmud, dealing with subjects related to the end of life, are studied. The final stages of mourning are the shloshim, a thirty-day period, and an eleven-month period during which Kaddish is recited.48

The Kaddish prayer has often elicited surprise. While it is typically said by mourners, it does not mention death or the deceased. The prayer, the Kaddish, sanctifies and magnifies God’s name. Why this prayer and what is its purpose? Recently a fascinating scholarly book on the Kaddish was published. The name of the book, not surprisingly, is Kaddish, written by Leon Wieseltier, an editor of The New Republic. Mr. Wieseltier had just completed saying Kaddish for his father. Wieseltier brings scores of explanations on the meaning of Kaddish. The one that appeals to him most is by a scholar—Wieseltier could not identify him specifically—named Obadiah. And here’s the explanation:

This Kaddish is not a prayer that the son prays for his father, that God should raise him from the lower depths. Rather, it is an ascription of merit to the father that the father fulfilled his duty and that one of his descendants will sanctify the great and exalted and awesome God before the entire congregation.49

In Obadiah’s view, says Leon Wieseltier, the Kaddish is not a prayer for something; it is proof of something. The son does not request that his father be granted a good destiny. The son demonstrates why his father deserves to be granted a good destiny. The son is not the advocate, the son is the proof.

48 The stages of mourning under Jewish law are discussed in Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Halakhah of the First Day," in Jewish Reflections on Death, 76–83.
The time has come for me to try to tie some of these ideas together. Rabbi Jack Riemer underscores the importance of community in describing how the Jewish religion responds to death.\textsuperscript{50} The community, he says, operates both horizontally and vertically. First, the community helps the ill person take care of the deceased, consoles the mourners. In other words, it makes sure that current needs are taken care of. For what would be more frightening and traumatic than a person facing the tragedy of death alone?

And the community also works through history, that is, vertically. The traditions and customs surrounding death are old, even ancient. When a rabbi or family member delivers a eulogy for a deceased at a funeral, and there is an obligation that this be done, he or she is continuing a tradition that began when Abraham mourned for his wife Sarah\textsuperscript{51} and which reached a high point in King David's moving lament for Saul and Jonathan in the Book of Samuel.\textsuperscript{52} When we erect a monument at the grave of a deceased, we do what Jacob did, when he erected a monument for his wife Rachel “until this day.”\textsuperscript{53} The practices of visiting the sick and accompanying the dead, and consoling mourners, all go back to the Hebrew Bible. The Biblical phrase for dying is “to be gathered to one’s people.”\textsuperscript{54} One becomes part of history when one dies. We die as Abraham and Jacob and Moses died. One is linked through the Jewish death and mourning practices with those who came before and, yes, with those who are yet to come.

I’d like to close with a simple story. It’s about a famous Jewish rabbi and scholar whose nickname was \textit{Chofetz Chaim}\textsuperscript{55}—One Who Wants Life; the phrase comes from the Book of Psalms.\textsuperscript{56} He lived in Poland, at


\textsuperscript{51} Genesis 23, 2.

\textsuperscript{52} 2 Samuel 1, 17–27: “Saul and Jonathan, beloved and cherished, never parted in life and death! They were swifter than eagles. They were stronger than lions.”

\textsuperscript{53} Genesis 35, 20. There still stands, near Bethlehem, a monument which supposedly marks the burial place of Rachel. However, this monument was erected in modern times and it is not known whether it is over the actual burial site. 13 \textit{Encyclopedia Judaica} 1490 (“Tomb of Rachel”).

\textsuperscript{54} Genesis 49, 33 (death of Jacob).

\textsuperscript{55} The actual name of the \textit{Chofetz Chaim} is Israel Meir Ha-Kohen Kagan. See, generally, 9 \textit{Encyclopedia Judaica} 1067–1010 (“Israel Meir Ha-Kohen”). The \textit{Chofetz Chaim} lived from 1838 to 1933 in Eastern Europe.

\textsuperscript{56} Psalms, 34, 13–14: “Who is the man who is eager for life ["Chofetz Chaim"], who deserves years of good fortune. Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech.” The \textit{Chofetz Chaim} is best known today through his work, \textit{Mishna Berurah}, a legal code and his work, \textit{Shmirat Lashon}, which deals with defamatory talk.
the end of the nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth
century, in a town, shtetl, not far from Yaffa Eliach’s shtetl that we spoke
about. And the story goes like this:

A tourist came to visit the Chofetz Chaim. The tourist looked
around the Chofetz Chaim’s room and saw a simple table, a desk,
a bookcase, a bed, and a chair. He asked the rabbi, “Where are
your possessions?”

The rabbi answered him, “Where are your possessions?”

“What do you mean,” the tourist asks, “‘where are my pos-
sessions?’ I am just a visitor here.”

“So am I,” said the Rabbi.

So are we all, so are we all, visitors. May we all have a happy, healthy,
and long visit.