CHAPTER SEVEN

SHIVA: THE SEVEN DAYS

SHIVA, BASED ON THE HEBREW WORD FOR SEVEN (*SHEVA*) is a protected island in time for the bereaved. It begins immediately after the funeral and is a seven-day period of withdrawal from the world to foster the difficult but healing work of grief.

The phrase "sitting *shiva*" probably derives from the custom of sitting low to the ground during the intense period of mourning after the funeral. Mourners do not sit still for seven days; they move around the house, stand, sit at the table to eat, lie down to sleep. And yet, the image of sitting during *shiva*—of motionlessness—is an apt metaphor for what happens over the course of this week. During *shiva,* mourners *sit with* their grief, remembering, weeping, dreaming, telling stories, sharing memories. Although it may be a quiet time, sitting *shiva* is not passive.

During the week, mourners are exempt from all the requirements of daily life and restricted from its pleasures, too. The bereaved do not work or play, call the office or wash dishes, watch TV or go to the gym. *Shiva* is for one thing only, and that

is exploring the emotional catalog of grief: sorrow, emptiness, regret, relief, guilt, anger, shame, self-pity, remorse.

Every *shiva* is difficult in its own way. Sometimes the bitterness of loss is tempered by the sweetness of memory; when death follows a long, productive life, reflecting upon the past can be a source of tangible blessings. But there are other times when *shiva* is little more than a blind cave; a child dies or a husband is killed and the agony is breathtaking. And sometimes *shiva* feels razor-edged; how does one grieve for an abusive parent, an estranged sibling, an unreconciled child?

Whatever the details, the weight of grief can be overwhelming. Thus, *shiva* supplies communal support, morning and evening, day in and day out. The presence of family members, friends, and neighbors makes the burden more bearable.

Shiva works best when mourners understand the hows and whys of the ritual, and when the bereaved are members of a community that knows how to care for them. Which is why some liberal Jews forgo *shiva.*

The weeklong ritual raises a host of choices about how to be Jewish and how Jewish to be. Should we cover the mirrors? Do we really want a lot of people in the house after Mom's death? How many days should we sit? We don't belong to a temple, so, since none of us read Hebrew, who would lead services? How can I be comforted when all my friends live thousands of miles from where the rest of my family is sitting *shiva*?

The following pages describe the full complement of *shiva* customs. American Jews tend to choose from among the traditions based on what they find meaningful and practicable: for example, covering mirrors but wearing shoes in the house, or holding *shiva minyans* on three evenings rather than morning

and evening all week. The key is to remember the purpose of *shiva*—which is to permit grieving to begin.

WHO SITS *SHIVA*: Jewish law requires that the immediate family spend this week in formal mourning. This includes adult children, parents, siblings, and spouses only. However, other relatives and friends sometimes join for some or all of its observance.

COUNTING THE DAYS: Seven is a mystical number in most religious traditions. In the biblical account of creation, the world was created in seven days and in a sense begins again every seven days. Every human death diminishes the world by the same measure. The Jewish custom of mourning for seven days is based on the verse in Genesis where Joseph mourns his father Jacob for a week.[1]

Though seven days may sound like a long time to "sit," in practice the seven are more like five because fractions of days are considered full days. Thus, the day of the funeral is counted as the first day of *shiva,* even if the burial occurred in the afternoon. Likewise, *shiva* ends on the morning of the seventh day—traditionally, right after *shacharit,* the morning prayer service.

Jewish tradition acknowledges the difference between the first three days of *shiva,* when grief tends to be overwhelming, and the remainder of the week, as mourners begin to face the future.[2] When people make a conscious decision to shorten their observance of *shiva,* it is usually to three days.

There are many reasons why people shorten *shiva.* Parents with young or school-aged children may need to attend to their families, especially if *shiva* is held out of town. If the death followed a long illness, weeks or months of anticipatory grief can make seven days feel excessive. Some professional obligations

cannot be put off, especially if other people's needs are at risk. The rabbis understood this when they exempted physicians whose patients might suffer from their absence. But they also advised that mourners try to find substitutes and/or postpone leaving until after the third day at least. (In contemporary practice, this might mean going into the office for a few hours on the fourth or fifth day only for as long as it takes to clear up pressing business.)

Rabbis, bereavement counselors, and experienced mourners all counsel against shortening *shiva.* The first days give family members time to cry and share their feelings. As the week wears on, it becomes more appropriate to talk about realities such as when to go through the house or apartment, or when to read the will.

WHAT *SHIVA* LOOKS LIKE: *Shiva* is traditionally observed either in the home of the deceased or in the home of a principal mourner. If possible, mourners spend the whole week in the *shiva* house together, sleeping under the same roof. Where this is not practical, mourners share their waking hours.

Just as *shiva* transforms how mourners pass time, it also changes the look and use of space.

- Sitting low to the ground—on the floor, on cushions, or special benches provided by the funeral home—is an outward sign of being struck down by grief. (Visitors sit on regular chairs and couches.)
- The practice of covering the mirrors began centuries ago and was based on a belief that spirits were attracted to mirrors. Some people thought that the soul could be trapped in the reflection, or that the dead person's spirit lingered on earth for a time and might reach out from

"the other side." The rabbis reinterpreted the folk custom, declaring that mirrors should be covered to discourage vanity and encourage inner reflection. Regardless of its symbolism, covering mirrors is a striking visual cue, a token of the disruption and grief felt by everyone who enters the house.

- Doors are left unlocked so that visitors can enter without knocking or ringing the doorbell, which would distract the mourners from their grief and cause them to act as hosts.
- A condolence book (often provided by the funeral home) may be set out in a prominent spot. This can be a useful record if family members wish to write thank-you notes to visitors. Condolence books and thank-you notes are American secular and Christian customs that have been adopted by many Jews. Though traditionally one would never thank someone (or expect to be thanked) for fulfilling a *mitzvah* as profound as honoring the dead or comforting the bereaved, many people find that writing to visitors and answering sympathy cards are part of the healing process.
- Other common objects in a *shiva* home include a seven-day memorial candle, and prayer books for *minyan* services. Jewish funeral homes or your synagogue will generally provide these in a *shiva* "kit" that might also include low benches or chairs, folding chairs for guests, and *yarmulkes.*

BEGINNING: *Shiva* starts when the mourners return home from the funeral. The rituals are elemental, and for the most part, wordless.

- Shoes: Mourners remove their shoes and refrain from wearing leather shoes—an ancient sign of luxury—while in the *shiva* house. Wearing cloth slippers, socks, or going barefoot is a sign of being humbled by loss.
- Water: A basin of water and a towel may be left outside the door for people to wash their hands, a ritual gesture that separates the *mitzvah* of honoring the dead from the *mitzvah* of comforting the bereaved. (This is usually done at the cemetery, as described in Chapter 5.)
- Light: It is customary to light a large *shiva* candle, also called a *ner daluk*—burning light—which burns for seven days and nights. Candles are universal symbols of the divine spark that inhabits the body. In the words of the Bible, "The soul is the lamp of God."[3] The candle is placed in a prominent spot and lit without saying a blessing. The immediate family might gather and designate someone to light the flame; this honor can go to a child, close friend, or other "unofficial" mourner. The funeral home provides a long-burning candle or a special electric light that stays lit throughout *shiva.*
- Food: Serving a meal to mourners upon their return from the cemetery is a tangible act of condolence. Although the bereaved tend to be uninterested in eating, friends provide nourishment to signal that life must go on.

In the *Shulchan Aruch,* a sixteenth-century guide to Jewish law, Rabbi Joseph Karo wrote, "The first meal eaten by the mourner after the funeral is called *seudat havra'ah,* the meal of recuperation. At this meal, the mourner is forbidden to eat of his own food. It is a *mitzvah* for friends and neighbors to bring him

food. The custom is to include round cakes or eggs in the meal of recuperation."[4]

Rabbi Karo's suggested menu of round foods recalls the cyclical nature of life, thus lentil dishes are traditional. Bread, the most elemental of foods, is always served. The meal is usually nonmeat, or *milchig* (dairy). It may be provided and served by a synagogue bereavement committee, or by friends and neighbors.

The meal usually begins with the blessing over bread, the *motzi.*

It is customary for people who attend the funeral and burial to return to the *shiva* house and share this meal with the bereaved. At some point during the funeral, the rabbi will announce, "You are all invited back to the Cohen home for the *seudat havra'ah,* the meal of consolation."

This is usually the largest gathering in the *shiva* house, and many mourners are deeply moved and comforted by the presence of many people. Sometimes, however, the *seudat havra'ah* can get out of hand. Too many people standing around eating and making small talk can turn it into a kind of Jewish wake. The mood and tone of *shiva* should be subdued—especially during the first hours. In some communities, guests serve the mourners and then leave them alone to eat.

If the funeral is very large and/or the family wishes a more intimate gathering, mourners can limit the size of the *seudat havra'ah* by personally inviting only a small group of close friends and asking the rabbi to make a different kind of announcement during the funeral. For example, "The family will be sitting *shiva* until Wednesday and invites you to come by anytime after tonight." Or "Visitation will be from six to nine P.M. Tuesday and Thursday."

During the rest of *shiva,* friends, neighbors, and synagogue bereavement committees continue to bring food and set up refreshments after services. Whether or not the family observes the Jewish dietary laws, it's best to prepare vegetarian or dairy dishes, or have meals delivered by a kosher restaurant or caterer; that way, family members and friends who do keep kosher will be able to eat.

Bereaved families often receive far more food than they can use or freeze, and it is a good idea to call before bringing yet another casserole or plate of brownies. Friends and neighbors can help dispose of any surplus by taking food to a local soup kitchen. The seemingly elemental urge to feed mourners can be turned into an act of charity honor by making a donation to a local food pantry or to Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger.[5]

HOW TO SIT *SHIVA*: After the rush of preparing for the funeral, the catharsis of the burial, and the communal outpouring of the *seudat havra'ah,* the rest of *shiva* can seem like a dark, lonely tunnel.

Jewish law is very specific about the prohibitions given to mourners. The bereaved do not cook, or run errands, or attend school. They do not wear makeup or shave. Mourners abstain from pleasures of all kinds: sensual, sexual, or even intellectual. Mourners are not supposed to read the Torah, which is considered one of life's great joys. Distractions are not permitted: so no television, card-playing, shopping, or computer games.[6]

This kind of self-denial is usually explained as an aide to grieving. However, there may well be a penitential aspect to some of the prohibitions and customs. Regardless of how much the deceased was loved and how complete the reconciliation at

the time of death, mourners may be feeling anger, relief, or regret as well as sadness; for these, the relatively modest privations of *shiva* make a kind of restitution.

But *shiva* is more than a list of don'ts. There are many ways to "sit with" grief:

Remember: *Shiva* is, above all, a time for reminiscence. Telling and trading stories about the deceased is one of the primary activities of the week. At first, the stories may focus on the final illness, death, and the funeral. As the days pass, the story usually shifts to earlier, healthier memories of the loved one. Favorite anecdotes will be repeated, long-forgotten memories will be recalled. Family members compare different versions of the same story, which will be repeated for visitors, over and over again. Displaying albums or photographs of the deceased is a good way to elicit questions from visitors, who may or may not have known him. Inevitably, someone will say, "If only Dad were here; he would have loved seeing us all together like this!"

No emotions are out of bounds during *shiva.* Some anecdotes may bring on tears, but others will generate laughter. There is nothing wrong or inappropriate about laughing in a house of mourning. It is part of how mourners reclaim the memory of the whole person who died—including his sense of humor, her favorite jokes. Laughter can be part of the bereaved's ongoing relationship with the deceased.

Reminiscing and condolence also takes place on the phone and through e-mail, especially for people sitting *shiva* far from their own homes.

Friends and neighbors come and go, providing mourners with opportunities to remember and tell stories. But inevitably, there will be hours when nobody comes by and the family is talked out.

Some of the following suggestions—walking and listening to music—depart from traditional observance, but some mourners find them consistent with the spirit and purpose of *shiva.*

Read: Mourners often find it very difficult to concentrate on the printed page at the beginning of the week. As the days pass, however, many people look for something to read. Some study Jewish mourning customs; others prefer inspirational writings or poetry. Visitors may bring books they found helpful when they lost a loved one. If several people are reading together, you can share passages and read them aloud.

Write in a journal (a *shiva* journal can be a thoughtful gift from a friend). This can be as basic as listing the names of people who visited or called, or a chronicle of emotions, hour to hour, day by day. Record conversations with visitors and the memories they shared. Write a letter to the deceased.

Look at photo albums or home movies and videos.

Pray or meditate.

Walk: Taking a leisurely walk around the neighborhood, either alone or in quiet conversation with a family member or friend, can help memories flow. A well-known meditation practice, walking also relieves the inevitable claustrophobia and frayed nerves of staying inside with family members who are in pain, too.

Listen: Listening to music during *shiva* is prohibited by Jewish law because music is associated with happiness or used for distraction. But many people use music to focus on their grief. Listening to a loved one's favorite song or symphony can be comforting, or painful, or both.

Rest: Whatever mourners do during *shiva*—however little it may seem—the days are exhausting. Remember that grief takes a

physical toll. Be kind to yourself. Rest. If possible, nap. When trying to rest, let would-be visitors know by leaving a note on the door and a message on the answering machine.

PRAYER SERVICES—*SHIVA MINYANS*: According to Jewish law, mourners are required to recite Kaddish daily in memory of the dead. However, since Kaddish may only be recited with a *minyan*—a prayer quorum of ten adult Jews—and since mourners were traditionally prohibited from leaving their homes, the synagogue comes to the mourner.

Kaddish is part of the weekday prayer service, which is held both morning (*shacharit*) and evening (*mincha/ma'ariv*)* in traditional synagogues. (Liberal congregations sometimes hold weekday services once a day. See Chapter 8.)

People who are not regular synagogue-goers or who are unfamiliar with weekday prayers may be intimidated by the idea of holding service in their homes. However, mourners do not lead these sessions. Sometimes, rabbis and cantors lead the *shiva minyan,* but it may be led by any Jew who knows the prayers.

The *shiva minyan* prays the regular weekday service (with a few modifications)[7] found in every *siddur,* or prayer book. The funeral home loans out prayer booklets, which come in the typical *shiva* "kit" along with folding chairs and *kippot* (Hebrew for yarmulkes). If you expect a lot of guests, make sure to ask for extra copies. Some synagogues provide their own *shiva* prayer books.

Mourners can choose to hold one or two services daily. Morning *minyans* tend to take place early—7 or 7:30 A.M.—so that people can get to work. The service is about thirty minutes

* *Technically, prayers take place three times a day. However,* mincha *(afternoon) and* ma'ariv *(evening) services are combined.*

long, and a light breakfast is usually served afterward. Although the hour can make it more difficult to organize the early service, in communities where this is common practice, there are groups of "regulars" who can be counted on to make up the *minyan.*

The Torah is read during morning services on Mondays and Thursdays, as well on Shabbat. While Torah reading is not required in a *shiva minyan,* it is permitted, and a scroll may be borrowed from the temple for this purpose. On Shabbat, however, mourners are encouraged to attend services at the synagogue.

Evening services are more typical in the liberal community. These may be held every weeknight of *shiva,* three times, or just once, depending upon the family's wishes. People arrive after dinner (7:30 or 8 P.M.) for the service, which is also about a half hour long.

It is now common practice to take a few minutes during the evening service to invite people to informally share memories of the deceased. This is not a eulogy, though family members and friends may commit their thoughts to paper and read them. Members of the family talk about their loved one or read something of meaning to them, such as a few lines from a *shiva* journal, a poem, or something written by the deceased. The leader of the service can then ask others in the room to share their recollections, too. "That was the high-point of the week for me and my family," said a bereaved son. "My children learned so much about my mother's life from the stories that were told."

This is a good way to involve school-age children, in-laws, and friends, whose mourning often goes unrecognized and who may wish to give voice to their feelings. Even people who didn't know the deceased well, but who care about the bereaved, can add their memories:

"I remember the way your mother beamed whenever her grandchildren walked into the room."

"I didn't know him well, but I met your brother at your wedding, and I remember his big booming laugh."

After hearing the stories, even people who never met the deceased feel connected to his or her memory and can honestly tell mourners, "I wish I'd gotten to know your father. He sounds like a wonderful man."

After evening services, dessert and coffee are served by friends, neighbors, and/or synagogue committee members. While it is inevitable that people will talk about other matters, this is not an ordinary social event and conversation should remain subdued and appropriate. Guests generally leave within an hour or so.

Services can become an organizing principle during a diffuse and difficult week. Said one widow, "If it weren't for the *minyan,* I'm not sure I would have gotten out of bed."

SHABBAT DURING *SHIVA*: Shabbat observance is the core of Jewish practice; more than a holiday, it is an enactment of Judaism's core beliefs about redemption, wholeness, and peace. While Shabbat counts as a full day of *shiva,* the restrictions on public mourning are lifted so as not to dim the joy of the Sabbath. By requiring the bereaved to celebrate Sabbath, Judaism insists that life and hope take precedence over death. "It is forbidden to despair," said Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. Shabbat is the method that transforms Nachman's statement from a slogan into a way of life.

Some of the visual cues of *shiva* are set aside during the Sabbath. For example, if the memorial candle has been kept in the dining room, it is moved so that the pleasure of the Shabbat can-

dles will be undiminished. Traditionally, mourners also remove the *k'riah* garment or ribbon and are encouraged to attend services at synagogue rather than at home.

Leaving the house for Shabbat services can be a healthy step back into life. At Friday evening services in some temples, mourners enter the sanctuary only after the singing of the hymn *Lecha Dodi.* At that point or later in the service, prior to Kaddish, the rabbi will announce the family's loss. When the time comes for mourners to rise and say Kaddish, they stand among others who have lost a loved one.

You need not belong to a synagogue to attend services at any temple. The rabbi who performed the funeral will certainly welcome you to his or her congregation to say Kaddish, as will family members or friends who are synagogue members.

After services, members of the congregation invariably approach mourners (whether or not they are acquainted) to offer condolences. Mourners stand at a distance from, or leave before, the casual conversation and noshing that takes place at the social gatherings that follow the service: oneg Shabbat (on Friday night) or kiddush (Saturday morning.)

Sometimes, when Shabbat comes early during *shiva,* going out for services can feel disruptive or even disrespectful. And even when the Sabbath falls on the last day of *shiva,* some people are too fragile to accept the kind of attention focused on mourners at a synagogue. For those who are not ready to face a sea of faces, there are private ways to change observance of *shiva* in honor of Shabbat.

For example, if you have not gone outside yet, consider taking a walk. Wear different kinds of clothing (casual if you've been dressed up; dressed up if you've been casual). Sit on the porch rather than in the living room. Put aside the books about

bereavement and read something else—perhaps Abraham Joshua Heschel's beautiful little book *The Sabbath.*[8]

SHIVA DURING JEWISH HOLIDAYS: The laws regarding the Jewish holidays' impact on *shiva* are specific and complicated.[9] In general, if mourners have observed *shiva* for any amount of time prior to the holiday, the rest of *shiva* is canceled. If a death occurs on a holiday or during a festival such as Passover, *shiva* begins when the holiday ends.

Canceling or postponing *shiva* on holidays seems counterintuitive to many people. Mourners need to sit with their grief regardless of whether it's Rosh Hashanah or Shavuot. In making these rules, the rabbis weighed the needs of the individual mourner against the community's obligation to celebrate the cycle of the year and decided that the communal needs were paramount—another example of choosing life over death. Since liberal Judaism treats *halachah* as a historical and changing system rather than as divine and immutable law, liberal Jews sometimes choose to continue to sit *shiva* during holidays.

If holiday observance during *shiva* is an issue for you and your family, discuss the subject with your rabbi.

CHILDREN: Parents often keep children away from *shiva,* hoping to protect them from grief. The tradition seems to support this impulse, excusing everyone under the age of thirteen from observing *shiva* or saying Kaddish. However, bereavement experts say that adults sometimes do more harm than good when they try to shield the young. Most rabbis concur and encourage parents to let children visit and/or participate in some part of *shiva.* (See "Children as Mourners" in Chapter 10.)

Children of all ages need extra reassurance in the immediate aftermath of a death. Even babies will be aware of the distress and disruption around them, and preschoolers may worry about their parents dying. *Shiva* can be very reassuring for kids: seeing bereaved parents, grandparents, or friends smile and even laugh as memories surface shows them that the terrible sadness in the air will eventually lift. It also provides a great lesson about how families fit into communities, and how communities can care for families.

Older children may want to participate in services to express their own sorrow and as a way to maintain connections with family members who are preoccupied and distracted. School-aged children can write about their feelings or share pictures they drew.[10] They can also be invited (without any pressure) to share memories of the deceased along with the adults during the time set aside for public reminiscence. Obviously, these options should never be forced upon children, simply offered.

Even so, *shiva* can be very hard on some children, who should be allowed to withdraw if they seem frightened or overwhelmed. Maintaining regular schedules (including school, lessons, and the like) can be helpful; arranging for play dates or even sleepovers away from the *shiva* house may be a good idea.

Most important is that some adult take the time to listen to each child and respond appropriately. When parents are bereaved, they may be unable to bear witness to their children's grief, so another adult—an aunt, uncle, cousin, or friend—should be asked to help.

ENDING *SHIVA*: Since fractions of days count as full days, *shiva* ends in the morning of the seventh day after the funeral. In

a traditional home, the week concludes after the mourners say Kaddish at the morning services.

Shiva ends without ritual. However, there are a few customs—some old, some new—that give closure to the week. The best known is the simple practice of the mourners walking around the block together, a symbolic enactment of returning to the world.[11]

But consciously doing anything that you avoided doing during *shiva* can have the same effect. The idea is to make a clear division between time spent in *shiva* and the rest of life. There is one rather dramatic custom of ending the week by hammering a nail into a board.[12] However, even something as simple as putting on leather shoes after a week of wearing slippers will feel strange and new. Men who haven't shaved and women who didn't wear makeup resume their normal habits, facing new selves in undraped mirrors.

Since it is traditional to remove the *k'riah** ribbon or clothing at the end of *shiva,* one mourner created a simple ritual that focuses on mending torn clothing: scarves, neckties, jackets, or sweaters. The family gathers and silently bastes their torn garments, using large, obvious stitches so the tear will still be apparent. When everyone is finished, mourners share their feelings and/or rise and recite the 23rd Psalm.[13]

Although some people are ready and even eager to get back to work after a week of unaccustomed contemplation, some mourners cannot bear the idea of a quick return to "normal." The seventh day can be used for a gentler reentry. Setting aside the to-do list for a few more hours, search out a place where it is possible to be "in" the world without yet becoming "of" it. Drive to a park, to the beach, or the mountains. Stroll through an art museum or go to the library. Have lunch with a good friend at a quiet restaurant.

* *Some people continue to wear the ribbon after* shiva, *as an outward sign to others that they are still in mourning. See* "Shloshim" *in Chapter 8.*

Mourners are not finished grieving when they get up from sitting *shiva.* Nevertheless, it is the end of the beginning. Things change over the course of the first seven days. Grief changes. The bereaved change. The great benefit of *shiva* is that it gives you time to notice the changes.

HOW TO BE A SHIVA VISITOR: Judaism considers comforting the bereaved a sacred obligation. In the words of the great twelfth-century rabbi and physician Maimonides, "The duty of comforting a mourner is greater than the duty of comforting the sick. Why? Because visiting the sick is an act of benevolence upon the living only. Comforting the mourner is an act of benevolence toward both the living and the dead."

Any friend or acquaintance, Jewish or non-Jewish, can call on a bereaved family when they are receiving visitors during *shiva.* This is not a social event: no invitations are issued. According to Jewish law, anyone who learns of a loss in the congregation or neighborhood is both obliged and blessed by the opportunity to perform this *mitzvah.*

Paying a *shiva* visit is never easy, and people are always worried about saying or doing the wrong thing, or of feeling out of place. But the overriding mandate is simply to be there. Showing your face in a house of mourning is, in itself, the most powerful statement of concern, respect, and condolence anyone can make. In the face of death, words are almost beside the point. God instructs the prophet Ezekiel to "sigh in silence"[14] when among mourners.

Many of the normal rules of etiquette are suspended during *shiva*. Mourners live like guests in their own homes: they are served food cooked by others; they let others answer the telephone and door.

The door is usually left unlocked so that mourners will not have to rise to greet people. According to Jewish law, visitors do not even say hello first, but wait to be acknowledged by the bereaved. Visitors follow the social pace set by the mourners. If they are sitting silently, the silence should not be broken. If they are laughing over a happy memory, guests can laugh, too.

In practice, some of these customs are breached—someone rings the doorbell or asks the bereaved how they are doing. There are no dire consequences to such "mistakes," and mourners may be unaware of or unconcerned with these traditions. *Shiva* manners are simply guidelines that stress the importance of treating mourners with the utmost compassion and deference.

There are all kinds of *shiva* visits: formal, intimate, melancholy, sweet. *Shiva* services and announced "visitation" hours convene the whole community around the bereaved, including colleagues from work, neighbors, and acquaintances from temple as well as extended family and close friends. Contact with mourners at such times can be as brief as a hug. These moments are important and precious, but people who want to spend time in more intimate conversation will also visit when the mourner is likely to be alone.

Apart from the times set aside for services, *shiva* tends to be rather informal. People drop by to pay respects, bring food, reminisce, listen, and simply sit with the mourner. Visitors should be sensitive to the mood and energy level of the bereaved. If mourners seem exhausted or are already deep in conversation with

someone else, just say a quick hello and ask if you can return at another time. At the end of the week, visits tend to drop off and friends are especially welcome. It may be a good idea to call ahead to schedule a visit.

Consolation is a gentle art that requires flexibility as well as sensitivity. What follows are a few general suggestions for *shiva* visitors:

- *Shiva* visits tend to be brief—usually a half hour to an hour. Visitors approach the mourner, wait for him or her to say hello, and then follow the bereaved's cues. If the mourner wants to talk about her loved one, comforters should stay and listen. However, after a long day of talking, she may be talked out and need to rest.
- If a guest is asked a question about himself, he should answer briefly. This is not a time for long stories about office politics or a grandchild's accomplishments. The conversation should ebb and flow around the deceased, the mourner's emotions, the progress of *shiva*.
- Visitors *should not* try to "cheer up" the mourners. The primary job of the comforter is to listen. In general, it is better to avoid giving advice, presuming to know what the mourner is feeling, or theorizing about how soon he will be "back to normal." It's better to ask questions, share memories, and simply say, "I'm so sorry."

  Nevertheless, visitors in *shiva* houses frequently find themselves remembering their own losses. While it is not appropriate to go into great detail, a statement such as "I lost my wife last year" speaks volumes to the recently bereaved. Mourners are often struck by their

new, painfully earned knowledge of the mourning all around them. There is a kind of solidarity among the bereaved: "All go to the house of mourning and each weeps over his own sorrow," wrote Joshua ibn Sahib, a fourteenth-century Spanish biblical scholar.

- It is traditional to bring food to a *shiva* house, but not flowers, candy, liquor, or any other kind of gift. Since friends may already be coordinating meals, it's a good idea to call first to find out what is needed, though many people automatically bring baked goods, which are served to guests throughout the day and after services.

  It is always appropriate to make a charitable donation in honor of the deceased rather bring a gift. If asked, virtually all nonprofit organizations send an acknowledgment to the bereaved family, informing them of your gift. (See "*Tzedakah*" in Chapter 9.)
- Call ahead, especially after the first few days, to offer help in running errands, chauffeuring out-of-town guests, baby-sitting, picking up groceries, etc.
- Say good-bye before you leave.

According to the book of Ecclesiastes, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting."[15] Of course, most people would rather attend a wedding than a funeral, but paying a *shiva* call can be a profound and beautiful experience. There is an undeniable "rightness" in being there for a friend, colleague, or acquaintance in mourning. Their gratitude is reward enough, but visitors often get more than that. Walking out of a *shiva* house, you savor the air (sweet, cold, heavy, hot), take note of sounds (birds, voices, traffic), breathe deeply, and sigh in gratitude for the gift of being alive.

HOW TO WRITE A CONDOLENCE CARD: Like condolence visits, cards and notes are a tangible token of concern and respect. Mourners rarely remember the content of any one sympathy card; however, the fact that it was sent means everything. Perhaps nowhere else does the phrase "It's the thought that counts" ring so true.

There is no need to write at length. Letters that share a personal memory of the deceased are special, but even if she was a stranger to the writer, the simplest message is moving if it comes from the heart:

"I was so sorry to hear . . ."
"I remember when . . ."
"I'm thinking of you."
"I wish you peace."
"I hope you have fond memories to sustain you."
"I love you."

LONG-DISTANCE *SHIVA*: The geographic realities of American life mean that many people sit *shiva* far from the comfort of their own homes and communities. Reaching out by phone can help, but there is nothing so consoling as your own friends' understanding faces and hugs, your own rabbi's presence.

It is becoming more and more customary to sit *shiva* in more than one place. For example, after three days in one city, some mourners continue *shiva* at home, either for the rest of the week or just for another day. If the full seven days were observed out of town, mourners sometimes have a *shiva*-like memorial commemoration in their own homes when they return.

Your rabbi or cantor may lead the service or say a few words at the gathering. If the week of *shiva* is formally over, mourners can invite friends over to share memories of the loved one and say

Kaddish together. Contrary to many mourners' fears, bringing *shiva* back home is not an imposition on others. As sad as it is, comforting one's friend is a very meaningful *mitzvah.*

For mourners who are uncomfortable with the idea of extending *shiva* or just too exhausted to be with a group of people immediately following their return home, a memorial observance at the end of the *shloshim,* the first month, is an option. (See Chapter 8.)

"NO VISITATION": When these words appear at the end of a death notice or in the rabbi's remarks at the funeral, a family announces its decision to forgo the comforts as well as the rigors of *shiva.*

There are many reasons why people decide against *shiva.* If someone dies after a long illness and months or even years of anticipatory grieving, the family may feel that *shiva* is superfluous. People who are not affiliated with a synagogue or any other Jewish organization and have only a small circle of friends may fear being isolated during *shiva.* Overscheduled people feel the pressure of their many responsibilities: children, colleagues, deadlines, bills.

Some people view *shiva* as morbid and counterintuitive. Death unlocks all kinds of painful emotional floodgates, and human beings, like all living creatures, seek to avoid suffering rather than wait for the next exhausting spasm of tears. And *shiva* raises profound questions about belief, identity, affiliation. For people whose connection to Judaism is passive or ambivalent, being part of such a traditional Jewish ritual may seem contrived or hypocritical or simply uncomfortable. "No visitation" bypasses consideration of such issues.

But "no visitation" announcements are becoming rarer. Those

who sit with their grief during *shiva*—sometimes reinterpreting laws and customs, sometimes inventing new traditions—discover that the ritual is a precious and healing gift.[16]

Whatever your decisions about sitting *shiva*—where, how long, how to, or even whether—the seven days that follow the funeral of a loved one are bound to be highly charged. It will be: The First Monday Since He Died. The First Friday Since She Died. At its core, *shiva* is the way that Jewish mourners begin to tell time after a loved one dies.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE FIRST YEAR

THE YEAR AFTER A LOSS IS FILLED WITH LESSONS NO ONE wants to learn: how to watch the trees turn red and gold without her; how to lead a seder alone; how to smile at a bar mitzvah that would have been the light of his life. The work of grief over the course of the first year is about relearning how to live in the world. And it's hard.

Jewish law and custom acknowledge the changes of the first year in many ways. According to tradition, mourners change their accustomed seats in the synagogue—a literal shift both in personal perspective and within the community. Saying Kaddish formalizes daily and/or weekly remembrance. Holidays (including Shabbat) are milestones through the journey. Rituals end the first month (*shloshim*) and the first year (*shanah*) in ways that create closure and affirm continuity.

Judaism's "architecture of time" for mourners continues even after the first year with the saying of Kaddish in the annual commemorations of *yahrzeit* and Yizkor. But the first year is a year of unwelcome firsts.

Liberal Jews observe the customs and rituals that are described in this section in a variety of ways. Some people add new observances, such as planting a tree at the close of *shloshim;* some transform old customs and, for example, say Kaddish as a private meditation. Some find wisdom, comfort, and strength in following traditions abandoned by parents or even grandparents, such as attending daily services in order to say Kaddish. Making these choices is part of grieving and healing, too.

SHLOSHIM: THE FIRST MONTH

Jewish law obligates official mourners (children, spouses, siblings, and parents) to continue with some of the observances of *shiva* for thirty days after the funeral, a period that includes the week of *shiva.*

During *shloshim*—the word means "thirty"—mourners return to work and regular family responsibilities, but tradition maintains a "fence" that permits grieving to continue. The prohibitions of *shloshim,* which are mostly concerned with public obligations, protect mourners against rushing or being rushed through their sorrow. In a culture that expects people to "get on with it" after a few days, *shloshim* helps the individual and the community to be patient and mindful that grief cannot and should not be hurried.

During *shloshim,* distractions and everyday pleasures are limited. Traditionally, the bereaved don't listen to music or attend concerts, plays, movies, or sporting events. People don't wear new clothing and men forgo haircuts and even shaving. Liberal Jews interpret these restrictions in ways that are personally meaningful: for example, some people avoid watching any television or listening to music on the radio; others limit themselves to news and public affairs programs.

Mourners avoid most social gatherings. Although someone observing *shloshim* would probably attend a family wedding or bar mitzvah, she might leave before the *simcha,* or reception. Although there is no Jewish law against it, mourners do not visit the cemetery during the first month. While this notion may have been born of superstition—it was thought that the spirit lingered on earth for a period of time after burial—it also keeps the bereaved in the world of the living. In the words of the *Shulchan Aruch,* "One must not grieve excessively for the dead."[1]

Shloshim is not a period of self-deprivation, however. Mourners resume many private pleasures, such as reading and study, visiting friends, exercise, playing with children. In many circumstances, mourners are permitted to marry during the thirty days.[2] Sexual relations are permitted. The bereaved are required to get out of the house to attend services and say Kaddish. The requirements of *shloshim* may be terminated by the observance of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. (Mourning observance during holidays is best discussed with your rabbi.)

Life resumes its precedence over death, but mourners keep their distance from the full court press of daily life. Some people even wear a *k'riah* ribbon or torn garment for a full month. Although tradition dictates that it be removed at the end of *shiva,* the ribbon is a silent announcement of the mourner's emotional state during the first month, signaling colleagues, friends, and acquaintances that its wearer is still fragile and not yet entirely "of" the workday world.

The ribbon also alerts people who might not know of a loss to offer condolences and, if they have experienced bereavement themselves, empathize. Mourners are often amazed at the discovery of loss around them. In the words of the great medieval

rabbi known as Rashi, "Bereavement is like a wheel encircling the world."[3]

Another way to acknowledge the first month is by reconvening the principal mourners around a table for a Friday evening Shabbat meal or by attending Friday night or Saturday morning services. The weekly cycle can provide a structure for reflection, such as writing in a journal just before lighting Shabbat candles, or composing a "letter" to the deceased to record thoughts, conversations, and changes that occurred since the last Friday night. Attending Shabbat services marks the passing of the month within the comfort and context of a larger community.

Shloshim can be an extremely busy time. Some mourners feel compelled to "take care of business" as soon as possible, clearing out the now-vacant house, disposing of property, meeting with lawyers, changing documents, and the like. Many people spend hours writing thank-you notes in response to sympathy cards, donations made in memory of the deceased, and *shiva* calls. (Funeral homes sell personalized thank-you notes for this purpose.)

However, some mourners are too exhausted or numb to do much of anything for the first thirty days, and for them *shloshim* is a "lost" month. As the reality of death sinks in, the overwhelming sorrow of *shiva* may return at any time. Friends tend to remain quite solicitous during *shloshim,* checking in on the mourner, inviting her out for meals. Nevertheless, the formal daily support of *shiva* may be gone. Widows and widowers spend their first nights alone. The days grow emptier. New symptoms related to grief may surface; for example, sleep disturbances are very common.

Saying Kaddish: The primary ritual obligation for mourners during *shloshim* is saying Kaddish in memory of the deceased. According to Jewish law, Kaddish is recited aloud only in the

presence of a *minyan* of ten adult Jews, which means the mourner must seek out a community in which to pray.[4] (See Part I, "Why We Say Kaddish.")

Liberal Jews make all kinds of choices about saying Kaddish in memory of a loved one. Some people attend two services daily, others go once a day, and many say Kaddish once a week at Shabbat services.

Daily synagogue services are held morning and/or evening, depending on the individual temple. All Orthodox and some Conservative synagogues have two daily *minyans.* Some Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist temples hold one daily service, morning or evening, but many do not. If you with to say Kaddish daily but belong to a synagogue that has no daily *minyan,* your rabbi can direct you to a congregation that does.

Everyone is welcome at synagogue services, and mourners generally find a warm embrace wherever they go for Kaddish. If you are not a temple member, shop around for a comfortable place. Attend services at the congregations in your neighborhood or near your workplace. Seek recommendations from the rabbi who officiated at the funeral, the funeral home director, family members, and friends.

For many mourners, attending services to say Kaddish becomes the organizing principle for their grief, a time for reflection, and a way to connect. People who attend a daily *minyan* in order to say Kaddish find themselves among other mourners who quickly become an empathic community. Those who were not previously synagogue regulars may find this a transforming experience: an introductory and/or refresher course in Hebrew and Jewish worship, an inspiration to continue studying, and a doorway into the Jewish world.[5] Mourners sometimes form close friendships and join the congregations where they say Kaddish.

One woman explains, "At the time of my loss, the *minyan* introduced a whole new set of people to my life, people I quickly came to care about. I wondered how their vacations or operations went and where they were if they missed a morning or evening. . . . Kaddish is a bond between generations, but the bonds among mourners who share the Kaddish experience may be equally powerful."[6]

Less traditionally, some mourners use Kaddish as a daily personal prayer. "It was my private meditation for that month," said a man who recited Kaddish every morning for his sister. "I'm not much of a synagogue-goer, but the sound of that prayer means something to me. It's my time of day to think, cry, sigh, whatever."

ENDING *SHLOSHIM*: The thirty days are the full measure of mourning for spouses, parents, and siblings. Only children are required to observe the rituals of *shanah,* the first year, though other mourners often do.

There are several ways to mark the end of *shloshim.* A family can invite friends and members of their community to join them for an evening *minyan,* study session, or simply for a gathering to reminisce. This can be especially consoling if *shiva* took place out of town.

People who have been wearing a *k'riah* ribbon or garment usually remove it at the end of *shloshim.* This can be done simply and without ceremony or it can become the occasion for an intimate ritual like the one described in Chapter 7. Similarly, family and close friends can gather for a quiet meal, light a memorial candle, and share their experiences of the past month. And as with virtually all Jewish milestones, the end of *shloshim* can be an occasion for making a charitable contribution in memory of the person who died.

A nice way to conclude *shloshim* is by planting a tree in memory of the loved one. Reverence for trees is a recurrent theme in Jewish texts, and the Torah itself is called "a tree of life." Memorial contributions in support of reforestation programs in Israel may be sent to the Jewish National Fund.* A hands-on tree planting is a more tangible symbol of continuity.

Family members and close friends might gather in a backyard, at a local park, or on the grounds of a synagogue or Jewish community center (with permission, of course). People can take turns covering the roots with soil, watering, and telling stories of the deceased. Although the shovel may well recall the pain of filling in the grave only thirty days earlier, the act of planting is a way of bringing memory to life.[7] Some people find the symbolism of a fruit or flowering tree especially beautiful.

SHANAH: A YEAR'S TIME

Jewish tradition is quite firm about time limits on outward signs of grief. According to the *Shulchan Aruch*, "Whoever weeps more than the law requires must be weeping for something else. Rather, let one accept the schedule set down by the sages: three days for weeping, seven for lamenting, 30 days for mourning."[8]

Even so, Jewish practice acknowledges that mourners suffer for longer than a month and indeed mandates a special yearlong status for the bereaved. "Whoever sees a mourner within 30 days should comfort him but not ask him how he is feeling. After 30 days but within 12 months, he should ask how he is and then comfort him."[9]

For most mourners, public signs of grief end with *shloshim.*

* *Call 800-542-TREE.*

However, according to tradition, children continue saying Kaddish and observing some of the same prohibitions on public rejoicing as during the first thirty days. The year of mourning is counted from the day of death, and traditionally consists of either eleven or twelve months according to the lunar Hebrew, or Jewish, calendar, though some liberal Jews count the year of mourning using the Gregorian, or secular, calendar.[10]

The longer period for children is often explained by citing the sixth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother."[11] But to many, this seems counterintuitive; after all, parents are "supposed to" die before children. Parents who bury a child and bereaved spouses would seem in greater need of rituals to give shape to their grief.

But this ruling, like so many others, dates from times when human lives were shorter and when infant and child mortality touched every family. In those days, limiting requirements for public mourning was doubtlessly intended to keep people from focusing on their losses to the exclusion of other obligations—such as remarrying and having more children.

Despite the fact that bereaved parents, spouses, and siblings are not required to continue public mourning, there is no prohibition against it. Indeed, many "exempt" mourners say Kaddish for their loved one for the full year, and it is common to find as many widows and widowers as bereaved sons and daughters at a daily *minyan.* Bereaved life partners, siblings, grandchildren, parents, and close friends may choose to mourn for the full year, too.

During the year of mourning, many of the prohibitions of *shloshim* continue. Mourners avoid parties and other purely social gatherings, though attendance at family events, such as weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs, is permitted. Tradition prohibits

listening to instrumental music, or attending plays and concerts. Liberal Jews tend to view such restrictions as a matter of personal choice.

As with other phases of Jewish mourning, there are positive *mitzvot* as well as negative ones during *shana.* The positive commandments for the year of mourning include prayer, study, and *tzedakah*—three interconnected blessings.

PRAYER: Kaddish continues as in *shloshim.* Mourners who attend services on a regular basis—whether once or twice daily, a few times a week, or weekly on Shabbat—find it works as a polestar through a difficult time. Mourners often form a community of their own, reaching out to people with new losses, healing themselves by helping others through the darkest days of grief.

As the year progresses and daily life gathers momentum, mourners sometimes feel guilty for "forgetting" their loved one for an hour or even a day at a time. Saying Kaddish regularly is a way of both giving grief standing and of containing it. As one woman wrote, "I think about my mother while I say Kaddish. Knowing that I have a structured way of remembering and that I'll be coming back to her memory again in the evening frees me to go about the rest of my day unburdened. Of course, I think of my mother during the day as well, but it isn't painful."[12]

There are two traditions about counting the year of saying Kaddish. The Talmud prescribes a full twelve months. However, in the sixteenth century, the legal scholar Rabbi Moses Isserles[13] shortened the period to eleven months based on the belief that only totally evil souls stood before God's judgment for a full year. Since no son or daughter should consider their parent completely wicked, this abbreviation was seen as an act of respect.

Stopping after eleven months also speaks to the psychological needs of the mourner, which intensify during the four weeks leading up to the anniversary of the death. During the twelfth month, mourners may be overwhelmed by memories of the final illness and/or death; they may also be preoccupied with preparations for the upcoming *yahrzeit* and an unveiling of the grave marker. Saying Kaddish in addition to all of this may mean devoting too much time to death.[14]

However, when the obligation to say Kaddish as a mourner does come to an end, some people experience the transition as a loss of purpose, community, and connection to the deceased:

> This first year was about showing up, a place to go, a community of words that were his words. For this year he has been nearby, alive in these words he learned by heart as a boy. . . .
>
> It has been soothing to stand here, understanding him more fully as his values wash over me. Now he is going even farther away. I am an orphan now—an orphan who is no longer a Kaddish. Where do I find him? Where do I find myself?[15]

Of course, there is no reason to stop attending daily prayers if the experience has become a source of comfort, connection, and identity. After all, it is a *mitzvah* to pray daily, and those who attend services help provide a *minyan* so that others can say Kaddish.

STUDY: Undertaking a new aspect of Jewish learning is considered an eloquent tribute to the life of the deceased. Attending services regularly to say Kaddish can be a learning experience in

itself. Mourners become familiar with the order of the service and improve their Hebrew skills, almost without trying. One traditional study goal is to learn to lead some or all of the daily service—an honor offered to people on the last day they say Kaddish as official mourners. Family members and close friends can be invited for this occasion—a unique living tribute to the memory of a loved one.

Whether or not they lead services, people who have been "regulars" sometimes sponsor a Kiddush breakfast for the morning *minyan* on their last day as official mourners. Not exactly a celebration, the meal commemorates a milestone in the mourner's grief.

There are other forms of study besides learning the service. Some mourners attend Torah study sessions (held before Shabbat morning services in many congregations) to honor the memory of a loved one. Others devote time to learning Hebrew or Jewish history or the rituals of the life cycle.

Tzedakah: The tradition of giving *tzedakah* to honor a personal milestone becomes poignant, urgent, and ultimately triumphant after a death. Giving money to charity is one way of keeping the memory of a loved one alive and palpable in the world. During the first year, some mourners make contributions in memory of a loved one at regular intervals; for instance, every time they say Kaddish, which is why there are *pushkes,* or little alms boxes, set out at synagogue minyans. Study and *tzedakah* merge when mourners sponsor a lecture or scholarship in memory of a loved one. (See Chapter 9.)

Season to Season: From the end of *shloshim* until the anniversary of a death, mourners endure a series of heartbreaking

"firsts." The annual cycle of Jewish holidays may seem especially empty and difficult if Rosh Hashanah was always associated with a big dinner at Nana's, or if Hanukkah was Pop's favorite.

These milestones in the Jewish calendar often prompt a return of intense feelings of grief and loss, which is perfectly normal. But the calendar also provides four occasions for mourners to publicly acknowledge their losses during the Yizkor prayer, which is recited at a service which is also called Yizkor—a word that means "memorial." Yizkor is held on Yom Kippur and at the end of the three "pilgrimage" festivals: Sukkot,[16] Passover, and Shavuot. (See Chapter 9.)

For some reason, joyful family celebrations seem to proliferate in the wake of a death. The absence of the deceased seems cruel when a new baby is born, a grandson gets married, a daughter becomes bat mitzvah. But even these events can provide opportunities to remember the departed and to make their presence felt. At baby namings and *brisses,* during wedding toasts and bar or bat mitzvah banquets, there is always an appropriate moment to recall the names and faces of people who are missing and who are missed.

Recalling loved ones during happy occasions adds a bittersweet note, but ultimately it is the sweetness that lingers. Speaking about someone who would have so loved the events of the day brings the continuity of generations into plain sight. After a recent loss, giving voice to the sadness in many hearts also gives permission for family and friends to comfort one another.

As the months pass, mourners find themselves more and more alone with their grief. Friends stop calling or dropping by as often. Acquaintances and colleagues start treating mourners as though they had returned to "normal."

The bereaved sometimes feel like they are falling apart precisely when they think they should be "getting better." This is not cause for undue alarm. Bereavement experts note that grief pays "visits," which are better off welcomed than avoided or ignored. Nevertheless, the isolation of grief does sometimes lead to serious depression. As difficult as it may be, mourners need to stay connected to others.

YAHRZEIT

Grief can become intense and even overwhelming as the first year comes to an end. Indeed, the "anniversary reaction" can extend to a whole season; if the death occurred in the springtime, the appearance of crocuses may be forever tinged with sadness.

As the anniversary of a death approaches, mourners often revisit the last days of a loved one's life, remembering the details of the same month of the previous year:

Today was the day . . .

. . . I got the phone call.
. . . he went into the hospital.
. . . she lapsed into a coma.
. . . we gathered at the bedside and said good-bye.

Jews call the anniversary of a death *yahrzeit,* Yiddish for "a year's time." The observance of this milestone is both private and public, intimate and communal.

THE DATE: The annual remembrance is traditionally marked according to the Hebrew calendar; if a loved one died on the

eighth day in the month of Av, the *yahrzeit* falls on the eighth of Av in all subsequent years. Since the lunar year does not correspond to the secular calendar, Hebrew dates "jump around" on the secular calendar: so the eighth of Av may fall on August 4 one year and August 15 the following year. This presents no difficulty for anyone who owns a Jewish calendar, which is laid out according to the secular year but also lists Hebrew dates.[17] Jewish funeral homes send out calendars to anyone who has used their services, and also mail annual reminders of *yahrzeit* dates to principal mourners. Many synagogues send *yahrzeit* reminders to their members.

Some liberal Jews find it more emotionally meaningful (as well as easier to remember) to observe the *yahrzeit* as the day of death on the secular calendar. This fulfills, too, the religious purpose of *yahrzeit*—which is to honor the memory of a loved one.

PRIVATE OBSERVANCES: The best-known *yahrzeit* is lighting a twenty-four-hour memorial candle. The small, flickering light—a universal symbol of the soul—is both melancholy and consoling. It gives form to memory: visible, warm, incandescent.

Since Jewish days begin at sunset, the candle is lit on the evening before the day of death. There is no set time; before or after sunset is fine, except on Shabbat or the evening before a holiday, when the *yahrzeit* candle is lit prior to lighting Shabbat and/or festival candles.

Yahrzeit candles are available in Judaica shops, kosher grocery stores, and supermarkets that serve Jewish customers. The candles are white and set inside a small, transparent glass. Many people have memories of these little glasses from childhood, when grandparents recycled them into drinking glasses.

There is no *b'racha,* no fixed blessing for lighting a *yahrzeit* candle. Many people recite a private personal prayer, sometimes beginning or ending with the phrase,

זִכְרוֹנוֹ/זִכְרוֹנָהּ לִבְרָכָה׃

Zichrono/Zichronah livrachah

May his/her memory be a blessing.[18]

The candle may be placed anywhere in the home, and is usually are permitted to burn all the way down. Sometimes, family members surround the light with photographs of the deceased, a much-loved book, children's pictures, or letters. This can remind children of a grandparent they may not remember well, or introduce them to someone they never met.

Some people use candle-lighting as a focus for memory, an occasion for leafing through photo albums, watching videos of the deceased, listening to his or her favorite music, adding another entry to a grief journal. Family members and close friends sometimes gather and take turns sharing a memory of the deceased, and/or reading a poem or prayer. Every member of a family may light their own candle, a token of their unique relationship and loss.

In addition to lighting a candle, mourners might reread a journal written in the immediate aftermath of the death, look at the *shiva* guest book and condolence cards, or listen to music unheard for the past twelve months.

Some people pay a *yahrzeit* visit to the grave, to recite psalms and the *El Malei Rachamim* prayer. It is also considered a *mitzvah* to study from Jewish texts at the graveside. (See Chapter 9 for more about visiting the grave.)

Public Observances: *Yahrzeit* also provides communal consolation for the predictable pangs of sorrow that return on the anniversary of death. In the synagogue, every *yahrzeit* has a weeklong presence. Starting on the Shabbat before the anniversary, the names of temple members' loved ones may be recited during services. In congregations with memorial plaques on their walls, an electric light may be lit beside the names as well. In some temples, the weekly newsletter lists those for whom Kaddish is being recited.

Saying the Mourner's Kaddish in a *minyan* is the central element of public mourning at a *yahrzeit.* Liberal Jews do this in several different ways. Some people say their *yahrzeit* Kaddish at the Shabbat services immediately prior to the anniversary of death; others make a point of attending services on the day itself. In some congregations, people observing a *yahrzeit* are called to the Torah for an *aliyah.* At most daily *minyans,* only mourners or those observing *yahrzeits* stand during the Mourner's Kaddish. With the bereaved thus identified, people invariably approach after services to offer a few words of condolence and a hug.

As at every meaningful juncture in Jewish life, it is traditional to give money to a charity on the occasion of a *yahrzeit.* Synagogues that send out *yahrzeit* reminders usually include an envelope for contributions.

CHAPTER THREE

CARE OF THE DYING

TO SIT AT THE BEDSIDE OF A LOVED ONE WHO IS DYING IS to know profound powerlessness. And yet, even after there is nothing left to "do for" him, there is still the responsibility—and the opportunity—to "be with" him. Professional pastoral caregivers call this "the ministry of presence." In Hebrew, it is known as *bikkur holim,* visiting the sick, and while this is part of the pastoral duties of pulpit rabbis, it is also a *mitzvah*—a sacred responsibility—incumbent upon all Jews.

The *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim,* of being present, is not just a matter of sitting or standing in the same room as a sick or dying person, but of being attentive to the whole person in the bed and not just to symptoms. This kind of presence is no small thing, since a lonely death is one of the most fearful prospects on earth. In the end, being present is both the only thing and the greatest thing we have to give one another.

Jewish law is adamant about treating the dying person with the same respect due any living person. A person who is very close to death is called a *gosses* (goe-*sace*) and is to be provided

with every comfort available. A *gosses* is still fully a member of the community; someone who can be counted for a *minyan*, serve as a witness, or even sit on a judicial tribunal—a *bet din*. The Talmud is emphatic on this point: "A dying person is to be considered a living person in all matters of the world."[1]

An ethical boundary is constructed around people in their last days to keep them from being treated only as patients, or even worse, as corpses-in-waiting. It is forbidden to start mourning until after the moment of death. Before death, "We do not rend the garments, bare the shoulder, deliver a memorial address, or bring the coffin into the house."[2]

But the prohibition goes beyond simply getting ready for the funeral; it requires that caregivers be attentive to what they say and do in the presence of a dying person, regardless of his or her medical condition. Standing at the bedside and talking about the person in the bed as though she were not present—even if she is in a deep coma—shows terrible disrespect. Similarly, talking about a terminally ill person in the past tense annihilates him. "Whoever closes the eyes of a *gosses* is considered as if he has taken a life."[3]

The mandate at the deathbed is to be fully present, attentive, and responsive. Although you may be unable to do what you most wish (make your loved one better, buy more time, change the course of the illness), there may still be many things you can do:

Listen: If your loved one wants to tell stories from her past, listen with a hearing heart. Life review is sometimes a person's final "work," their last effort at creating and finding meaning. Sharing stories can be a crowning gift.

Follow: Always let the dying person take the lead. If he does

not wish to reminisce about his past, don't insist. If he wants to talk about death, don't change the subject. By the same token, if he refuses to discuss his own demise, it is not your place to confront him with it. If possible, do what he asks. For example, if he insists that you leave the hospital to rest, obeying is a way of returning a sense of agency to him.

Accept: People tend to die as they lived. Bitter people die in bitterness. The sweet-natured die more easily. Deathbed transformations, though not unheard of, are rare. Respect for the dying requires letting them be who they are, and accepting them unconditionally.

Speak: It is said that hearing is the last of the senses to go. If your loved one is willing to listen, or even if she is beyond responding, give voice to your feelings. Talk about memories that you cherish and that will stay with you. Apologize for any unkind words or misunderstandings between you. Forgive her for any unkindness she might have done to you.

Read aloud from a book that has meaning for your loved one or for you. Pray, if you are comfortable with praying. Sing, if you are moved to sing.

Touch: It is the most elemental form of presence and communication. Even if you were not physically affectionate before a final illness, holding his hand or placing your hand on a shoulder or arm provides physical reassurance that he is not alone and that his end will not be lonely.

Care for yourself: You cannot care for a loved one if you neglect your own health and well-being. Especially in cases of lingering final illness, caregivers must remember their own needs for food, rest, and respite. Remember that you cannot give your all to someone else when your own resources are depleted.

Reassure: Sometimes dying people will hold on to life, even in misery, because of fear for their loved ones. Offer reassurance that, as much as you will miss her, you and the rest of the family will be all right. That her life will be remembered and treasured. That her memory will sustain you.

Some caregivers refuse to leave the bedside for fear that death will come while they are gone. But dying people, wishing to protect the ones they love, may find it difficult to let go while others are in the room. If you have said everything that needed to be said, if you have been present and attentive, there is no need for self-recrimination. Your love does not vanish when you leave the room.

Prayer at the Bedside: If your loved one and/or your family never prayed or discussed religion or spiritual matters before a final illness, it's unlikely that this will change, even at the deathbed. However, in some cases, "business as usual" is set aside as death approaches.

It is quite common for people to express religious or spiritual longings at the end of life, or when facing the death of a loved one. Rabbis often hear people say, "I haven't been to synagogue for forty years, but now . . . ," and they are sometimes unable to even name what it is they want.

Rabbis, chaplains, physicians, and nurses can testify to the power of prayer to comfort the dying and ease their way. The goal of Jewish prayer by the bedside is not cure—though hope is surely a part of the human genetic map. Jews pray to heal relationships with loved ones and with God. We pray for wholeness—*shleymut*—a word that shares a root with *shalom*, peace.

Rabbis and synagogue *bikkur holim* committees sometimes

bring a brief "healing service" of prayers and psalms to the bedside. Some patients and families find this deeply moving; others see it as a frightening intrusion or a denial of all hope. This is the family's choice.

There are innumerable stories about the impact of praying for and with the dying.

A rabbi sat beside a man who had been in a coma for several days, with a bleak prognosis. The rabbi put his hand on the patient's arm and recited psalms. After a few minutes, the man opened his eyes and regained consciousness. He recovered and went home.

The same rabbi read the same psalms at the bedside of another man in dire condition. That patient died. But his widow was so moved by the rabbi's efforts and attentions that, after years of distance from the Jewish community, she became an active member of a synagogue, where she found much comfort.

A woman sat by the hospital bedside of her husband who was dying of cancer. A member of her synagogue choir, she sang the Shema to him over and over again. While she sang, the electronic monitors showed a gradual slowing of his heart and respiration rates. When she stopped, his breath became labored and his heart raced. She continued her soft, chanting song until her husband achieved a *meta yaffa*—a pleasant death.

End-of-Life Decisions: History has taught the Jewish people to be survivors, to defy death sentences, to persevere. The Torah says "Choose life," and the religious principle of preserving human life (*p'kuach nefesh*) is considered a primary mandate. One may break nearly every Jewish law—eat pork, work on the Sabbath—if it might save a life or promote the healing of someone who is ill.

In keeping with this history and tradition, Judaism has always opposed active euthanasia. "Whoever closes the eyes of a *gosses* is considered as if he has taken a life."[4] Some take this to mean that death must be resisted at all costs and by all means. But that is not the only responsible Jewish choice; the tradition views death as part of life and teaches that there is a "time to die." Letting go, accepting the inevitable, and even permitting death to occur are consistent with Jewish law and teaching, too.

The Talmud tells the deathbed story of Rabbi Judah, whose disciples gathered and prayed for his life. The rabbi's maidservant, seeing how the prayers kept the suffering man alive, threw a jar from the roof. The noise distracted the students' prayers long enough to enable the rabbi's soul to depart in peace. The Talmud portrays the woman as a heroine and praises her act of compassion.[5]

While it is forbidden to "hasten death," Jewish authorities throughout the centuries have agreed that it is permissible to remove "impediments" that prolong dying. Of course, the line between "hastening death" and "removing impediments" is not always clear-cut. Rabbi Moses ben Israel Isserles tried to make the distinction in the sixteenth century: "If there is anything that causes a hindrance to the departure of the soul, for example if there is, close to the house, a knocking sound from a wood cutter, or if there is salt on his tongue, and these hinder the departure of the soul, it is permitted to remove them."[6]

The fundamental questions have not changed. Today we ask: When is a respirator (the wood chopper) an impediment to death? Does the removal of a feeding tube or intravenous hydration (salt beneath the tongue or the prayers of the students) "hasten a death?"

Nor is "quality of life" a new concept. In the words of Ben

Sira, a rabbi of the second century B.C.E., "Death is better than a life of pain, and eternal rest than constant sickness."[7]

But even with a medical proxy and living will in hand, end-of-life decisions can be agonizing. Just as every life is unique, the circumstances surrounding the end of each life are unique. Choices about "removing impediments" are best made in consultation with other family members, nurses and doctors, hospice staff, and your rabbi.[8]

FINAL CONFESSION: Many people are surprised to learn that there is a Jewish deathbed confessional prayer called the Viddui. During the Yom Kippur Viddui, the whole congregation rises and symbolically beats its chest while confessing to an alphabetical series of sins. The Viddui recited at the end of life is very different; personal rather than communal, it acknowledges the imperfections of the dying person and seeks a final reconciliation with God.

Unlike the better-known Catholic ritual,[9] reciting the Viddui has nothing to do with insuring the soul's place in the "world-to-come," nor does it, in any way, tempt fate. In the words of the *Shulchan Aruch,*

> If you feel death approaching, recite the Viddui. Be reassured by those around you. Many have said the Viddui and not died, and many have not said the Viddui and have died. If you are unable to recite it aloud, say it in your heart. And if you are unable to recite it, others may recite it with you or for you.[10]

The prayer is recited when death seems imminent; it may be said by the *gosses,* by family members, or by a rabbi. It can be read

in Hebrew or English or in both languages. A formal Viddui (samples follow) can be read in sections, with pauses to let people speak from their hearts, to voice regrets or guilt, to ask forgiveness of one another, and to say "I love you."

The Viddui can also be seen as a model for a less formal farewell. People at the bedside can sing a wordless melody—a *niggun*—say a few personal words of good-bye, and recite the Shema together: this, too, is a Viddui.

However, as in all matters concerning the dying, the *gosses* is the one to decide on whether she wants to say or hear this prayer. The Viddui should never be imposed.

The central element of the Viddui is the Shema, the most familiar of all Jewish prayers and the quintessential statement of faith in God's unity. The Shema is the last thing a Jew is supposed to say before death—which is also why it is recited before going to sleep at night. (In case "I should die before I wake.")

The Shema is not a petitionary prayer, nor does it praise God. It is a not really a prayer at all, but the proclamation of God's oneness. It is also an affirmation of Jewish identity and connection.

The Shema ends with the word *Echad,* which means "One." Uttered with "a dying breath," it suggests the ultimate reconciliation of the soul with the Holy One of Blessing, Echad, whom Jews also call Adonai. In many ways, the Shema says "Yes." In its own way, the Shema says "Amen."

CONFESSION BY THE GRAVELY ILL*

My God and God of all who have gone before me, Author of life and death,
I turn to You in trust.
Although I pray for life and health, I know that I am mortal.

If this life must soon end, let me die, I pray, at peace.
If only my hands were clean and my heart pure.
I confess that I committed many wrongs and left so much undone,
Yet I know also the good that I did and tried to do.
May those acts give meaning to my life, and may my errors be forgiven.
Protector of the bereaved and the helpless, watch over my loved ones, in whose souls my soul is bound.
You are my Rock and my Redeemer, the Source of mercy and truth.
Into Your hands I commend my spirit.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echad.
Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God. Adonai is One.
Adonai is our God. Adonai is our God.[11]

* *This prayer, like the ones that follow, may be recited on behalf of another, i.e.: "Into Your hands we commend* his/her *spirit."*

VIDDUI:
FINAL CONFESSIONAL PRAYER

My God and God of my fathers and mothers
May my prayer come before You.
Do not ignore my plea.
Please, forgive me for all of the sins
That I sinned before You throughout my lifetime.
I am ashamed of deeds that I have committed.
I regret things that I have done.
Now, O God, take my pain and suffering as atonement.
Forgive my mistakes, for against You have I sinned.

May it be Your will, Adonai, my God and God of my ancestors,
That I sin no more.
In Your great mercy, cleanse me of the sins I have committed,
But not through suffering and disease.
Send me a complete healing along with all those who are ill.

I acknowledge before You, Adonai my God and God of my ancestors,
That my healing and my death are in Your hands.
May it be Your will to grant me a complete healing.
If it be Your will that I am to die of this illness,
Let my death be atonement for all the wrongs that I have done in my life.
Shelter me in the shadow of Your wings.
Grant me a place in the world to come.

Parent of orphans and Guardian of widows,
Protect my dear ones,
With whose souls my soul is bound.

Into your hand I place my soul.
You have redeemed me, O God of truth.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echad.
Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, The Lord is One.

Adonai Hu Ha'elohim. Adonai Hu Ha'elohim.
Adonai is God. Adonai is God.

TRANSLATION BY RABBI AMY EILBERG[12]

VIDDUI,
THE FINAL CONFESSION

I acknowledge before the Source of all
That life and death are not in my hands.
Just as I did not choose to be born,
so I do not choose to die.
May it come to pass that I may be healed
but if death is my fate,
then I accept it with dignity
and the loving calm
of one who knows the way of all things.

May my death be honorable,
and may my life be a healing memory
for those who know me.

May my loved ones think well of me
and may my memory bring them joy.

From all those I may have hurt,
I ask forgiveness.
Upon all who have hurt me,
I bestow forgiveness.

As a wave returns to the ocean,
so I return to the Source from which I came.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echad.
Hear, O Israel,
that which we call God is Oneness itself.
Blessed is the Way of God,
the Way of Life and Death,
of coming and going,
of meeting and loving,
now and forever.
As I was blessed with the one,
so now am I blessed with the other.
Shalom. Shalom. Shalom.

RABBI RAMI M. SHAPIRO[13]

KAYLA'S PRAYER

Listen to my voice,
O Lord our God and God of my ancestors.

I lie here on the brink of life,
Seeking peace, seeking comfort, seeking You.
To You, O Lord, I call and to You, O Lord, I make my supplication.
Do not ignore my plea.
Let Your mercy flow over me like the waters,
Let the record of my life be a bond between us,
Listen to my voice when I call,
Be gracious to me and answer me.

I have tried, O Lord, to help You complete creation,
I have carried Your Yoke my whole life.
I have tried to do my best.
Count my effort for the good of my soul,
Forgive me for when I have stumbled on Your path.
I can do no more, let my family carry on after me,
Let others carry on after me.

Protector of the helpless, healer of the brokenhearted,
Protect my beloved family with whose souls my own soul is bound.
Their hearts depended upon mine,
Heal their hearts when they come to depend on You.

Let my soul rest forever under the wings of Your presence,
Grant me a share in the world-to-come.

I have tried to love You with all my heart and with all my soul,
And even though You come to take my soul,
Even though I don't know why You come,
Even though I am angry at the way You take me,
For Your sake I will still proclaim:
Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.
The Lord is with me, I shall not fear.

RABBI LAWRENCE TROSTER[14]

The Moment of Death: The boundary between life and death is an awesome place. From one minute to the next, the spirit or soul is gone. Where there was once energy and consciousness, only a body remains. The room feels entirely different. What is to be done?

Some people simply ask forgiveness of the deceased and sit in silence.

There are many ancient customs surrounding the moment of death, some dating back to biblical times. The eyes are closed and the limbs straightened, the body is laid on the floor, feet facing the door. Some open a window, light a candle, cover the mirrors, and empty any standing water in the room.

Many of these traditions began as folkways, intended to help the soul depart and protect it against evil spirits. Over the centuries, customs rooted in superstition became metaphors for letting go. The open window brings in fresh air. The candle recalls the light that was extinguished by death. Pouring water symbolizes the tears to follow.

The traditional blessing uttered upon witnessing or hearing of a death is:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, דַּיַּן הָאֱמֶת.

Baruch ata Adonai Eloheynu melech ha-olam, dayan ha-emet

Holy One of Blessing, Your Presence fills creation, You are indeed the Judge

This statement of total acceptance is a verbal bowing of the head in acknowledgment of what has happened. Like Kaddish, it praises God at a time when God may seem remote, if not cruel.

Many liberal rabbis do not recite the *Dayan ha-Emet* blessing

to mourners, especially in untimely circumstances. How can the death of a child be the result of God's judgment? Is the accidental death of a husband and father in the prime of his life a "ruling" against him?

But for most people, words are nearly meaningless at the moment of death. Consolation comes later.

As soon as someone is able, there are a few official telephone calls to make. If the death occurs at home or anywhere other than a medical facility, notify the doctor and police (911). Contact the funeral home, and inform your rabbi and/or your loved one's rabbi.

Unexpected Deaths: Although accompanying a loved one through a final illness is difficult and painful, it does give family and friends time to prepare themselves for the end. When you know that death is imminent, the move into mourning is more like shifting weight from one foot to the other, but sudden death lifts you up by the back of the neck and drops you, shattered, into the valley of the shadow.

People who lose a loved one by violence, accident, or sudden illness are doubly bereaved. A fatal heart attack, a stillbirth, a car crash, means there was no time to make peace or say good-bye or promise to remember. When a child or young person dies, it feels like life itself has been violated.

The Jewish path through mourning does not try to make sense of such losses, nor does it attempt to make the pain go away. It is only a lifeline, a way to get through.