

The Journey of the Soul: An Introduction to the Study of Death, Mourning and Comforting

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This weekend, we are devoting time to discussions about “Death and Mourning and Comforting in Jewish Tradition”. I first want to thank Esther Stern-Bloom and Sharon Liebhaber, for all of their work in creating a weekend devoted to this topic. On so many occasions within this community, those facing death, whether their own or that of a loved one, have expressed to me and to others confusion about their own beliefs, about what Judaism has to say about these matters. Many here, and in nearly every other corner of the Jewish Community, feel uninformed about our own rituals and beliefs. And, in general, we feel ill-equipped to confront that from which there is no escape.

On some level, we all play the game: if I just ignore it, maybe it will ignore me as well. Or perhaps, if we cannot ignore it, we “soften” our description death in terms intended to be more positive and comforting. Parents often tell younger children a nice story about the death of a grandparent or a close acquaintance, in order to protect the children from pain and sadness (Your G’father is with God. Or God needed your G’Mother and he took her).

If this is what the parent believes, that’s fine. But many parents say this while not believing it themselves. But it is also my observation that, deep down, these parents are not only trying to shelter their children. They tell their children what they might like to believe in order to avoid confronting their own pain. (And this topic of speaking about death with children will be addressed in one of our workshops tomorrow morning). At the same time, we know in our hearts that there is no avoiding the topic of death. We cannot escape being touched or experiencing the pain of such a loss. As we learn from the Torah: *Ein bayit asher ein sham met/* No house remains untouched by death.

And so, Sharon and Esther have taken the lead in raising this issue explicitly for us to discuss. During this weekend, we will cover topics ranging from the practical (for how many months do I say *kaddish*?) to topics more theological and theoretical, all in an attempt to educate, to inform and mostly to explain some of the central concepts and practices which make up some of the Jewish views about death and mourning. It is my assignment this morning to begin this discussion.

I would like therefore to introduce this topic with a few comments which I hope can provide a framework for our discussions. From my perspective, this topic and framework should begin with some thoughts about the soul.

What is the soul? In 1140, in his famous, “historical novel” called the Kuzari, Yehuda HaLevi speaks of the soul of Moses:

When Moses would speak, instruct and lead us, what came out of him did not emanate from his tongue, or his heart or his brain. Rather those were just tools that Moses’ soul used to speak to us. The entity called “Moses” then, is the speaking, discerning soul. (The Kuzari, II:6, Jason Aronson, p. 33)

All of us are given a soul, which is what differentiates humanity most profoundly from the rest of the animal kingdom. In the language of Judaism, it is our souls that makes us human. The soul is that spirit, that spark of the Divine, implanted in us, as suggested by the story of the creation of humanity in the Garden of Eden. Our souls enables us to act, at times, in ways that are counter-intuitive: helping another person, restricting what we eat or how we act. Our souls reflect the deepest aspects of what makes us who we are as individuals.

Life, from a Jewish perspective, is not measured on the basis of that which is material or transient. This doesn't mean there is something wrong with you if you have enjoy material success, if you live a life of comfort or luxury. On the contrary, from a Jewish perspective we are encouraged to enjoy the beauty and to experience the richness and the blessings which this world offers. But ultimately, when we die, if we are to be judged "on High", and/or if we are to be lauded by friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances after we have died, we shall be remembered in the context of the values and priorities which characterized the way we lived.

We shall be judged on the basis of our souls. Have we lived by the values to which we pay lip-service? Have we acted in ways that demonstrate the best of what it means to be human? As we grow through life, have we done our best? Have we used our lives for good? Have we improved, through our actions, the quality of our souls?

Each morning, during the *Shacharit* service (Sim Shalom, Weekday Service, p. 7), we ask in a rhetorical fashion: What am I? What is my worth? *Mah anachnu, meh chayyeinu, meh chasdeinu*? And in asking we are reminding ourselves to live lives that will help us increase the spiritual worth of our souls. For ultimately, material objects or physical attributes are of little use to us. Despite our money, wealth, fame and fortune, life ends for all in the same way. "Fear not when a man grows rich...for he will take nothing with him, his wealth does not follow". (Ps 49). Expressed differently we will not be judged on the basis of how much we have spent but on how much we have given.

There is a story about a man, Sam, who was leaving his apartment building and, as he exited, he bumped into someone entering and realized that this was Murray is old friend. They embrace: "How have you been..." "Can you loan me \$100. I'll pay back immediately". Murray writes a check. A full year later, the two meet again. After pleasantries Murray says: "I loaned you \$100 and you never re-paid me". Sam apologized. "I'll go up to get the money this instant". Sam returns with the same check which murray wrote a year before. Murray is surprised and says: "I don't mind that you borrowed or that it took a year to pay, but if you were not going to do something with it, why did you want me to lend it to you?"

The point of this story is conveyed, as well, in a beautiful verse from Psalms, Ps. 24 in which we read:

Asher Lo Nasa LaShav Nafshi/ (speaking of God) Who has not given me a soul for nothing.

If God has given us a soul, it was not given without a reason. The reason we are given a soul, I believe, is to improve upon it so that, when we die, our soul has been strengthened, elevated and been refined. By virtue of the fact that we possess a soul, the Psalmist refers to humans as, "little less than the angels". It is because we have a soul. Because we possess the capacity to strengthen and elevate our souls by the performance of *mitzvot* and deeds of kindness, we have the capacity to come closer to and connect with God.

It is only on the basis of a recognition that we possess a soul that Jewish laws and traditions relating to death, mourning and comforting make sense. For in these laws and traditions, the notions and beliefs about the soul are reflected. A few examples:

When a person dies, for example, we do not embalm. Why? Because when a person dies, we are urged to focus on the soul of that individual. It is inevitable that we think about the physical person in the moments and days following death, but our thought should not fixate on the structure which housed the soul. It is the soul that is our primary concern. And so, traditionally we do not need to embalm, because we rush to bury as soon as possible in order to remove from focus the physical person. Traditionally, we do not prepare bodies with make-up or new clothes for viewing. Viewing relates to the physical person. But from our perspective, although the body has died, the soul persists. We want to focus on the soul.

When I first came to Philadelphia nearly 25 years ago, in order to familiarize myself with the different aspects of the community, I visited the funeral homes (at the time there were three) on Broad Street. I remember speaking with funeral director who gave me a tour of the facility and, best for last, the casket room. On display were dozens of different models, from pressed-board (used for cremations), to bronze caskets. I remember that, on one of the metal caskets, there was a small Cadillac insignia.

I do not mean to offend anyone, nor to make light of the choice someone here may have made at a time, and under circumstances that are, by definition, difficult. But such a choice represents a major misunderstanding of Jewish tradition and beliefs: We are not sending the person on a journey, placing them in a bronze casket to a special place to which they, and the rest of us, are going. The body is not going anywhere after the burial.

The reason we suggest that caskets be plain pine, is not only to save the consumer money. We urge our mourners to choose a simple casket in order to demonstrate

1. The person is not going anywhere. It is the soul which departs. The body's life span is limited, but the soul is eternal.
2. A plain unfinished casket decomposes quickly along with the body. We say that a body returns to dust. The body, like any physical matter decomposes. It is the soul, the not parts of who we are which are not physical, on which we are urged to focus our thoughts.
3. During *shiva*, we light a candle in the home. Why? As it says in Proverbs the light of God is at the core of a person's soul – *Ner HaShem Nishmat Adam*. In the *shiva* home, the candle, literally and figurative, pierces the darkness, illumination the sadness with the memories of the soul of our loved one. It is the soul, you see, that survives.

Similarly, the traditional dress for burial is also unadorned. The burial garbs are called "*Tachrichim*": Shrouds. Unlike a new suit or dress, shrouds are pure white, often made of linen. But they are distinct in at least two ways:

1. They have no buttons. After being placed on the deceased, the cloth is basted together.
2. They have no pockets, a reminder that, where one goes, one takes nothing with them other than their good name.

All of these issues and more will be discussed in the classes this weekend.

The ancient Jewish traditions connected to “Death, Mourning and Comforting” are reminders of our history, of reminders of parents and grandparents whose adherences and beliefs preserved these practices for us. These rituals, however, beyond their original rationales, create the mechanism and structure which enables not only mourners to mourn. These rituals provide the opportunities and the guidance necessary for the community to support and to comfort. As Rabbi Harold Kushner put it, “unlike Christianity which is a religion centered in faith...Judaism is a religion centered in community”. And for those who have been touched the warmth and love of our community, by way of our *Chesed* Committee, understand this in a deep and meaningful way from their own experience.

The Hebrew word for funeral is “*leveiy'a*” which means “to accompany”. When a loved one dies, the specific mitzvah to attend the funeral is fulfilled by “accompanying” the deceased to the cemetery. But the act of accompanying goes even further.

When a loved one dies, our world divides between mourner and comforter. Through our rituals and our practices, through our *minhagim* and through *halacha* each person has a job. The mourner sits to contemplate the magnitude of the loss and the impact which one’s loved one has made, on themselves and on others, through their humanity, their goodness and through the soul which they carried. And for the community, these laws and traditions provide a way to support and to nurture. Lacking words which can heal or actions which will eradicate pain, comforters, through their presence remind the mourner that they are not alone. As the mourner makes his/her journey through the “valley of the shadow of death”, a comforter, by virtue of their presence his/her presence says, “Let me walk with you. You need not walk this path alone. I will accompany you”.