A little bit about the names mentioned above: (You should always know from whom you are learning!)

I am Rabbi Me’irah Iliinsky. Before my ordination at Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, I was a clinical social worker for 15 years in Portland, Oregon. I did my chaplaincy residency at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. I currently work as the staff rabbi and chaplain for Vitas Health Care in the San Francisco Bay region. Art has always been a part of my life.

My presentation today draws on the work of Rabbi Joshua Elkin, who has been called a “visionary Jewish educator.” For his doctorate at Teachers College (part of Jewish Theological Seminary) he did a dissertation on curriculum for teaching Jewish adolescents about death and dying and bereavement. There, he broke away from teaching this material in a chronological order, and formulated this structure based on Jewish values. Rabbi Elkin is an Executive and Leadership Coach. I learned about his work in a course from the Gamliel Institute.
The Jewish life cycle has historically been taught in chronological order. Even when explaining traditions at the end of life, most writers organize the material from final illness through death, care of the body, funeral, burial and mourning.

The chronological structure describes “what,” we do, but this chronological structure doesn’t address the deeper issues as to “why” we do it. Rabbi Elkin has distilled eight values from our customs at the end of life, and organizes the teaching of these customs around the eight values. This helps us understand how these age old traditions function to support the lives of individuals and communities.

We will explore each Value concept in turn, giving examples from our sacred texts as well as examples of how these values are practiced today. The values are not in a tidy, mutually exclusive, paired order, with “one value” assigned to “one tradition,” but occur over and over, woven throughout the various rituals.
In our daily prayers, we say, “We are grateful to you and sing your praises for our life, which is bound up in your hand and for our souls which you have appointed us...” At Yom Kippur, a time we rehearse our own death, we sing a liturgical poem based on Jeremiah: “Like clay in the hands of the potter, who forms it or crushes it at will, so are we in Your hand.”


The entire hospice movement is based on accepting the reality of death, that it must come to every person. You in this audience are the experts in this value. Heroic measures may emanate from a hopeful intention, but they can also lead to more suffering, isolation, and dying in an impersonal place. We all must meet with death. In complete concert with hospice, Judaism’s position is that we neither hasten nor delay death.
We show respect for life’s vessel, the body or, as we say in Hebrew, meit for a man or meitah for a woman.

Pictured here are the women who form a taharah team, the particular individuals who have volunteered to do the ritual washing of a meitah. A men’s team will work with men. We wash her first for cleanliness, then a second time by pouring water over her as in a mikvah, or ritual bath, marking a life transition. She is then dressed in garments akin to those that the High Priest wore in ancient days in the Temple in Jerusalem when entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. At that time, the high priest would appear before God to learn the judgement of the People Israel for that year.

Every part of the ritual washing, or taharah, is accompanied by prayers of love, of hope for compassion on the day of judgement, of giving and asking forgiveness. We understand that in the taharah room both God and the soul of the deceased are present along with the taharah team and the meitah.

In this image, the taharah team has almost completed their task. They have gathered here to say the final prayer, asking the meitah for forgiveness if they have done anything to embarrass her, or showed any lack of respect in their work. Next, the team will wrap the sheet around her, and then place the cover on the casket. These are the last people to see her. While we do speak to her, we do not stare at the meitah, especially before she is clothed, when she is not able to look back at us.
Rabban Gamliel was a great first century sage and leader in the Sanhedrin, the rabbinical high court. Pictured here is Rabban Gamliel’s funeral. He is wrapped in the simplest of burial garments, and carried by four people on a stretcher.

“Originally people spent so much money on a lavish funeral, the poor would sometimes abandon their loved ones rather than incur the great expense of burial. Then Rabban Gamliel left instructions that he be buried in a simple garment, and people followed his example.”

Babylonian Talmud: Mo’ed Katan, 27 a&b

It is difficult to separate the values of equality and simplicity, as one follows the other: If all are equal and made in the image of God, then we must practice the simplest of ways, so as not to burden those with less means.

In Israel, people are buried directly into the holy ground with no casket. In the US, this is starting to be possible in green cemeteries in many communities. Green burial is consistent with Jewish practice.

**Other examples of equality and simplicity**

- plain pine casket with no nails, finishing, carving, lining, etc.
- Simple potluck food at the home of the mourner (rather than catering)
- No flowers, but rather, charitable donations in the name of the deceased
One particularly poignant example of the value of expressing emotions comes from the story of Joseph.

“And they brought the coat of many colors to their father and said, ‘This we have found: Do you know whether it is your son’s coat or not?’ And he recognized it, and said, ‘It is my son’s coat! An evil beast has devoured him! Joseph is surely torn to pieces!’ And Jacob tore his garment and put on sackcloth on his loins and he bewailed his son a great many days.” Genesis 37:32-34

Of course, the intense and complex emotions accompanying illness and death might occur at any time. However, Judaism also has structured times whose purpose is to allow persons to give full attention to their feelings of grief.

To this day, we keep the tradition of tearing a garment or wearing a torn black ribbon, a symbol of this potent expression of the tear in the fabric of our lives. Shiva is tradition of setting aside a period of 7 days devoted to attending to one’s grief. It begins upon returning home from the funeral. The shiva home, rather than being empty, is filled with community who come to pray, share meals and remembrances of the deceased.

**Other texts describing expressions of grief:**
- Abraham mourns Sarah  Gen 23:2
- The people mourn Aaron Numbers  20:29
- Joseph & the people mourn Jacob  Gen 50:1-14
Just as we come together to celebrate the joyous occasions with our community, there are many ways we come together to support the family in their loss. One of the most powerful customs in which the community shares responsibility is the literal “burying of the dead.” At the graveside family members, and others who wish, are encouraged to place at least three shovels-full of earth upon the casket, and continue until it is entirely buried. This activity helps the mourners face the reality of death in a shared bonding ritual within a community. The most impactful moment in the funeral is hearing the first shovelful of earth hit the casket.

(The basis of burial comes from this verse in Genesis: “By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread, until your return unto the earth, for from it you were taken, and dust you are and unto dust shall you return. Gen 3:19)

(“The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written in Deut 34:6: ‘And He buried him in the valley.’ So should you, also, bury the dead.” Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14A)
While there is definitely a tradition of “The World to Come” in Judaism, we are firm in what we know here in this world, but less so about the world to come. In this world, we must help God finish the work of Creation; that is, to make the world more perfect: right injustices, care for those around us.

Some examples of how we affirm life are:
- An ethical will is essentially a list of what one has found to be the most important lessons learned in life. It can be addressed to our descendants, students, or community of friends. Our possessions may last a few generations, but the wisdom one has accumulated, articulated in an ethical will, will hopefully become integrated into the very character of those whose lives we have touched. Imagine how precious this might be for generations yet to come!
- Bikkur Holim—Visiting the sick
- Lehayyim—Our constant toast “to life” at every joyous occasion
- Hesped—Eulogy—Honoring the deceased’s life in spoken and written public statements
- Recounting memories and stories of the deceased at shivah
- Bringing round foods, such as eggs & lentils, symbols of the cycle of life, for the meal of comfort and for the shiva period
We now address the eighth and last value identified by Rabbi Elkin: Memory.
Depicted here is the custom of reciting *kaddish*, an Aramaic prayer praising God, that mourners recite for specified periods of time after a death. It is a daily prayer that requires the response of a *minyan*, a quorum of 10. In that way, the mourner is drawn back into community daily, and has a specified, yet brief time each day, to focus on their loss, and integrate it into their ongoing life.

**Other ways we remember:**
- Headstone (unveiling)
- *Yahrtzeit*—yearly lighting of a candle on the anniversary of the death.
- *Yizkor* Services—Special services of remembering throughout the holiday cycle of the year. (4 times per year.)
- *Tzedakah*—Funding charities
- Naming children after the deceased
In hospice work, we attend to the quality of life, not simply ‘being alive.’ Within the value of “Affirmation of life,” let us focus on visiting the sick. In Judaism, ‘Affirmation of Life’ can be understood as not just life itself, but what we are charged to do with our lives.

In Deuteronomy 13:5 we read, “After the Lord your God you shall walk…”

Let’s listen in to a 2000 year old discussion from Talmud about this verse:
“R. Hama son of R. Hanina said: What means the text: “Ye shall walk after the Lord your God? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah?* for has it not been said: ‘For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire?’

But the meaning is this: to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written in Gen 3:7: ‘And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them’ (verbally explain interpretation) So should you, also, clothe the naked.

The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written in Gen 18:1: ‘And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre,’ (verbally explain interpretation) So should you, also, visit the sick.

The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written in Gen 25:11: ‘And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son.’ So should you also comfort mourners.

The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written in Deut 34:6: ‘And He buried him in the valley.’ So should you, also, bury the
To Walk After God…

- Clothe the naked
- Visit the sick
- Comfort the mourners
- Bury the dead

So what does it mean to walk after God? Work for Hospice!
Let’s look at a few more stories about visiting the sick.
Abraham’s Visit by the Angels

Here is a deeper explanation of the verse alluded to by Rabbis Huna and Hanina 2000 years ago about God visiting the sick:

“And the Lord appeared to him by the trees of Mamre, as he sat in the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and looked, and lo, three men were standing opposite him.” Genesis 18:1-2

In Genesis 17, the chapter directly before this verse, God offers to make a covenant with Abraham. Abraham’s sign of accepting the covenant is the ritual of circumcision. Chapter 17 concludes with Abraham and his son Ishmael, and all the men of his house being circumcised that very day.

The interpretation of the juxtaposition of these verses is that God visited Abraham when he was ill and in pain. This interpretation, that God was visiting the sick, also hints that Godliness can appear in the form of human beings.

When we visit the sick, we are “walking after God.”
Rabbi Akiva lived toward the end of the first century. He was of humble background. He was a devoted student of Torah, and a much beloved figure in Talmud. He died as a martyr, burned to death, in the Roman occupation of Jerusalem.

(Talmud: Commentary on Torah compiled from 200-500, which forms the basis for Judaism that is practiced today.)

**Rabbi Akiva Visits the Outcast**

“One of R. Akiva’s disciples fell ill, and the sages did not visit him. So R. Akiva himself entered his house to visit him, and swept and sprinkled the ground before him. ‘My master,’ said he, ‘you have revived me!’ Straightway R. Akiba went forth and lectured: ‘He who does not visit the sick is like a shedder of blood.’” *Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 40a.*

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

Q. Have you ever been alone, and ill, with no one to visit you? What was that like?

Q. Were you ever so ill that you wished you could die?

Q. How did you feel towards visitors when you are ill and cannot help yourself?

The Talmud says that visiting someone who is ill takes away 1/60th of the illness.
(The Chaplain’s Visit)

Rabbi Yohanan visits Rabbi Elazar

Rabbi Yohanan was renowned for his luminous beauty, warmth and caring. He went to visit his student, Rabbi Elazar. The room was dark so R. Yohanan bared his arm, illuminating the room. He saw that Elazar was crying. “Why do you weep Elazar?” Yohanan proceeded to ask a number of questions indicating that Elazar was deathly ill. “I am weeping,” Elazar replied, looking up at him, “to think that one as beautiful as you must one day also rot in the earth!” Rabbi Yohanan replied, “Well you should weep on that account!” So the two of them wept together!

*Babylonian Talmud*, Berachot 5b.

R. Yohanan said, “Give me your hand.”

R. Elazar gave R. Yohanan his hand, and R. Yohanan raised him. *Babylonian Talmud: Berachot 5b*.

**Text Study Questions:**

1. Whose concern did the two discuss?
2. Why did Elazar mention Yohanan’s death, when Elazar was the one who was ill?
The values identified by Rabbi Elkin can be found in sacred Jewish texts. They open a meaningful way to organize the teaching of Jewish practice in the transition from life to death, that describes not only what we do, but the meaning behind our practice.