

# JEWISH PRINCIPLES OF CARE FOR THE DYING

BY RABBI AMY EILBERG

(adapted from *Acts of Loving Kindness: A Training Manual for Bikur Holim*)

**E**ntering a room or home where death is a presence requires a lot of us. It is an intensely demanding and evocative situation. It touches our own relationship to death and to life. It may touch our own personal grief, fears and vulnerability. It may acutely remind us that we, too, will someday die. It may bring us in stark, painful confrontation with the face of injustice when a death is untimely or, in our judgement, preventable. If we are professional caregivers, we may also face feelings of frustration and failure.

Here are some Jewish principles of care for the dying which are helpful to keep in mind:

### ***B'tselem Elohim* (created in the image of the Divine)**

This is true no matter what the circumstances at the final stage of life. Often it is our task to simply see that no matter how much time remains until the moment of death, this person embodies a spark of the Divine.

### ***Refu'at HaNefesh* (healing of the spirit)**

With surprising frequency, the final stages of life offer the possibility of healing of the spirit, precisely when healing of the body is no longer a possibility. It is helpful to simply know this truth, and perhaps to remember occasions when one has seen this in life.

### **Hopefulness**

As long as there is life, there is hope. It is not helpful to encourage unrealistic expectations on the level of physical healing, lest the patient and loved ones feel betrayed and shattered when this hope proves unjustified. There are things to hope for, and an attitude of hopefulness is possible even in dark times.

### ***Teshuva* (repentance/turning/atonement)**

One Talmudic rabbi taught, "Do *teshuva* the day before you die." This poignant teaching encourages all of us to live our lives in such a way that we will be ready when death comes. It helps to know that extraordinary acts of soul-searching, reconciliation, and growth can and do happen right up to the end of life.

### **Community**

Inevitably, we die alone, in our own body, on our own solitary journey. Yet as with every phase of the Jew's life, we journey with others, those who have

gone before and those who stand with us now. We are part of this larger community (a Jewish community, a human community) that has known death and will continue to live after our bodies are gone—part of something stronger and larger than death.

### **Appreciation of Everyday Miracles**

Quite often, the nearness of death awakens a powerful appreciation of the "miracles that are with us, morning, noon and night" (in the language of the Amidah prayer). Appreciation loves company; we only need to say "yes" when people express these things.

### **Afterlife**

Unfortunately, most Jews have little knowledge of our tradition's very rich teachings on life after death. Read up on the subject, then, just listen to the person who is dying.

*For those who visit, care, and comfort.*

## *A Blessing*

May you be comforted by your ability to care and to give comfort.

May you derive strength from your own deeply held faith to be emotionally present to suffering and grief.

May your prayers give voice to the awesome state of our mortality in the face of the infinite.

And may you find grace to help others see that rage against loss carries within it the feisty spark of its own divine energy.

That our outcry is as important as our tears.

BY DR. KEN GORFINKLE

Adapted from "*When a Child Dies: Helping the Rabbi Help,*"

Keynote Address presented Nov. 30, 1999.

# THE HARDEST TASK OF ALL...

A couple of years ago, an oncologist called for a consultation. Over the past two years, he had treated a medical colleague for cancer, and the two doctors had become good friends in the process. Barely holding back his tears, he explained that the cancer had advanced to a point where no more treatment was of use, and it was time to tell his patient, his friend, that it was time to turn to palliative care, to put his affairs in order, and to prepare for death. "But how?" he pleaded, "How can I say that to him?"

I didn't *have* a script to offer, *but* I did share with him the following midrash from the Middle Ages:

"Is this matter meant for me?"

Moses tells Aaron of his impending death.

*A Midrash*

Said the Holy Blessed One to Moses, "Do Me a favor and tell Aaron of his death, for I am ashamed to tell him."

What did Moses do? He rose early in the morning and went to Aaron. "My brother Aaron!" he cried.

Aaron immediately came down to him and asked, "Why have you come here so early today?"

Replied Moses, "There was a matter in Torah that was difficult for me, and I pondered it all night. That is why I have come to you early in the morning."

"What matter is it?" asked Aaron.

"I do not know what matter it was; I know only that it is in the Book of Genesis."

They took the Book of Genesis and read from it together. When they reached the creation of Adam, Moses said, "What shall I say about Adam, who brought death to the world?"

"Moses, my brother," replied Aaron, "shall we not accept God's decree in this matter?"

Said Moses, "And I, who ruled over the ministering angels, and you, who stopped the Angel of Death—will our end not be thus?"

As soon as Moses reminded him of the day of death, Aaron's bones felt weak. "Is this matter meant for me?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Moses.

Thereupon (the people of) Israel saw that he was diminished in size.

Moses said to him, "Do you accept death?"

"Yes," answered Aaron.

"Then let us ascend to *Hor HaHar*," said Moses.

When they ascended to *Hor HaHar*, a cave opened for them, where they found a bier which was the work of Heaven. Aaron took off one garment at a time, which

Elazar put on, while a fog enveloped Aaron.

Immediately, the Divine Presence (Shekhinah) descended and kissed him. Then the Holy Blessed One said to Moses, "Depart from here." When they left, the cave was sealed. And Moses and Elazar descended.

— YALKUT SHIMONI (early 12th century), HUKKAT 76

*He asked me to fax him this story, and subsequently told me that the two of them read it together, and wept together. Even the Holy Blessed One finds it hard.*

—RABBI SIMKHA Y. WEINTRAUB, CSW,  
RABBINIC DIRECTOR, NCJH

## *Psalm One Hundred Forty-Three* Last Days

Guide me, Holy One, on this final journey,  
Your hand pointing the way,  
Your loving eye upon my face  
As I seek my new dwelling.

Surround me with Your kindness,  
Embrace me with tranquility;  
Soothe my fears with the surety of Your care,  
Even as I release my tears to Your custody.

Then shall I find Your eternal gift of peace,  
Laid out for my notice and my strength.  
Linger near, Holy One, through these trials,  
Easing my way as I fly to your keeping.

DEBBIE PERLMAN  
Resident Psalmist, Beth Emet,  
The Free Synagogue, Evanston, Illinois

## Choices: Hospice Care at the End of Life

Since hospice care for the dying is a relatively new type of care on the American medical scene, many of us are just learning about what it offers. Hospice care provides aggressive comfort (palliative) care as well as pain management, and is considered an option when the disease process is irreversible and aggressive medical treatment to “cure” is either inappropriate or futile. Since most hospice services are primarily provided at home, hospice actually represents a philosophy of care rather than an actual physical structure. The philosophy is holistic, so the health care team for each patient and family not only includes medically trained members, but those trained in psychological and spiritual support as well. The goal of this kind of care is to help make every remaining moment at the end of life as comfortable and as meaningful as possible for the patient and his or her loved ones.

Here is a small compilation of resources echoing some of the Jewish voices on hospice care (put together by Rabbi Simkha Weintraub). We encourage you to learn more about the availability of hospice care in your community, and to address any specific questions and concerns you may have with your doctor and/or your rabbi.

“As we learn more about the dying process, hospice care becomes not only a permissible option, but, at least in most cases, the Jewish preferable one...It has become widely known that dying patients usually do not fear death as much as they fear pain, isolation, physical deterioration, and infantilization. Therefore, hospice care...has a much better chance than a hospital does of addressing the real needs of the dying...Even the person’s physical needs are probably better served through hospice care. One enters a hospice program fully aware that death cannot be avoided; therefore the goal of both the person and the attending health care personnel is no longer confused by unrealistic wishes but is rather clearly focused on pain management. Since Judaism generally is interested in the whole person and not just the body, and since even care of the body is greatly influenced by a person’s psychological well-being, rabbis should explore it (hospice care) with the terminally ill and their families, and where appropriate, recommend it...”

RABBI ELLIOTT DORFF,  
in *Conservative Judaism* magazine,  
Spring 1991, pages 26-7.

“In many ways, hospice care epitomizes what all medical care should be, and it exemplifies the Jewish vision of healing, addressing both *r’fuat hanefesh* and *r’fuat haguf*, healing of the body and healing of the spirit. Hospice care—whether provided in a residential center or in the patient’s home—is care that addresses the possibilities of healing, when the time to fight for cure has passed, when the pursuit of cure would only destroy the person’s opportunity to use the remaining time meaningfully. Hospice is care of the whole person—care of the person’s body and emotions and spiritual life, care for the whole family and the person’s circle of caregivers, care for the context in which the person will live the last chapter of life. Hospice care is offered by a team of care providers who actually talk to one another, who understand that the parts of the person are interconnected, and that the best care is care that recognizes and honors those connections. Hospice is care that is loving, fierce in its determination to alleviate the pain, and respectful of the life this person has lived. Hospice, at its best, is care that is unafraid of death and pain, reverent of the mysteries of life and death, aware of the limitations of medical technology and of the possibilities of love...”

RABBI AMY EILBERG, from “*Walking in the Valley of the Shadow: The Spiritual and Ethical Dimensions of Care at the End of Life*,” delivered at the “End of Life Issues and Care: Jewish Perspectives” Conference, Nov. 4, 1998.

“...Hospice reflects King Solomon’s observation: “There is a time to give birth and a time to die...” (*Ecclesiastes 3:2*)...Had King Solomon written there is “a time to live”, a dying patient’s family might feel that “they must do everything to keep him alive,” even if it is medically futile. Hospice helps us understand and accept the wisdom that “we are born...live...and die against our will” (*Avot 4:29*).

Medical science—with all its sophisticated technology—may, at best, postpone the arrival of the Angel of Death; it cannot deny him access forever. Accepting our mortality by acknowledging that our loved one is dying is not an act of abandonment or a lack of faith and love. It is, rather, the recognition of the reality that ultimately each of us must surrender our soul to our Maker. For patient and family, hospice can make those final days together among the most poignant and meaningful they have ever shared.

RABBI ZEV SCHOSTAK  
“Precedents for Hospice and Surrogate  
Decision-Making in Jewish Law,” in  
*Tradition* magazine 34:2, page 50.

# Jewish Teachings About Death Through the Ages

(selected and compiled by RABBI SIMKHA Y. WEINTRAUB, CSW, Rabbinic Director, NCJH)

## SOME BIBLICAL EXPRESSIONS FOR DEATH

*"He was gathered to his people."*

GENESIS 25:8

*"The dust returns to the earth  
as it was, and the spirit returns  
unto God who gave it..."*

ECCLESIASTES 12:7

## EARLY RABBINIC TRADITION

*"And the day of death is better than the day  
of one's birth" (ECCLESIASTES 7:1) The day on  
which a great person dies is better than the  
day on which he was born; because none  
knows, on the day of his birth, what his deeds  
will be, but at his death, his good deeds are  
published unto all, and for this reason is  
'the day of death better than  
the day of one's birth'.*

EXODUS RABBAH 48:1

*"Death was decreed for all, so that men  
may not be righteous just for the sake of life."*

RABBI JONATHAN BEN ELIEZER IN GENESIS RABBAH 9:5

## SOME MEDIEVAL JEWISH GUIDANCE

*"Death is the means of  
transition to a future life,  
which is the ultimate  
goal of mortal existence."*

SAADIA, EMUNOT VEDEOT, 933 CE, 3:7

*"If God didn't hide from all people the  
date of their death, nobody would build  
a home, nobody would plant a vineyard,  
because everyone would say, 'I'm going to  
die tomorrow, so of what purpose is it for  
me to work today?' For this reason, God  
denies us knowing the day of our death,  
in the hope that we will build and plant.*

*If not for ourselves, others will  
benefit from our labor."*

YALKUT SHIMONI ON ECCLESIASTES 9:5

## HASIDIC TEACHINGS

*"Fear not death.  
It is just a matter of  
going from one room  
to another, ultimately  
to the most  
beautiful room..."*

MENACHEM MENDEL OF KOTZK, EMET VEEMUNA (1940)

## CONTEMPORARY JEWISH VOICES:

*"The greatest problem is not how to continue but  
how to exalt our existence. The cry of a life  
beyond the grave is presumptuous, if there is no  
cry for eternal life prior to our descending to  
the grave...Eternity is not perpetual future but  
perpetual presence. He has planted in us the seed  
of eternal life. The world to come is not only a  
hereafter but also a herenow...This is the meaning of  
death: the ultimate self-dedication to the divine.  
Death so understood will not be distorted by  
the craving for immortality, for this act of giving  
away is reciprocity on man's part for God's gift  
of life. For the pious man, it is a  
privilege to die."*

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, FROM MAN IS NOT ALONE

## SOME YIDDISH FOLK SAYINGS ABOUT DEATH

*For dying, you always have plenty of time.  
Every man knows he will die,  
but no one wants to believe it.  
There are no bad mothers and no good death.  
Death does not knock on the door.  
The Angel of Death always finds an excuse.  
One is certain only of death.*

Adonai will rout out your enemies who rise up against you,  
to be defeated before your face;  
they shall march against you one way, but flee before you seven ways.  
(Deuteronomy 28:7)

You will winnow them, and the wind will carry them away,  
the whirlwind will scatter them;  
but you, you will rejoice in Adonai,  
you will glory in the Holy One of Israel!  
(Isaiah 41:16)

Delight yourself in Adonai;  
Who will give you the desires of your heart.  
(Psalm 37:4)

Blessed shall you be when you come in,  
and blessed shall you be when you go out.  
(Deuteronomy 28:6)

As an eagle rouses its nest, flutters over its young,  
spreads out its wings, takes them, bears them on its pinions.  
(Deuteronomy 32:11)

God set him atop the high places,  
feasting on the produce of the fields;  
God fed him honey out of the crag,  
oil from the flinty rock  
(Deuteronomy 32:13)

The name of Adonai is a tower of strength;  
To which the righteous runs, and is safe.  
(Proverbs 18:10)

Awake, O north wind; come, O south wind!  
Blow upon my garden, that its perfume may flow out.  
Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat its luscious fruits.  
(Song of Songs 4:16)

Above it stood the seraphim; each one had six wings;  
with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his legs,  
and with two he did fly  
(Isaiah 6:2)

Open the gates, and let a righteous nation enter,  
one that keeps faith/truth.  
(Isaiah 26:2)

But those who trust in Adonai shall renew their strength;  
they shall grow new wings as eagles;  
they shall run, and not be weary;  
they shall walk, and not grow faint.  
(Isaiah 40:31)

Then shall your light break through like dawn,  
Your healing spring up quickly;  
and your righteousness shall march before you;  
the Presence of Adonai shall be your rear guard  
(Isaiah 58:8)

Adonai will guide you continually, satisfy your soul in drought,  
and give strength to your bones;  
You shall be like a well-watered garden,  
Like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.  
(Isaiah 58:11)

Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity,  
Passing over the transgression of the remnant of his heritage?  
Who does not retain anger forever, delighting instead in lovingkindness?  
(Micah 7:18)

Adonai of hosts is with us; our refuge is the God of Jacob, Selah.  
(Psalm 46:8)

Adonai of hosts – happy is the person who trusts in You!  
(Psalm 84:13)

Save, Adonai! The King will answer us on the day that we call.  
(Psalm 20:10)

You are my hiding place/my shelter; you preserve me from distress;  
You surround me with joyous songs of deliverance. Selah.  
(Psalm 32:7)

Thus God redeems his soul from going into the Pit,  
and his life shall bask in the light.  
(Job 33:28)

Adonai will guard you from all evil/harm; Adonai will guard your soul.  
(Psalm 121:7)

Adonai will guard your going out and your coming in  
from this time forth, and for evermore.  
(Psalm 121:8)

*"Faith in the world-to-come makes a difference. It makes a difference to how one views life, and surely to how one accepts death."*

-RABBI DAVID WOLPE

## Two Classic Jewish Stories on the Afterlife

### The Twins

The classic Jewish summary on the laws of death and mourning, *Gesher ha-Hayyim* ("The Bridge of Life"), opens with an intriguing analogy. It asks the reader to imagine twins lying together in the womb. Everything they need is provided. One of them believes, "irrationally," that there is a world beyond the womb. The other is convinced that such beliefs are nonsense. The first tells of a world where people walk upright, where there are mountains and oceans, a sky filled with stars. The other can barely contain his contempt for such foolish ideas.

Suddenly, the "believer" is forced through the birth canal. All the fetus knew is gone. Imagine, asks the author, how the fetus left behind must view this—that a great catastrophe has just happened to his companion. Outside the womb, however, the parents are rejoicing. For what the brother left behind has just witnessed is not death but birth. This is a classic view of the afterlife—it is a birth into a world that we on earth cannot begin to imagine.

### A Ship Leaving Port

An old rabbinic teaching says that birth and death can be thought of like the launching of a ship. People are apprehensive when a ship leaves, for they do not know what storms and adventures may befall it. When it docks in a safe harbor, everyone celebrates. We do the reverse with people—we celebrate birth, although not knowing what life will hold, and we mourn over death. But death is really the return, the docking in a safe harbor.

From, RABBI DAVID WOLPE, *"Images of God as Healer"* (1995 monograph, NCJH)

## RABBI CHARLES RUDANSKY

*As the Jewish chaplain at the Hospice Care Network, I received a call with a request from a patient's wife to visit her dying husband whose nurse felt he would not survive the day. When I arrived, the whole family had gathered in his room. Though extremely frail, he was able to greet me. He requested that a prayer be said, not for him for he was ready to die, but for the well-being of his wife, and family. I invited everyone to express their feelings to this beloved man. I found myself in a very powerful and spiritual moment as each family member came up to his bedside and told him how much he had meant to them.*

*When I got to the office on Wednesday, I learned that he was still alive. I visited him again on Thursday, but this time he was in a deep coma. In sharp contrast to Sunday the house was quiet, and only his wife and the nurse's aid were around. As I was leaving, his wife whispered to me, "Why? How is he surviving?" I turned to her and told her the story of Rabbi Judah's handmaid. Then I said to her, "Your children are still praying and hoping that a miracle could occur." She nodded and began to weep. I stayed with her a little longer, then left. As I was travelling along the highway it began to storm with heavy rain and lightening. Nearing the city I entered the tunnel, and as I came out I was paged by the patient's wife and returned her call. "Rabbi," she said, "during the storm we lost our electricity for a few minutes. By the time I got a flashlight and went upstairs to check on my husband, he had passed away. The oxygen machine had stopped during the storm. I guess the immortals finally won. Thank you for that beautiful story. I will never forget it and will make sure that everyone at the funeral will know that this righteous man had the same kind of death as the great Rabbi Judah."*

RABBI CHARLES RUDANSKY is the Pastoral Counselor/Rabbi of the Hospice Care Network of Long Island and religious leader of the Westchester Religious Institute, Mamaroneck, N.Y.

## DR. IRA BYOCK

*Death is an unwanted intruder in our lives. Particularly when death approaches someone we love, we cling to any remnant of life. But we are mortal—and as much as we'd like to deny it, illness, dying, death and grief are part of the fullness of life.*

*In the story of Rabbi Judah HaNassi's death, we glimpse the paradox of illness as a gift, a way God has given us to prepare for death. The progressive symptoms and disability of illness can help the person who is forced to confront death gradually adjust to leaving this life. In the process a persons' family and friends may come to realize that death is not only an enemy to be battled, but also the inevitable and natural culmination of life. This insight allows those of us who struggle against the pain of looming loss to loosen our selfish hold on the person who is suffering, allowing him or her to leave with our love and our blessing.*

*In momentarily distracting the Rabbis from prayer, the handmaiden acted out of love for Rabbi HaNassi. She performed a mitzvah.*

IRA BYOCK, M.D., Research Professor of Philosophy, University of Montana, Missoula. Author of *Dying Well* (Riverhead 1998)

## RABBI DAVID LAZAR

*We are often preoccupied with our human inadequacy. So preoccupied, in fact, that in our search for ways to control, or at least influence, the reality in which we live, we remove ourselves from that reality. Particularly when dealing with a close one's mortality, we may try to prolong his or her life regardless of the person's suffering. Along with all of our love and compassion, we may sometimes be more concerned with our fear of death and loss than with the quality of life of the one who is dying. We confront our fears by attempting to take control, and when we are unable to influence the situation physically, we resort to the metaphysical and we pray.*

*The students and disciples of Rabbi Judah are doing whatever they can to keep their beloved teacher alive. Not being able to really control the situation on a physical level (although they try by decreeing that anyone caught talking about Rabbi Judah as dead will be punished), they are successful in influencing the situation on a metaphysical level through their prayers. But they are unable to appreciate just how poor the quality of their master's life is. The handmaid, on the other hand, is able to perceive this, and it is she who is able to jolt the others back into reality by breaking the jar. At this moment, their concentration on their metaphysical task is broken just long enough to perceive the physical reality.*

RABBI DAVID LAZAR is a Masorti (Conservative) Rabbi living in Jerusalem, working in the field of community leadership training.