

Navigating The Changes To Jewish End of Life Practice As A Result Of COVID-19

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Much of Judaism involves connecting with others. Our small Community is truly a large extended family with a pronounced emphasis on social interaction and our interdependence upon one another. Because of the importance Judaism places on being part of the Community, COVID 19 protocols have significantly disrupted our usual way of life. Every part of life has been affected - but none more than the practice of Jewish observances at the End of Life. It is the purpose of this document to suggest different options that can be utilized in the absence of traditional Jewish practices to comfort those who have been bereaved of a loved one.

In our attempts to stay safe from the Virus, the COVID-19 protocols have created feelings of loss, grief and frustration for many people. And yet it is important to remember that Judaism is flexible and adaptive to changing circumstances. We have survived centuries of persecution, poverty, isolation and epidemics - while still keeping our traditions, our values and our practices intact. We will survive this challenge as well.

Below is a list of observances that have been affected by COVID-19 and some suggested alternatives on how to deal with their current absence. Please carefully consider the proposed options and see which one(s) might resonate with you.

Visiting Those Who Are Ill

Hospitals are now forced to restrict how many, if any, relatives can visit patients. Some institutions are compelled to discharge a family member to a nursing home without involving relatives to assist in the transition to the new facility. If the patient is actively dying some hospitals are able to allow a couple of close relatives to say goodbye in person but are unable to permit family to remain in the room. Some relatives, like grandchildren, may not be able to visit at all. Relatives are anxious and worried that their family member will pass away alone.

Suggestions:

- a) Try to arrange for a cellphone, iPad/computer or telephone to communicate. These devices can be set up in the room so that those who cannot visit in person can still communicate remotely. You might be able to visit from the other side of a window. If family members are not permitted into the room at all, a nurse or other health professional may be able to facilitate regular phone/video calls between you and your loved one.
- b) You can show your love and support from a distance by sending words of encouragement in a card or letter that you can mail or drop off. Record messages from grandchildren or friends on a smartphone to play for the loved one. Ask staff members if they are able to write down a note from the patient that can be faxed or

read to the family. Care providers may also be able to read handwritten notes from family members to their loved one.

- c) Think of ways to create a soothing environment in the patient's room that includes family significance. One could place photographs of family and/or drawings from grandchildren or other significant people in the hospital room to strengthen these connections especially when these individuals are absent.

Final Prayers (Shema and Vidui)

In Judaism special prayers, such as *Tehillim (Psalms)* and *vidui (a final affirmation of faith)*, are traditionally recited before a Jewish soul departs from this world. These prayers evoke G-d's mercy and bring spiritual atonement upon the person for whom they are said. In many hospitals no one deemed 'non-essential' is currently permitted inside the hospital, especially if the patient might have COVID-19. This would prevent a Rabbi, Jewish Chaplain or even a family member from reciting these prayers.

Suggestions:

- a) Ask the nurse to call a Rabbi or a Jewish Chaplain. Every institution has someone they can call. Ask the Rabbi or Jewish Chaplain if they can enter the hospital to visit your loved one and say these special prayers. If the Rabbi is not permitted physical access, it is likely the staff chaplain or nurse can facilitate a telephone call where your loved one can hear the prayers recited over the phone.
- b) If you are permitted access to visit, ask a Rabbi to email you the text of these prayers for you to recite with your loved one (in English, Hebrew or other languages) during your visit.
- c) If your loved one is awake or alert it is preferable that the patient recite these prayers on his/her own. If this not possible, for any one of a variety of reasons, you can say these prayers on his/her behalf. For your convenience a version of the Hebrew/English text may be found at the following website: <https://bit.ly/viduitextlink>
- d) You can play the recording of these prayers for your loved one. The recordings can be found at the following website: <https://bit.ly/viduiaudio>

Funerals

Attending a Jewish funeral is, perhaps, the greatest demonstration of respect one can show to the deceased and his/her family members. Unfortunately, due to the need for social distancing and other protocols meant to contain the spread of the Virus, funerals today are only held by the graveside and are limited to just the immediate family. This creates an effect that can only be described as surreal for those in attendance. Further, with only a few family members present, and cemetery workers unable to approach the grave until after the family has left, there is no opportunity to cover the coffin with earth other than a few ceremonial shovelfuls. This can emphasize to the family a lack of closure.

Suggestions:

- a) Those allowed to attend the funeral can try to set up a video chat, Zoom conference, Facetime or use a hand held device to broadcast the actual funeral proceedings in order to allow greater participation in real time, albeit remotely, by those unable to attend in person.
- b) Family members could begin to plan to gather together for a more fitting memorial service as soon as the state of emergency concludes and the precaution protocols subside.
- c) Those unable to be physically present can leave a condolence message on the funeral home website and reach out to the mourners to express their condolences remotely while they observe *Shiva* (the first seven days of mourning after a Jewish funeral).

Shiva

Under normal circumstances those who are bereaved gather at the deceased's home for seven days to sit *shiva*. They are surrounded by family, friends, acquaintances and even strangers who come to pay their respects. This constant exposure to people helps the mourners come to terms with their loss and prepare to re-enter the world.

Today mourners are truly and unalterably alone which emphasizes the loneliness and separation they feel after suffering a loss. In regular circumstances, the constant stream of visitors keep the mourner engaged at a time when many would be tempted to shut down. Today comfort and healing are far more elusive and, for many, far more difficult to obtain.

Suggestions:

- a) A Zoom *shiva* is a great way to receive and accept the comfort that others bring to those who are mourning. After setting up the Zoom meeting, post the information for those who may wish to join. Additionally provide email addresses and phone numbers if people would prefer to connect using these mediums.
- b) Family members should be encouraged to collect stories about the deceased and write them down to be shared with each other as a means of finding comfort even while they are alone.
- c) In a traditional *shiva*, the mourner is not supposed to be responsible for hosting, or even greeting, those who come to comfort them. One could ask a friend, or a family member who is not a principal mourner, to take over the task of administering the Zoom session.
- d) There are many *shiva* observances that do not require visitors. For example, it is customary to have a memorial candle burning during the entire *shiva*. King Solomon compares a human soul to the flame of a candle (Proverbs 20.27). Jewish tradition teaches that the soul remains in the home during the period of *shiva* and it is comforted by the presence of a candle lit for it. Normally a special 7 day candle is used for a *shiva*; it is lit in a prominent place in the *shiva* house and is allowed to burn itself out. However not every Jewish home has a 7 day candle. One may use multiple *yortzeit* candles, one after another, for this purpose. (A *yortzeit* candle is one that burns for 24 hours.)

A second example is the giving of *Tzedekah* (charity) in memory of the deceased by putting even a few coins into a *Tzedekah* box in the *shiva* house. This should be done daily, except for *Shabbat*. Our tradition teaches that giving charity in memory of a loved one enables a spiritual elevation for the soul of the departed.

A third example is studying specific Jewish texts in the merit of the departed. During the *shiva Torah* is not to be studied. This is because *Torah* study is described as being “a delight to the soul” and “that which brings gladness to the heart” (Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah 384.1). A mourner may read from the *Book of Lamentations*, the *Book of Job* or sections of Jewish law dealing with mourning as these subjects deal with material more in consonance with what the mourner is going through at this time (ibid 384.4).

Saying Kaddish

Saying *Kaddish*, the memorial prayer said in honour of the deceased, is an enormously therapeutic practice for virtually all Jewish mourners. *Kaddish* empowers the mourner by giving him/her a concrete act that fosters a personal connection with the departed loved one. We are taught saying the *Kaddish* prayer elevates the soul of the deceased.

Kaddish is a public prayer and therefore can only be recited in the presence of a *minyan* (a quorum of 10 Jews which is the smallest public Jewish gathering). This prayer is, in fact, a dialogue between the mourner and the congregation; it is interactive with those in assembly responding to each other through the words of this prayer at specific junctures. The mourner saying *Kaddish* has rejoined society and begun interacting with others around him. This facilitates the healing process and the mourner begins to move forward.

Today, due to COVID-19 protocols, synagogues are closed and we are prohibited from praying with a minyan. *Kaddish* cannot be said because we all have to stay apart and all the therapeutic benefits described above are lost.

Suggestions:

- a) A mourner could try to arrange for someone else to say *Kaddish* for the deceased in a city where synagogues are still open. A mourner might feel comforted that the *Kaddish* is still being said, even if the mourner is not personally saying this prayer. One can sign up here: <https://bit.ly/kaddishservice>
- b) The purpose of saying *Kaddish* is generally understood to spiritually elevate the soul of the deceased. Fortunately there are many ways within Jewish tradition to accomplish this and, theologically, perhaps even surprisingly for many, these other options may have even greater spiritual significance. For example:
 - Many rabbis assert that studying *Torah* in the merit of the departed is on a theologically higher level than saying *Kaddish*.
 - Many rabbis state that teaching *Torah* to others is even greater than studying.
- c) Any *Torah* subject can be studied after the *shiva* period has concluded. Many rabbinic authorities emphasize that the ideal *Torah* subject to learn is *Mishnah*. This is because the Hebrew word for *Mishna* has the same letters as the Hebrew word for soul (*Neshama*). In the current circumstances the study of *Mishnah* will give the soul of a deceased loved one the same ‘*nachas*’ (spiritual pleasure) as the saying of *kaddish*.

Some texts of the Mishna that are particularly easy-to-learn can be found at the following website:

<https://bit.ly/pirkeiavotlink>

Shloshim and the Year of Mourning

At the conclusion of the *shiva*, the mourner automatically shifts to the *shloshim*. The *shloshim* are the first thirty days counting from the funeral (and the seven days of the *shiva* are, in fact, the first seven days of the *shloshim* as well). The *shloshim* are a time of transition. After spending the seven days of *shiva* staying home and receiving condolences, now the mourner begins to resume a semblance of normal living. The mourner returns to work and most of one's daily routine is begun again. The mourner will continue to say *kaddish* and observe other aspects of the year of mourning, as the individual continues to reintegrate back into an active and productive life.

Today, under the COVID-19 protocols, there is very little to distinguish one time period from another. The clear demarcation of transition is lost as everyone must continue to stay at home.

Suggestions:

There are two traditional modes of ongoing observance that join the *Saying of Kaddish* as the mourner observes the *year of mourning*. The first is *Torah* study. The second is making a commitment to do one's best in all areas as much as possible. Both modes of activity serve as a means of honouring the memory of a deceased loved one and are understood as providing a spiritual elevation to the Jewish soul.

Unveiling & Grave Visitations

The *Unveiling* of a gravestone is an important event in the life of a family. While there is no fixed time for this to occur, an *Unveiling* is usually held close to the one year anniversary after the date of death. For many families the *Unveiling* is a time to come together after the passing of a loved one. With the passage of time, individuals can now come to reflect on the significance of their loss after they have had the opportunity to process it's meaning.

The harsh reality today is that all cemeteries are closed to the public. There is no opportunity to visit the grave of a loved one at this time and, therefore, all discretionary observances must be deferred to a time when access is restored.

Yortzeit

Yortzeit is the annual anniversary of the day of death of a loved one. It is an occasion fraught with spiritual and emotional significance for those who have been bereaved and many of the mourning rituals that were observed earlier are observed, again, on this day. For example: a candle is lit which burns for the 24 hour *yortzeit* anniversary. The individual who had said *kaddish* for the eleven months after the funeral now says the *kaddish* again on the *yortzeit*.

However, as noted several times above, synagogues like all public gathering places are closed for the duration of the crisis. Being denied access to a *minyan* in which to say *kaddish*, the individual often feels deprived of the principal observance of the *yortzeit*.

Suggestions:

Saying *kaddish* is an important observance of a *yortzeit* but it is not the only one. An individual observing a *yortzeit* should light a *yortzeit* candle to burn for the duration of the day. *Tzedekah* (charity) should be given and one could study or teach *Torah* in memory of the deceased. One could gather via Zoom, Facetime, video chat or telephone with loved ones similarly sharing the *yortzeit* and reminisce about their lost loved one.

Yizkor

Yizkor is a powerful prayer of remembering our deceased loved ones recited during prayer services on *Yom Kippur*, *Shimini Atzeret*, *Pesach* and *Shavuot*. This prayer evokes thoughts of their impact upon us, the sadness that they are no longer here with us and a sense of resolve to use the significance of their lives to inspire us to be our best as we move forward in life.

Suggestions:

- a) While it is preferable to recite *Yizkor* in a *minyan*, this prayer may actually be recited alone when no *minyan* is available (Kol Bo al Aveilus chapter 5, notes 21, 26, 27; Yesodai Smochos chapter 11, note 3).
- b) The main merit for the soul as a result of the saying *Yizkor* is from the charity that the family member pledges to make in the near future and the sincere effort one makes to live his/her life as a righteous person.

Closing Thoughts

We are living in enormously difficult times. The COVID-19 virus has influenced virtually every aspect of life. The need to self-isolate, as a means of containing the spread of this disease, has interrupted and interfered with work routines and family life and we struggle to obtain a semblance of normality.

The protocols to which we are all subject have had a massive impact on the ability of a Jewish mourner to grieve meaningfully and achieve a sense of closure after the passing of a loved one. The suggestions made above all have religious and spiritual significance and it is our hope you will find them helpful.

It is important to remember that by observing the commandment "*v'nishmartem m'oad l'nafshosaychem*" (Deuteronomy 4.15), the Divine imperative to "*guard our health*", we are giving merit and honour to the soul of a loved one that has left this world.

As difficult as it is to refrain from our traditional Jewish mourning practices that bring comfort and consolation, it is crucial to remember that in doing so we are performing a tremendous kindness to others. We are watching over their health and helping to protect each other. Looking out for others and taking care of one another is the basis of the entire *Torah*.

What greater merit is there for a departed loved one than to have their descendants care for others in a time of great distress?