

Understanding Hospice From a Jewish Viewpoint



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Jewish Principles of Care for the Dying

(By Rabbi Amy Eilberg adapted from "Acts of Loving Kindness: A Training Manual for Bi-kur Holim")

Entering 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 judgment, 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/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.

Jewish Views Regarding Hospice Care

(By Rabbi Susan Falk of the Joan Grossman Center for Chaplaincy and Healing of the Jewish Family and Children's Service)

Is Hospice Jewish?

For most of us, death is a sad and often fearful event. Whatever our beliefs or uncertainties about God or an afterlife, our lives and the lives of our loved ones are precious to us. As death comes closer, we grieve our loss even as we may wish for an end to suffering. Hospice, a model of end-of-life care that focuses on pain management, as well as emotional and spiritual healing, is in accordance with Jewish laws and values making it a viable choice for Jews. When deciding whether or not to elect hospice care, you may consider the following Jewish values, traditions, and teachings.

Death is a Part of Life

Jewish tradition has always placed a premium on life and on the idea of preserving life at all costs (as in the concept of *pikuach nefesh*, or "saving a life"). In addition, given the number of historical traumas that the Jewish people have faced (exile, expulsions, the Holocaust), survival seems to have become a core part of the collective Jewish identity. To "give up", or to "give in" to illness after centuries of surviving persecution may seem almost like a sin to many Jews.

On the other hand, Jewish teachings and canonical writings have consistently maintained the belief that death is a part of life and inevitable. As it says in the Torah: "For everything there is a season... A time to be born and a time to die..." (Ecclesiastes 3). Jewish prayer also strongly affirms this belief. Each day, the observant Jew recites many prayers recognizing God's power to give and to take away life. One such prayer, recited each morning, reads: "My God, the soul You gave to me is pure. You created it, You shaped it, You breathed it into me, You guard it within me, and someday You will take it from me and restore it to me in the Time to Come."

Jewish Law

Along with Torah and prayer, Judaism is also comprised of an extensive body of law or *halacha*. Since its beginnings, Jewish law has recognized the terminally ill (the *trefa*) and imminently dying (the *goses*) as separate categories from those who are temporarily ill, and as such, has made special laws and allowances for them. Contemporary Judaism, from its liberal to orthodox denominations, generally permits the termination of treatment when it is clear that treatment is no longer effective and only prolongs suffering. Jewish law, therefore, supports the idea that sometimes electing the comfort, pain management, and dignity that hospice care provides, over painful, aggressive treatments can be the most life-affirming decision we can make.

Jewish Vision of Healing

The Jewish vision of healing, called *refuah shleimah*, or “complete healing”, is a holistic one comprising both body (*refuat guf*) and soul (*refuat nefesh*). *Refuah shleimah* shows us that Judaism deems body, mind, and soul each to be vital parts of the healing process. The Jewish vision of healing, then, fits in well with the hospice team approach of providing doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains, and other aides, who attend to the patient’s physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. The Jewish concept of *refuah shleimah*, along with hospice care, teach us to recognize that healing can still occur even when there is no longer the possibility of a cure.

Making the Decision

When deciding whether or not to elect hospice care, you may find it helpful to consult with a rabbi along with your medical care provider. Whatever decision you choose to make, remember that Judaism is concerned about the sanctity of life *and the quality of life*. Death is unavoidable. Hope for comfort and peace of the mind and spirit, however, are attainable goals at the end of life.

Prayers

Prayer of Reconciliation (*Viddui*)

Our God and God of our ancestors,
Shaken by the loss of our beloved,
We turn to You in trust.
We pray that the pure soul which You breathed into our loved
one now return to You in purity and peace.
May the good that he (she) has done and the gifts with which he
(she) has blessed other lives, give meaning to his (her) life, and
may his (her) errors be forgiven.
Protector of the bereaved and helpless, watch over us and
comfort us in our grief. Each of our souls is bound in love to his
(hers), and aches with the prospect of separation.
Help us to understand that love is stronger than death, as his
(her) memory continues to bless and sustain us.
Into Your hands we commend our beloved's spirit.
Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. Hear O Israel,
Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my Shepherd, I need nothing more.
You give me rest in green meadows,
Setting me near calm waters, where You revive my spirit.
You guide me along sure paths, You are true to Your name.
Though I should walk in death's dark valley,
I fear no evil with You by my side,
Your shepherd's staff to comfort me.
You spread a table before me as my foes look on.
You soothe my head with oil; my cup is more than full.
Goodness and love will tend me every day of my life, and I will
dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Priestly Blessing

Y'va-rech-che'cha Adonai v'Yish-m'rechah.

May God bless and keep you.

Ya-ayr Adonai panav aylechah veey-chu-nekah.

May God shine His face on you and be gracious to you.

Yeesah Adonai panav aylechah, v'yasaym l'chah shalom.

May God lift His face to you and give you peace on your journey home. Amen.

A Blessing

(By Dr. Ken Gorfinkle)

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.

Mourners' Kaddish (*Kaddish Yatom*)

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא.
בְּעֵלְמָא דִּי בְרָא כְרַעוּתָהּ,
וְיִמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתָהּ בְּחַיֵּינוּ וּבְיוֹמֵינוּ
וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל.
בְּעֵגְלָא וּבְזִמְנוֹ קָרִיב וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:
יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלְמָא וְלְעָלְמֵי עָלְמַיָּא:
יְתַבְרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח, וְיִתְפָּאֵר וְיִתְרוֹמֵם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא
וְיִתְהַדָּר וְיִתְעַלֶּה וְיִתְהַלָּל שְׁמֵהּ דְקֻדְשָׁא בְרִיךְ הוּא
לְעָלְמָא (בְּעֵשִׂית וְלְעָלְמָא מְכַל) מִן כָּל בְּרַכְתָּא וְשִׁירָתָא,
תְּשַׁבַּחְתָּא וְנַחֲמָתָא, דְאָמִירוֹן בְּעֵלְמָא, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:
יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמַיָּא וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל,
וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:
עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו הוּא יַעֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם
עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:

Reader: Let God's name be made great and holy in the world that was created as God willed. May God complete the holy realm in your own lifetime, in your days, and in the days of all the house of Israel, quickly and soon. And say: Amen.

Congregation: May God's great name be blessed, forever and as long as worlds endure.

Reader: May it be blessed, and praised, and glorified, and held in honor, viewed with awe, embellished, and revered; and may the blessed name of holiness be hailed, though it be higher (Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, add: by far) than all the blessings, songs, praises, and consolations that we utter in this world. And say: Amen.

May Heaven grant a universal peace, and life for us, and for all Israel. And say: Amen.

May the one who creates harmony above, make peace for us and for all Israel, and for all who dwell on earth. And say: Amen.

Transliteration

Yit-gadal ve-yit-kadash shemay rabba (Amen)
Be-al-ma dee vra chi-roo-tay ve-yam-lich mal-choo-tay
Be-cha-yay-chon oov-yo-may-chon.
Oov-chay-yay de-chol bayt Yisrael
Ba-agala oo-viz-man kariv ve-imroo amen.

Ye-hay she-may rabba me-vorach le-alam ool-al-may al-may-ya,

Yit-barach ve-yish-ta-bach
Ve-yit-pa-ar ve-yit-rom-am ve-yit-nas-ay
Ve-yit-hadar ve-yit-aleh ve-yit-hal-lal
She-may de-kood-sha
B'rich hoo.

Le-ayla min kol bir-cha-ta ve-shira-ta
Toosh-be-cha-ta ve-ne-che-ma-ta
Da-amiyran be-alma ve-imroo, Amen
Ye-hay shlama rabba min she-maya ve-chayyim aleynoo
Ve-al kol Yisrael ve-imroo, Amen.

Take 3 steps back and say

Oseh shalom bim-ro-mav, hoo ya-a-seh sha-lom aleynoo ve-al
kol Yisrael Ve-imroo, Amen.

Hospice Accreditation

Life Choice Hospice is a member of the Jewish Hospice Network of the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Philadelphia.

Life Choice Hospice is accredited by the National Institute for Jewish Hospice.

At Life Choice Hospice, people of all religions are welcomed and respected. Our nurses, nurses aides, social workers, volunteers and chaplains respect all spiritual traditions and identities. We respectfully accommodate the diverse religious needs of all of our patients. Our employees are similarly trained to be sensitive to diverse Christian traditions and traditions of other religions. As accreditation becomes available from other religious groups, we are committed to pursue those opportunities.



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