

Preparing for Jewish Burial and Mourning

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INTRODUCTION

The death of a loved one is so often a painful and confusing time for members of the family and dear friends. It is our hope that this "Guide" will assist you in planning the funeral as well as offer helpful information on our centuries-old Jewish burial and mourning practices. Please call our clergy at any time, especially before you suffer the loss of a loved one, if you have questions or concerns (323) 876-8330 (Rabbi John Rosove and Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh - ext. 1000); Chazzan Danny Maseng (ext. 1004); Rabbi Jocee Hudson (ext. 6000). Temple Israel of Hollywood has owned Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary for more than five decades, and we encourage you to contact them if you need assistance (310 641-0707 - <http://www.hillsidememorial.org/>).

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A Practical Guide

Pre-need preparations – We recommend that you not wait until a death to attend to the details of preparing for a funeral. Pre-need considerations include choosing the cemetery in which you wish to be interred, the location of the plot or crypt in the cemetery, the choice of coffin, flowers or lack thereof, and all financial arrangements so that in their time of grief your survivors will be relieved of the burden of making these difficult and painful decisions.

Choosing a cemetery, selecting a grave and arranging for family plots - Jews are buried either in a specifically Jewish cemetery or in a part of the general community cemetery designated for Jewish use. Consider a cemetery that has already been used for other family members.

Contacting the clergy - When a death occurs the rabbi or cantor should be contacted immediately. The clergy will coordinate with the family setting the time for the funeral service in conjunction with the cemetery/mortuary. The clergy and family can also make arrangements to meet before the funeral service. Though the clergy does not have to be someone who knew the deceased personally, families often prefer an officiant who knew the deceased. Those without a connection to a synagogue will find that the funeral home will have a list of clergy who serve unaffiliated families during their time of grief. We at Temple Israel of Hollywood will do everything we can to provide one of our clergy to officiate at the funerals of our members and close relatives. Unfortunately, because of the size of the membership at Temple Israel and the demands upon our clergy, we may not be available to assist people who are not members of the synagogue. We are available to officiate at the funerals of Temple members who are not of the Jewish faith (i.e., spouses or parents of Jewish members). Please consult with our clergy.

Contacting the *Chevra Kadisha*/Mortuary and arranging for the funeral – The next task of the mourners is to inform the *Chevra Kadisha* (lit. "Holy Committee" or burial society/mortuary – Note that there is a mortuary in Los Angeles that carries the name "*Chevra Kadisha*". The term in this document is meant in its literal Hebraic, historic and generic meaning and does not refer to this particular mortuary). Their personnel will quickly send representatives to gather the body. There are a number of such organizations in Los Angeles. For a list of cemeteries and mortuaries please see page 17. Funerals are usually arranged by families in consultation with the mortuary and the clergy. In some places, the mortuary, funeral home and Jewish cemetery are integrated. Even when this is not the case, the three organizations generally communicate with one another.

Preparation of the body - The mortuary will either conduct its work in preparing the body for burial at its own facility or at a funeral home. Trained volunteers/employees of the mortuary will bathe and dress the body with care and respect, according to traditional Jewish law (*halachah*). No natural or chemical agents are used to preserve the body. However, if the burial is to be delayed, embalming may be required and/or required by California state law. Some mortuaries are amenable to contemporary requirements and others are not. You should choose the *chevra kadisha*/mortuary with which you are most comfortable.

Someone to watch over the body - Traditionally, a Jewish body is not left alone before burial. A *shomer/shomeret*, or guard, can be engaged through the Jewish

mortuary to watch over the body, often while reciting psalms. Although family members may be willing to serve in this role, it is not necessary that the *shomer/shomeret* know the deceased person (though it is considered best if he or she is Jewish).

The timing of the funeral – Tradition urges that the funeral and burial take place within twenty-four hours of the death out of respect for the dead, as the body begins decomposition immediately upon death. In modern times, however, mortuaries can delay this process to enable family coming from far away to make arrangements and arrive in time for the funeral. In Los Angeles, as well, the number of deaths in the Jewish community necessitates delay of the funeral for two, three and possible four days.

The coffin and dressing the deceased for burial - A traditional burial will include dressing the body in a plain white shroud (*tachrichin*) and an untreated wooden coffin that has no metal parts. Other than the shroud, the only item that may be buried along with the dead person according to Jewish law is a *tallit* (prayer shawl) with one of its corner fringes (*tzitzit*) cut. These rules enable a natural returning of the body to the earth and emphasize the irrelevance of wealth and stature in death. Some families prefer to dress their loved ones in the deceased's favorite clothing. At times, for sentimental reasons, a family may wish to include photographs or personal items in the casket. At Temple Israel of Hollywood we are amenable to these modern practices. It is also a tradition to include a bag of earth from the Land of Israel in the coffin. You should consult with the mortuary personnel about all these matters.

Who are the "mourners"? - Though recognizing that an individual's impact extends beyond his/her closest family, the Jewish definition of a "mourner" includes only first-degree relatives—parents, children, siblings, and spouses. These are the people bound to the obligations of mourners under Jewish law and tradition.

Actions to honor the deceased (flowers and *tzedakah*) - Historically, to offset odor from the decaying body, non-Jews often used flowers and spices. Due to the immediacy of burial in Jewish practice, flowers and spices were not needed at Jewish funerals. The absence of flowers at Jewish funerals became a way to distinguish between Jewish practice and non-Jewish practice. Thus, it became customary to discourage flowers at Jewish funerals. Despite the custom of flowerless funerals, Jewish law and tradition in no way forbid flowers at funerals. It is common practice today for Jews to welcome flowers at funerals. However, instead of sending flowers, it is more consistent with Jewish practice to send donations as *tzedakah* to a charity favored by the deceased. The deceased's family might indicate in an obituary notice to which specific charity they would like donations to be sent. If flowers are sent, the bereaved family may ask the funeral director to donate them to a hospital or nursing home following the funeral and burial.

The clergy's role in the funeral service - Usually, the rabbi or cantor will lead the funeral prayers and deliver a eulogy. In order to prepare for these tasks, the clergy will wish to meet with family members before the funeral, either in one of their homes or at the synagogue. The clergy will ask family members to provide a description of the deceased person's character and the lessons that may be learned from that person's life.

The eulogy (*hesped*) - The eulogy (Greek for “nice words” or “praise”) or *hesped* (Hebrew for “beating the breast”) is among the most important elements in a funeral service. It should offer praise but not excessive praise, evoke the deceased’s essential qualities and virtues, passions, interests and hobbies, community involvements and contributions, and the names of the most important family members and closest friends should be noted. It should reflect as well what the deceased would want to say to his/her children, grandchildren, and friends, as a summary of his/her life. The *hesped* is expected to evoke honestly the character and nature of the deceased.

Eulogies delivered by family and friends - A relatively recent practice is the delivery of several eulogies/*hespedim*, given by close family members and friends. Sometimes reminiscences about the deceased’s life and declarations of the deceased’s influence on the speaker (for example, an adult grandchild) can provide a unique and moving testimony at the funeral. However, if a mourner’s attempt to speak at the funeral is likely to be marred by an emotional struggle or inability to speak, it is preferable to impart the information to the officiating clergy in advance so that it can be woven into his/her eulogy/*hesped* without disrupting the funeral service. Or the individual can write down his/her thoughts and ask a close member of the family or the rabbi to deliver them. In no event should any mourner feel pressured to speak at the funeral. It is more in keeping with Jewish tradition to reserve remembrances by family and friends for *minyan* services held at home during the *shivah* week following the funeral and burial. Should a member of the family or a dear friend be asked to speak, we recommend that the speaker write the eulogy in advance, as very few people are able to do justice to the deceased when they speak extemporaneously, especially since emotions are strong and often unfiltered at funerals. We also recommend that the eulogy be shown to others in the family to be certain the way the deceased is presented is in agreement with the closest relatives. Depending upon the number of speakers, remarks should be kept brief. Appropriate humor is welcome at funerals but should not be used for the purpose of getting laughs. Generally, we do not recommend that eulogies be delivered by family and friends as they are usually unaccustomed and not skilled in preparing these remarks according to the spirit of the occasion and the honor of the deceased. Those remembrances can be offered at the *shiva* home. There are excellent texts from Jewish tradition that can illustrate and evoke the values held dear by the deceased. Please contact our clergy for assistance.

Prayers said at the funeral and burial – Both traditional and modern readings are read by clergy at the funeral service and include passages from the book of Psalms (16, 23, 37, 90, 103, 121, and 144). The memorial prayer (*Eil Maleh Rachamim*) includes the Hebrew name of the deceased and affirms that the soul of the departed has been gathered unto God. The Mourner’s *Kaddish* is said at graveside.

Music at the funeral – The funeral service is enhanced by having the cantor or rabbi sing psalms, other appropriate music and the traditional *Eil Maleh Rachamim*. Other musical selections should be arranged with the clergy.

Closed casket – The casket is closed before Jewish funeral services begin for two reasons; one is out of respect for the deceased, that he/she should not be viewed as an object; and the other is that once the funeral service begins, the process of mourning also begins. Mourning the loss of a loved one is very painful. Yet, the pain is a necessary aspect of the mourning and should not be delayed in any way.

Expense of funerals – There are many options available to mourners when planning a funeral. As a general rule those who plan their own funerals or that of a loved one after death should not spend any more money than is necessary for a dignified funeral and burial. Rather than spending added dollars for a very expensive casket, or a cache of flowers, we recommend saving those dollars for the living or contributing those dollars as *tzedakah* in memory of the deceased to causes that he/she valued. However, even doing so funeral services can be expensive. For the indigent, most Jewish cemeteries will provide funerals for little or no fee.

The death of a child – There is nothing more tragic and painful than the death of a child. Hillside Memorial Park and other Jewish cemeteries will provide funeral services free of charge for stillborn children and children under the age of 13 years old, the age of maturity according to Jewish tradition.

Pallbearers – It is a tradition to choose six or eight people excluding the immediate mourners who were close to the deceased to serve as pallbearers to help carry and escort the coffin from the funeral service to the gravesite. In addition, honorary pallbearers may also be chosen. There is a tendency to choose only men for this honor, but there is no religious reason that women should not be equally considered.

K'riah (lit. "tearing") ribbon for mourners - If mourners would like to rip a garment in the traditional manner (e.g., a shirt or sweater) for *k'riah*, then they should wear that article to the funeral (with appropriate garments underneath, for the sake of modesty). Instead of tearing one's clothing, one can wear a black ribbon (provided by the mortuary) to tear for *k'riah*. This custom is reserved for immediate mourners (i.e., spouse, parent, child, and sibling). The garment/ribbon is torn before burial and the saying of the Mourner's *Kaddish*. One tears and says – *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam dayan ha-emet*. (Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, the true Judge.). The *k'riah* garment/ribbon is worn over the right breast by the spouse, parents and siblings, and over the heart by children of the deceased. It is worn every day during the *shivah* period (seven days) but not on *Shabbat* or holydays. If other Jewish holidays intervene during *shivah* the period of mourning is reduced. Please consult with the rabbi/cantor.

The Mourner's Kaddish – This prayer is a defiant declaration of faith and is often necessary for mourners at the time of the loss of their loved ones when there is a tendency to deny God's presence and goodness. There is no mention of death in this prayer. Rather, it affirms God's Name as manifest in every place and at every instant, even at our darkest moments of loss, anger, fear, despair, and confusion. It expresses our obligation to nurture a world that is filled with holiness. Mourners proclaim the *Kaddish* as the body of their loved ones is interred in the earth. The prayer is written in Aramaic using Hebrew letters, the colloquial language of Jews during Talmudic times.

Filling the grave – At the conclusion of the service the coffin is physically lowered into the grave in the presence of the mourners, a heart-wrenching moment. However, witnessing this act promotes the acceptance of the finality of death. The family begins the burial by placing earth either by hand or by a shovel. There is a custom that the first person who places earth on a grave turns the shovel upside down. This act reflects the deep reluctance a loved one feels to perform this *mitzvah*. Customarily three handfuls or shovels of earth are the minimum per person. If using

a shovel, the person placing earth returns the shovel to the earth and not directly to the next mourner. All are welcome to perform this *mitzvah* of burial.

Children at funerals and burial - It is important that children of sufficient age and maturity attend funeral services and burial. If very young children are to attend the funeral, however, parents should arrange to seat them with a babysitter or another responsible adult who will not mind leaving the service if the children are restless or upset. We recommend that children over the age of eight years old in most cases are capable of attending funeral services and burial, and should do so. The rabbis and cantor would be happy to speak with the children before the funeral to explain what they will witness. We do not recommend younger children attending.

Etiquette at funerals - Funeral services start on time and one should plan to arrive early. In most cases, one should not expect to greet the family before or after the funeral service, or at the burial. Offer your comfort by visiting the *shivah* home. Pay attention for announcements of *shivah* location and times, and for organizations to which you might make a contribution as *tz'dakah* (righteous giving) in honor of the deceased. There will be a processional to the gravesite if the funeral was not a graveside ceremony. When possible it is a *mitzvah* to go to the cemetery and gravesite and participate in the burial itself, and to shovel dirt into the grave with your hands or with a shovel (see above - "Filling the grave"). As the mourners leave the gravesite they often walk between two rows of those attending the burial. It is customary to say as they pass by you "*Ha-Makom y'naheem et'chem b'toch sha'ar av'lei Tzion viY'rushalayim*—May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Washing hands - It is customary to wash one's hands when leaving a cemetery (most Jewish cemeteries have a water fountain at the exit for this purpose - no blessing is said when doing this act), before you enter the *shivah* home (it is customary for mourners to provide outside the front door of the home a water pitcher, pot and paper towels for people to use before entering), or in your own home if you are not going directly to the *shivah* home. This custom is based in an old superstition that demons lurk in cemeteries and seek to attach themselves to the living under their fingernails. The water is thus called *nagelwasser* (literally, "nail-water"). It is also a symbolic washing of *tum-ah* (ritual impurity caused by contact with the dead) from one's own body and soul. In modern times, washing one's hands represents a transition from one state of being to another.

Arranging for a traditional meal after the funeral - Many families, including some who are not observing *shivah* (the traditional seven days of mourning that commence immediately after burial) welcome visitors at the family home after the funeral service for a traditional meal, called a "*seudat hav'ra-ah*" (meal of healing). This meal is mostly intended for the mourners, who may feel too saddened to eat if left alone. The community is present and required to provide the food for the mourners, encourage them to take care of their own physical needs and usher mourners into a new stage in their lives. There is a tendency in many places for families to engage a caterer to provide for this meal. However, it is best for extended family members, synagogue members or friends to arrange the meal. Mourners should not arrange for the food, greet or entertain guests. You should consult with the clergy about appropriate foods at the home and *kosher* sensitivities when ordering food. For example, we suggest that you not order pork products, shellfish, or platters that contain both meat and cheese together.

Lighting a *Shivah* candle when returning home - When mourners return from the cemetery it is customary to light a large candle (usually provided by the funeral home) which will burn in the home for the next week of *shivah*. Care should be taken about the placement of this candle to avoid fire. There is no blessing said when kindling this flame. The immediate mourners (spouse, parents, children, siblings) should all have a candle for each of their own homes.

Planning for *Shivah* - Before the burial, priority should be given to arranging a respectful farewell to the departed loved one. Once these efforts are in place, attention should turn then to the details of mourning. If mourners will be sitting *shivah* (i.e., observing the seven-day-long period of mourning in a family home) preparations must be made, usually with the help of a rabbi/cantor and/or synagogue members. (Some families may alternately make use of a leniency which permits a three-day mourning period when economic necessity requires an early return to work.) A full week of withdrawal from daily concerns provides a chance for mourners to grieve together, exchange memories of the deceased loved one, and be comforted by each other and the community. This period of seclusion can be of great psychological benefit to the mourners.

***Minyan* prayer leaders during the *Shivah* period** - Temple Israel provides a Mourner's *Minyan* leader. He or she is a trained, sensitive, and knowledgeable volunteer who will make contact with the family before the funeral service to inquire whether the family would like assistance in leading the *Minyan* in the home for one, two, three, or more days. Mourner's *Minyanim* do not take place on *Shabbat* as tradition instructs that there is no public mourning on *Shabbat* or Jewish holidays.

The *Shivah* period of mourning - The first period of mourning is known as *shivah* (literally, "seven") and officially begins the day that the coffin is lowered to the ground and covered with dirt. It is customary during this time for the mourners (spouses, children, parents, and siblings) to remain home, grieve and be cared for by extended family and friends. Since no public mourning takes place on *Shabbat* and Jewish holidays, the mourners do attend *Shabbat* services during this first week where they can say *Kaddish*. There are a number of traditions during this period when mourners are encouraged to grieve heavily and freely without concerns for their appearance. The covering of mirrors, refraining from shaving, or wearing perfume and make-up, jewelry and fine clothing relieves mourners of concern for appearances. It is also traditional for mourners to study from the *Mishnah* (2nd century law code) as the letters of *Mishnah* when rearranged spell *n'shamah* (soul). During this period friends flow in and out of the mourner's home, but we recommend setting specific times when guests visit so that the family may also have time to themselves. At the conclusion of the *shivah* period it is a custom for the mourners to walk around the block thereby easing out of this intensive home-bound period and slowly returning to the outside world.

The *Sh'loshim* period of mourning - The balance of the 30-day period from the funeral after *shivah* becomes a period of reduced mourning, called *sh'loshim* (literally, "thirty"). The mourner returns to work at the end of the *shivah*, but there are restrictions against attending celebrations, entertainment events or doing anything that feels uncomfortable for the balance of *sh'loshim*. Men customarily do not shave during this period. One may attend the religious ceremonies for a *brit milah*, *bar/bat mitzvah* or wedding during *sh'loshim*, but not stay for the celebration.

We recommend that when mourners begin to drive their cars that they be especially careful as accidents are common during this period of grief.

Mourning for deceased parents and the first year of mourning – Restrictions on celebrations during *sh'loshim* are traditionally extended for an entire year when mourning deceased parents. Those mourning parents continue to say the Mourners' *Kaddish* at every service for eleven months. The reason for the eleven-month period is the presumption that the deceased parent was a good person who did not need an entire year of prayer to avoid divine punishment, the period in which the soul enters into a phase known as *Gehenna* (i.e., undergoes a spiritual purification process). Visiting graves during the first year is common, and there is no rule of thumb as to the frequency of such visitation, except that people should avoid the extreme of constant visitation. Visitation to graves is not made on *Shabbat* or religious holidays. It is a tradition to visit graves between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Many cemeteries schedule memorial services during this period (as does Hillside Memorial Park on the Sunday between the two holydays). Learned Jews often study a few verses of *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, or *Torah* at the gravesite. It is also a tradition to continue to give *tz'dakah* to charitable causes in memory of the deceased during this period. At the conclusion of the year it is hoped that the mourners have accepted the loss of their dear ones, healed from their grief, and are prepared to move forward. This does not mean, of course, that we should expect to be without the pain of our loss, but it does mean that tradition encourages us to restore ourselves into life and affirm all that was good in the life of those who have died.

Mourning for relatives of other faith traditions – The spiritual and psychological needs of mourners exist regardless of the faith of the deceased. We recommend that Jews take advantage of Jewish mourning traditions for their dearest family who are not of the Jewish faith. At Temple Israel we welcome the listing of the names of all the deceased on their *Yahrzeit* death anniversary and at *Yizkor*, and we encourage Jewish relatives to say the Mourner's *Kaddish* for them as they would a Jewish relative.

Tombstone and unveiling – The tombstone should not be elaborately ostentatious. It should bear a simple inscription of the name (English and Hebrew), the date of birth and the date of death (Gregorian calendar and Hebrew calendar). If mourners wish to inscribe a brief descriptive phrase that evokes the deceased's great loves or a passage from classical Jewish text, this may also be done. One can set the stone between 30 days and up to 12 months after the death. Unveiling ceremonies usually occur near the first anniversary after the death. This can be an occasion for family to share their memories of the deceased, read from the book of Psalms, say the *El Maleh Rachamim* and *Kaddish* prayers. This service does not require a rabbi or a cantor. Our clergy can offer suggestions of prayers and readings.

Yahrzeit – The anniversary of the death is commemorated each year by *Yahrzeit*, a time of prayer and remembrance. The mourner recites the Mourner's *Kaddish* at services. A 24-hour candle is lit in the home beginning on the evening before the *Yahrzeit* day. The *Yahrzeit* day is determined according to the Hebrew calendar taking into account that the Hebrew calendar day begins at sundown. Some prefer to remember the *Yahrzeit* according to the Gregorian calendar, as it is easier for many to remember. Please consult a Hebrew/English calendar to coordinate the *Yahrzeit* date. Whichever day you choose, we recommend being consistent from year to year.

Yizkor – A memorial service (*Yizkor*) in Reform synagogues (which follow the Biblical and Israeli calendar) is held on the seventh day of *Pesach*, the first day of *Shavuot*, the seventh day of *Succot*, and on *Yom Kippur*. For those who celebrate the Diaspora tradition of two days, *Yizkor* is held on the eighth day of *Pesach*, the second day of *Shavuot*, the eighth day of *Succot*, and on *Yom Kippur*. Those who have lost a parent, sibling, child, or spouse participate in this service. *Yizkor* is an additional service in which *Eil maleh rachamim* and the Mourner's *Kaddish* are recited and all mourners gather in memory of their loved ones.

Jewish Values and Traditions

Values - All practices related to death and mourning in Jewish tradition take into account one of two values, *Kavod Ha-meit* (respect for the dead) and *Kavod Ha-chayim* (respect for the living). These values flow from a greater religious truth affirmed in the Book of Genesis (1:27) that every human being is created *B'tzelem Elohim* (in the Divine image). Hence, both respect for the body of the deceased and for the needs of the living (i.e., mourners) inform Jewish funeral and mourning practices.

Relieving the pain of a dying patient – Thankfully, in most situations medicine can be prescribed to eliminate pain when a patient is suffering. However, we have to ask if, in the case of a dying patient who is suffering great and unbearable pain, does Judaism permit prescribing medication to relieve agony even if the medicine might react to bring death sooner? A general Jewish legal principle says that “nothing should be done to either hasten or delay the death of a terminal patient.” [1] A terminal patient (i.e., *goses*) is defined in Judaism as someone who is within three days of death, though modern medical technology has made this limitation obsolete. In truth, it is impossible to know the exact time of death, but the question still raises significant ethical issues. We have to consider this matter from both patient and physician perspectives. Tradition considers it a pardonable offense for the patient to ask for relief if he is in agony, even if he/she knows that the medication will hasten death. Regarding the physician, tradition allows the doctor to administer pain medication [2] based on a famous Talmudic story [3] that describes the final hours of the life of Rabbi Judah the Prince. Rabbi Judah's colleagues and disciples had surrounded his house to pray for his healing. Rabbi Judah's servant understood Rabbi Judah's great agony and that the prayers were forestalling his death. She decided to disrupt their prayers so as to end his suffering, and mercifully Rabbi Judah died. Tradition praises her for this action. From this story Judaism affirms that in a person's final hours, a physician may administer pain medication even if there is risk of hastening death. [4] Whenever possible, the physician should endeavor to know the patient's wishes through direct dialogue; when the patient is incapable of interacting, the physician should endeavor to understand the patient's wishes by querying the closest relatives what they know of the patient's wishes.

Living Will - Advance Health Care Directive – Is the “Living Will” permissible in Jewish tradition? Under the circumstances in which new treatment that will not change the outcome of a patient that is considered by Jewish tradition to be a *goses* (terminal within three days), a “Living Will” may be helpful as a legal method to terminate life support systems of those who are dying because of serious illness or accident and are in a “persistent vegetative state” while attached to life preserving machinery. Liberal Judaism supports a physician who in good conscience and in consultation with the patient's family ceases treatment and removes life giving

support systems from the patient. The "Living Will" document must be worded so that it deals with the "persistent vegetative state" without moving toward euthanasia (forbidden in Jewish tradition - see below). The document should be sufficiently recent to assure that it reflects the wishes of the patient. The "Living Will" is used when the individual does not have anyone he/she trusts to appoint as a "Health Care Agent" (although it is possible to designate someone to act on one's behalf). The "Living Will" is also used in addition to the Advance Health Care Directive when individuals are traveling abroad or spending time in other states. The "Living Will" is generally more common in other states. In California, the form estate attorneys use is most commonly the "Advance Health Care Directive." Without one of these two documents, an individual is in peril of becoming a Terri Schiavo, whose life was prolonged despite a lack of any meaningful quality of life. [5] We have included an example of the "Living Will" and an Advance Health Care Directive in this Guide. [6] We encourage you to keep a copy of this document on file here at Temple Israel so that we can be of help to you at the time when difficult decisions must be made.

Euthanasia – The willful killing of another human being, even if believed to be merciful, is contrary to Jewish moral ethics. Judaism says that nothing proactive (i.e., "active" euthanasia) may be done to shorten a human life, although Judaism does permit us to refrain from doing something that would continue life when it seems unjustifiable (some refer to this as "passive" euthanasia). The foundation is "a basic principle of faith that lies at the foundation of Jewish ethics. Human life is more than a biological phenomenon; it is the gracious gift of God; it is the inbreathing of the Divine spirit. The human being is more than a minute particle of the great mass known as society; each human being is a child of God, created in the Divine image." [7]

Burial in the ground - When a loved one dies, the final act of respect and love for that person performed by family members is to assure a dignified burial. Ground burial is among the oldest traditions in Judaism harking back to Abraham who bought burial ground for his wife Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah [8]. The rabbis of later centuries teach that *K'vurah B'karka* - burial in the ground, returns the physical part of us to its source in the earth so that the spiritual soul can return to its source in God, as alluded to in the verse "The dust returns to the dust as it was, but the spirit returns to God who gave it.." [9]

Mausoleums and concrete vaults - Tradition says that the grave should be at least two *amot* - two cubits deep (a cubit is measured from the elbow to the end of the hand). This means that a mausoleum with concrete vaults/crypts is permissible for interment if the deceased has contact with the ground itself. Vaults are designed to incorporate substantial holes at the bottom.

Cremation - Jewish law requires burial and prohibits cremation. In support of this tradition is unanimity across the predominant modern Jewish religious streams (Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox). The reason for the prohibition is based on the principle *Kavod Ha-meit* — dignified treatment of human remains. The body once served as the sacred vessel of the soul during life and therefore merits respectful treatment upon death. In the years since the Holocaust, Jews have been particularly sensitive to the association of the destruction of European Jewry and the practice of cremation. Cremation artificially also substitutes the natural process of decay. Many today choose cremation based on their concerns to preserve the environment. However, a growing body of research suggests that cremation has a significant

negative impact on the environment in the emissions of noxious materials into the atmosphere and five times the amount of carbon dioxide for every cremation relative to each burial. Large amounts of non-renewable fossil fuel are needed to cremate bodies in North America. Despite these issues, in recent years increasing numbers of Jews have chosen cremation over traditional burial. Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary (operated by Temple Israel of Hollywood) and Sinai Cemetery (operated by the Conservative synagogue, Sinai Temple of West Los Angeles) do not operate crematoria, but each cemetery will bury cremated remains.

Our clergy and cremation - Though each of our clergy advises against cremation, Rabbis John Rosove, Michelle Missaghieh and Jocce Hudson will officiate at funerals and burial for those who have been or will be cremated. Chazzan Danny Maseng will not do so, but he will attend memorial services for the deceased who was cremated that are held separately from the funeral. We encourage discussion with the clergy on this matter well in advance of death.

Burial rights of Jews and their families in a Jewish cemetery - Jews are usually buried either in a specifically Jewish cemetery or in a part of the general community cemetery designated for Jewish use. If a close family member is of another religious background or is not otherwise affiliated in a different faith tradition and wishes to be buried in his/her family plot in a Jewish cemetery, the family must check with that respective Jewish cemetery concerning its policies. At Hillside Memorial Park and Cemetery, we inter the spouses and children of Jews in their family plots. Hillside does not permit non-Jewish clergy to officiate at the funerals or at burial services in the park nor may any religious symbols from other religious traditions be used or displayed on graves.

Former marriages - If a married couple separated during their lifetime, they may nevertheless be buried alongside one another, unless one of them requested to be buried separately. A remarried person may be buried with any of the previous spouses. In this case burial location depends on the expressed will of the deceased, if known. Otherwise, the next of kin makes this decision.

The burial of born-Jews who converted to other religions - A Jew who has renounced the Jewish faith and has accepted another religion is still considered by Jewish law to be Jewish. However, for all practical purposes, such an individual has the same status in the Jewish community as a gentile. A born-Jew who has converted to another religion is not included in a *Minyan*, a quorum of at least ten Jewish men/women over the age of 13 required as a minimum for a public prayer service. Traditional Jewish law does not permit the converted Jew to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. However, Hillside will treat such an individual in the same way that close non-Jewish family members are treated. They can be buried in a family plot at Hillside.

Suicide - Jewish tradition regards the taking of one's own life as an ultimate tragedy. The tragedy is compounded in the fact that so often such a death leaves deep scars upon mourners. Our hearts break for such loss of life. Some in the Orthodox community do not countenance the burial of a person who has committed suicide in a Jewish cemetery. Other Orthodox communities permit such burial by reasoning that the person who took his/her own life had a momentary lapse of reason or was mentally unstable and therefore not responsible for his/her actions. Based on the assumption that people who commit suicide are usually not of their

right minds, it is very rare for such a death to actually be labeled a “suicide” by Jewish tradition. Hillside Cemetery will not add to the grief of survivors by refusing to bury their loved ones who died in this way. Such individuals are afforded full funeral and burial rights at Hillside Memorial Park. If burial is to take place in other Jewish cemeteries in Los Angeles, family must ask in advance about those cemeteries’ policies.

Tattoos and Jewish burial - Judaism forbids tattooing based on the Biblical verse, “You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Eternal.” [10] The body is regarded as a sacred vessel carrying the Godly soul, and as such should not be abused. That being said, in recent years tattooing has become a national fad. We know of no rabbis who would refuse to conduct a funeral for someone with a tattoo, nor do we know of any Jewish cemetery that would refuse to bury a person with a tattoo based in the principle of *kavod hameit* (honor given to the dead).

Autopsy – Are autopsies permitted by Jewish tradition? Classical Jewish literature explicitly and implicitly permitted autopsy if doing so benefited an ill person. While objections have been raised to autopsy on the grounds that doing so disfigures the dead, a violation of *kavod hameit* (honoring the dead), even some contemporary Orthodox authorities permit it, but only if the individual consented to the autopsy before death. Other Orthodox authorities felt that an individual who consented to an autopsy, in fact, had no right to consent based on the view that the body belongs to God and is only lent to the individual for safekeeping. There is a general stipulation that all portions of a body must be buried, yet this is *minhag* (custom) rather than law and there is a difference of opinion. The Reform movement takes the lenient view; namely, that for the sake of long-range research that may help others in the future or alleviating the immediate suffering of another person today, autopsy is permissible. The Advance Health Care Directive (see “Living Will”) form allows an individual to specify whether or not he/she would authorize an autopsy. [11]

Donating body parts for transplantation and research – Following the argument stated above, in Judaism to save or prolong life (*pikuach nefesh*) is a supreme obligation. Based on the above, in Jewish law the dismemberment of a human body after death is not regarded as mutilation if other lives now imperiled or seriously impaired might be rescued or preserved. Therefore, the authorized removal of a body part (e.g., corneas, kidneys, heart, etc.) from a deceased person in order to heal and restore a live person is not an act of mutilation or a violation of the principle of *kavod hameit* (respect for the dead). Rather, such action takes precedence over almost all other religious injunctions. The Advance Health Care Directive (see “Living Will”) form allows an individual to specify whether or not he/she would authorize donating body parts. [12]

Notes

1. *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Dea* 339
2. *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dea* 154
3. *Talmud, Kebubot* 104a
4. "Relieving Pain of a Dying Patient," *American Reform Responsa*, Solomon Freehof, Volume LXXV, 1975, pp. 83-85
5. "Living Will", *New American Reform Responsa*, #156, 1989
6. For additional examples of Health Care Directives see <http://ag.ca.gov/consumers/pdf/AHCDS1.pdf>
7. "Euthanasia," *American Reform Responsa*, Rabbi Israel Bettan, Vol. LX, 1950, pp. 107-20
8. Genesis 18
9. Ecclesiastes 12:7
10. Leviticus 19:28
11. "Autopsy for Future," *Contemporary American Reform Responsa*, CCAR, November 1986
12. "Transplanting the Eyes of Deceased Persons," *American Reform Responsa*, CCAR, Volume LXIII, 1953, pp. 152-153; "Donating a Body to Science," S.B. Freehof, *Reform Responsa*, CCAR, pp. 130ff; "Bequeathing Parts of the Body," *Contemporary Reform Responsa*, CCAR, pp. 216ff

Funeral Checklist

Although the most vital tasks and decisions concerning funerals, burial and mourning in the home are made by family members, we recommend recruiting friends and non-first-degree relatives (such as in-laws, who are appropriate for this) to cover other tasks such as making phone calls, helping transport out-of-town relatives, arranging food for the meal following the funeral, and assisting with other needed errands.

The following is a check list of tasks that might be delegated to others:

Burial Arrangements

- _____ Contact a *Chevra Kadisha* (burial society)/mortuary and/or funeral home. See page for a complete list of cemeteries and mortuaries in Los Angeles.
- _____ If the departed person has a pre-arranged burial and funeral plan, find the necessary information.
- _____ If the deceased owned a *tallit* (prayer shawl), decide if it should be buried with the individual. (We recommend that this be retained by the family and passed to the next generation as a family heirloom and keepsake.)

Sharing the Sadness

- _____ Inform (in person, if possible) the closest family members. For out-of-town members of the immediate family, do your best to make sure that the person being called is not alone or in an inappropriate location to receive the news of their loved one's death. For example, one should not notify a sibling that his/her sister has died while he or she is on a cell phone and driving.
- _____ Make a list of people who should be contacted regarding the death. Include family members, friends, employers (of both the deceased and of family members), colleagues, co-workers, community members, and neighbors. Temple Israel sends a notice of all deaths to the entire membership of the synagogue by e-mail, if this is the desire of the family of the departed. We also note, per the family's wishes, the time and location of the funeral and the *Minyan* services following the funeral and burial.
- _____ Delegate family members and friends to make phone calls.

Funeral Service

- _____ Decide who will conduct the funeral service and contact the clergy immediately upon the death.
- _____ Consult with the rabbi/cantor regarding the eulogy/*hesped* and the participation of family members and friends (noting the aforementioned guidelines).

- _____ Estimate the number of funeral attendees and choose the funeral location accordingly.
- _____ Consult with the funeral home and/or cemetery regarding service locations for both the eulogy and burial. Decide if a chapel and/or graveside service will suit family needs.
- _____ Appoint pallbearers (those who will carry the coffin part or all of the way to the burial site). If there are individuals who may be unable to physically handle this task, you may designate them as "honorary" pallbearers. We at Temple Israel encourage women and men alike to be pallbearers and "honorary" pallbearers. Usually the deceased's spouse and children do not act as pallbearers. In-laws, siblings, grandchildren, dear friends are customary. This is an honor that can be given to Jewish individuals as well as those of other faith traditions.
- _____ Arrange for transportation to and from the ceremony for mourners and other family members. This is often done through the funeral home.
- _____ Some mourners may wish to practice reciting the Mourner's *Kaddish* prayer in advance of the funeral. Please see our Temple Israel website for the *Kaddish*. It is the religious duty of mourners to say the *Kaddish* themselves and not rely upon surrogates to say it for them. For those who do not read Aramaic, the Mourner's *Kaddish* is transliterated into English letters.

***S'udat Hav'ra-ah* ("Meal of Healing")**

- _____ If the family will be observing this custom, members of the extended family or friends (but not the mourners) should make arrangements for a light meal.
- _____ Give out printed directions to the family home at the funeral.
- _____ Place a pitcher of water, a basin, and towel outside the front door to be used by funeral returnees before they enter the home. (All Jewish cemeteries have water spouts/basins at the gate so that those leaving the cemetery may stop and wash their hands, a traditional act of purification.)
- _____ Prepare hard-boiled eggs for eating during the meal. These eggs symbolize the cyclical nature of life. Lentils are also traditional food at the house of mourning.

Preparing for *Shivah*

- _____ Notify employers of needs for family leave.
- _____ Contact the synagogue of the departed person and/or of the mourners regarding the *shivah*, in order to set a schedule of services, to assure ten adults (Jewish women and men over the age of 13) at services (if applicable), and to ask for assistance with other practical arrangements. Set a schedule for meal preparation by friends and extended family for the first week or more, as needed.

- _____ Prepare a handout with the *shivah* information, to be passed out at the funeral, that includes the address of (and directions to) the home where *shivah* will be observed, hours during which visitors will be welcomed, and the times of the services.
- _____ Create a door sign with visiting hours posted.
- _____ Notify neighbors (and the police department, if necessary) of the presence of additional cars and people in the neighborhood and arrange for parking passes, as needed.
- _____ It can be helpful to have groceries and other necessary items delivered over the course of the week.
- _____ Temple Israel has mourner prayer books that are gender inclusive, transliterated, and with English translations for *Minyan* services, and *kippot* (head coverings) for guests.

Other

- _____ Post an obituary in the local and/or Jewish newspapers. Obituaries may be posted either before or after a funeral. Usually newspapers such as *The Los Angeles Times* have a deadline for obituaries at 3:00 PM or 4:00 PM for the next morning's edition.
- _____ Designate charitable organization(s) to receive donations in the memory of the lost loved one.

Cemeteries and Mortuaries in the Greater Los Angeles Area

Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary is owned and operated by Temple Israel of Hollywood. 6001 Centinella Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90045. Telephone (310) 641-0707. <http://www.hillsidememorial.com/>

Mount Sinai Memorial Park and Mortuary – 5950 Forest Lawn Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90068. Telephone (800) 600-0076. <http://www.mt-sinai.com/> Simi Valley location: 6150 Mount Sinai Drive, Simi Valley, CA 93063. Telephone (800) 220-6776. <http://www.mt-sinai.com/>

Eden Memorial Park – 11500 Sepulveda Boulevard, Mission Hills, CA 91345. Telephone (818) 361-7161. <http://buyandsellcemeteryplots.com/eden-memorial-park-mission-hills-ca.htm>

Home of the Peace Memorial Park and Mortuary – 4334 Whittier Boulevard, Los Angeles. CA 90023. Telephone (323) 261-6135.

Groman-Eden Mortuaries – 11500 Sepulveda Boulevard, Mission Hills, CA 91345. Telephone (818) 365-7151. 830 West Washington Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90015-3358. Telephone (213) 748-2201

R.L. Malinow Glasband Weinstein Mortuaries – 7700 Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood, CA 90046. Telephone (800) 300-0223.

Malinow and Silverman Mortuary – 7366 South Osage Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90045. Telephone (800) 710-7100. <http://malinowsilverman.com/>

Chevra Kadisha – 7832 Santa Monica Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90046. Telephone (800) 899-5211. <http://www.chevrakadisha.com/>

Shalom Memorial Park Mortuary – 13017 Lopez Canyon Road, Sylmar, CA 91342. Telephone (818) 899-5216. <http://www.yelp.com/biz/sholom-memorial-park-and-mortuary-sylmar>

Hebrew and Aramaic Glossary

Aninut	The state of mourning between death and burial
Aron	Casket
Ashkenaz	Lit. "Germany"; includes Jews of European origin
Avel	Grief
Avelut	Mourning, the mourning period
Bet Kevarot	Cemetery
Bechi	Mournful crying, wailing
Bikur Cholim	Visiting the sick
B'tzelem Elohim	In the Divine image
Chesed shel emet	Compassionate concern and kindness of the living for a deceased
Chevra Kadisha	Lit. "Holy community" - mortuary
Dayan Ha-emet	"The true Judge" – prayer said after a death
Eil maleh rachamim	"God full of Compassion" – memorial prayer that includes the Hebrew name of the deceased
Emet	Truth
Gan Eden	Garden of Eden; paradise; the place to which righteous souls return
Gehinnom	The period after death in which the soul is purified
Gemilut Chassadim	A category of commandments; lit. "Deeds of loving-kindness"
Gilgul ha-nefashot	"Wheel of souls"; reincarnation
Halachah	Rabbinic law based on Mishnah, Talmud, and Codes
Hazkarat neshamot	Memorial prayer for the deceased
Hefsed	Loss
Hesped	Eulogy
Kaddish	Aramaic prayer that exalts the Name of God and is said in memory of the deceased
Kohen	A descendant of the priestly class, according to traditional Judaism will only attend the funeral and burial of his immediate family as he is otherwise forbidden to come near a corpse
Kosher/kashrut	Jewish dietary practices
Kavod ha-meit	Respect for the dead
Kavod ha-chayim	Respect for the living
Kevurah	Burial
K'riah	Tearing the garment or black ribbon and worn by immediate mourners (spouse, parents, children, siblings)
K'vura b'karka	Burial in the ground
Levayat ha-meit	Lit. "accompanying the dead"; walking behind the casket to the gravesite
Matzevah	Monument or tombstone
M'chayei ha-meitim	Resurrection of the dead
Minhag	Custom, which may carries the weight of <i>Halachah</i> (law)
Minyan	Prayer quorum of 10 Jews
Nechamah	Consolation, comfort
Nefesh	The physical soul
Neshamah	The Godly soul

<i>Nichum Aveilim</i>	Comforting the mourners after burial and for the seven days of <i>shivah</i>
<i>Olam ha-ba</i>	The world to come
<i>Olam ha-zeh</i>	This world
<i>Onen</i>	The mourner before the burial
<i>Otzar ha-nefashot</i>	"Treasury of souls"; the metaphysical way-station in which righteous souls reside before returning to a new life
<i>Pikuach Nefesh</i>	Saving a life takes precedence over almost all other religious injunctions in Judaism
<i>Rachamim</i>	Compassion, from <i>rechem</i> (womb)
<i>S'farad</i>	Lit. "Spain"; includes Jews of Spanish and middle eastern origin
<i>Seudat hav'ra-ah</i>	Meal of healing
<i>Shalom</i>	Salutation meaning "hello" and "goodbye" but coming from the root word meaning "wholeness" or "completeness"
<i>Shivah</i>	Lit. "seven"; the first seven days of intense mourning following burial
<i>Sh'loshim</i>	Lit. "thirty"; the first thirty days of mourning following burial
<i>Shoah</i>	Lit. "conflagration"; refers to the murder of the six million Jews
<i>Shomer/shomeret</i>	Guards who sit with the body before burial often reciting psalms
<i>Tachrichin</i>	Traditional shrouds worn by the body for burial
<i>Taharah</i>	Ritual purification of the body for burial
<i>Tehilim</i>	Psalms
<i>Teshuvah</i>	Repentance
<i>Tzedakah</i>	Righteous giving in memory of the deceased
<i>Tziduk ha-din</i>	The "justification of God" prayer recited at burial
<i>Vidui</i>	Confessional said before death
<i>Yahrzeit</i>	Hebrew date marking the date of burial
<i>Yizkor</i>	Memorial service for the deceased on the pilgrimage festivals of <i>Pesach</i> , <i>Shavuot</i> , and <i>Sukkot</i> , as well as on <i>Yom Kippur</i>

Resources for Further Consideration and Study

Mourning & Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing – by Rabbi Anne Brener
The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning – by Rabbi Maurice Lamm
To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times – by Rabbi Naomi Levy
How to Survive the Loss of a Love – by Peter McWilliams, Harold H. Bloomfield, and Melba Colgrove
A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement – by Dr. Ron Wolfson
Jewish Views of the Afterlife - by Rabbi Simcha Paull Raphael
Does the Soul Survive? A Jewish Journey to Believe in the Afterlife, Past Lives and Living with Purpose - by Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz, with a foreword by Dr. Brian L. Weiss
So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them – by Rabbi Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer

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Shivah, the First Seven Days of Mourning

Shiva is observed in the home as an intensive mourning period for close relatives.

By Rabbi Joseph Telushin

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After the burial, mourners return home (or, ideally, to the home of the deceased) to sit *shivah* for seven days. Shiva is simply the Hebrew word for seven. During the *shivah* week, mourners are expected to remain at home and sit on low stools. This last requirement is intended to reinforce the mourners' inner emotions. In English we speak of "feeling low," as a synonym for depression; in Jewish law, the depression is acted out literally.

There are seven relatives for whom a Jew is required to observe *shivah*: father or mother, sister or brother, son or daughter, and spouse.

During the *shivah* week, three prayer services are conducted daily at the mourners' house. The synagogue to which the mourning family belongs usually undertakes to ensure that a *minyan* (at least 10 adult Jews) be present at each service. Among Orthodox Jews, a male mourner leads the service and recites the Kaddish prayer for the dead. Some Orthodox, and virtually all non-Orthodox, Jews encourage women to recite the Kaddish as well.

According to Jewish law, there is a specific etiquette for paying a *shivah* visit. Visitors are to enter quietly, take a seat near the mourner, and say nothing until the mourner addresses them first. This has less to do with ritual than with common sense: The visitor cannot know what the mourner most needs at that moment. For example, the visitor might feel that he or she must speak about the deceased, but the mourner might feel too emotionally overwrought to do so. Conversely, the visitor might try to cheer the mourner by speaking of a sports event or some other irrelevancy at just the moment when the mourner's deepest need is to speak of the dead. And, of course, the mourner might just wish to sit quietly and say nothing at all.

Unfortunately, people frequently violate this Jewishly mandated procedure. Particularly if the deceased was very old, the atmosphere at a *shivah* house often becomes inappropriately lighthearted, as Jews also try to avoid confronting the fact of death.

Mourners must not shave, take a luxurious bath, wear leather shoes (which Jewish tradition regards as particularly comfortable), have sex, or launder their clothes during the week of *shivah*. If the family of the deceased is in desperate economic circumstances, its members are permitted to return to work after three days of mourning.

In the past, when the Jewish community was less affluent, this leniency was utilized more frequently. Solomon Luria, a great Polish rabbinical scholar of the 16th century, was asked by a *melamed* (a teacher who tutored young boys in Hebrew) if he might

return to work before *shivah* was complete; otherwise he feared the parents would hire another teacher for their children. Rabbi Luria gave him permission on the grounds that his livelihood was at stake and on the further, rather pathetically humorous, grounds that since a Hebrew teacher's life is quite miserable, everyone would know he was not returning to work out of pleasure.



Rabbi Joseph Telushkin is the author of *Jewish Literacy* and *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal*, along with other widely-read books on Judaism and the "Rabbi Daniel Winter" murder mysteries. He lives in New York City and lectures widely throughout North America.

How to Make a *Shivah* Call

Because a *shivah* call requires total sensitivity to the needs of the mourner, the tradition mandates appropriate behaviors for the visitor.

By Dr. Ron Wolfson

Reprinted with permission from Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning, edited by Jack Riemer (Schocken Books, publisher).

We are not alone. This is the fundamental message of Judaism about death and bereavement. Every law and every custom of Jewish mourning and comforting has, at its core, the overwhelming motivation to surround those who are dying and those who will grieve with a supportive community. While some may argue that facing death and coping with grief heighten one's feeling of aloneness, the Jewish approach places loss and grief in the communal context of family and friends.

Comforters are obligated to tend to the needs of mourners. For instance, since a family sitting *shivah* [seven days of mourning following a death] should not prepare meals, it is the responsibility of the community to feed them. Some people send prepared foods from local caterers, and many Jewish newspapers carry ads for "*shivah* trays." With our busy, frenetic lives, it is certainly convenient to turn to these sources. Yet personally prepared and/or delivered food is a more traditional act of comfort. Liquor, candy, or flowers are not usually sent. A donation to a charity designated by the mourners would be another appropriate way to honor the deceased, while comforting those who mourn.

As a comforter, making a *shivah* call is one of the most important acts of condolence. But all too often those visiting a mourner's home are not sure of the appropriate behavior. David Techner, funeral director at the Ira Kaufman Chapel in Detroit and a leading expert in the field, suggests that many people do not have the slightest idea as to why they even make the *shivah* call. "People need to ask themselves: 'What am I trying to do?' When people say things like, 'At least he's not suffering,' who are they trying to make comfortable? Certainly not the mourner. People say things like that so that they do not have to deal with the mourner's grief. The comment is for themselves, not the mourner."

In my interviews with rabbis, funeral directors, psychologists, and lay people for my book, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*, I discovered that the act of comforting the mourner is quickly becoming a lost art. We do not know what to do, so many people avoid making a *shivah* call altogether. We do not know what to say, so many people say things that are more hurtful than helpful. We do not know how to act, so often the atmosphere is more festive than reflective.

The problem is exacerbated by mourners and their families who do not know how to set an appropriate tone. Many observances have become like parties, with plenty of food, drink, and chitchat. Of course, there are alternatives. In some *shivah* homes, the *minyan* (prayer service with at least 10 Jews, where the mourner says *Kaddish*, the memorial prayer) becomes the focus. During the service (or just before and just after it), the life of the deceased is remembered through stories and anecdotes.

Practical Tips

Whichever type of *shivah* home you encounter, there are some basic guidelines for making a *shivah* call.

Decide when to visit. Listen for an announcement at the funeral service for the times that the mourners will be receiving guests. Usually the options are immediately after the funeral, around the *minyanim* in the evenings and mornings, or during the day. Should you wish to visit during another time, you may want to call ahead. Some experienced *shivah* visitors choose to visit toward the end of the week, when it is frequently more difficult to gather a *minyan*.

Dress appropriately. Most people dress as if attending a synagogue service. Depending on the area of the country, more informal dress might be just as appropriate.

Wash your hands. If you are visiting immediately after the funeral, you will likely see a pitcher of water, basin, and towels near the door. It is traditional to ritually wash your hands upon returning from the cemetery. This reflects the belief that contact with the dead renders a person "impure." There is no blessing to say for this act.

Just walk in. Do not ring the doorbell. The front door of most *shivah* homes will be left open or unlocked, since all are invited to comfort the mourners. This eliminates the need for the mourners to answer the door. On a practical level, it avoids the constant disruptive ringing of the bell.

Take food to the kitchen. If you are bringing food, take it to the kitchen. Usually there will be someone there to receive it. Identify the food as meat, dairy, or *pareve* (neither meat nor dairy). Be sure to put your name on a card or on the container so that the mourners will know you made the gift. It also helps to mark any pots or pans with your name if you want to retrieve them later.

Find the mourners. Go to the mourners as soon as possible. What do you say? The tradition suggests being silent, allowing the mourner to open the conversation. Simply offering a hug, a kiss, a handshake, an arm around the shoulder speaks volumes. If you do want to open a conversation, start with a simple "I'm so sorry" or "I don't know what to say. This must be really difficult for you" or "I was so sorry to hear about _____. Be sure to name the deceased. Why? Because one of the most powerful ways to comfort mourners is to encourage them to remember the deceased.

Recall something personal: "I loved _____. Remember the times we went on vacation together? She adored you so much." Do not tell people not to cry or that they will get over it. Crying is a normal part of the grieving process. And, as most people who have been bereaved will tell you, you never "get over" a loss, you only get used to it.

Spend anywhere from a few moments to 10 minutes with the mourners. There will be others who also want to speak with them, and you can always come back. If you are the only visitor, then, of course, spend as much time as you wish.

Participate in the service. If a prayer service is conducted during your call, participate to the extent you can. If you do not know the service, sit or stand respectfully while it is in progress. If the rabbi or leader asks for stories about the deceased, do not hesitate to share one, even if it is somewhat humorous. The entire purpose of *shivah* is to focus on the life of the person who has died and his or her relationship to the family and friends in that room.

If invited, eat. Take your cue from the mourners. In some homes, no food will be offered, nor should you expect to eat anything. In others, especially after the funeral, food may be offered. Be sure that the mourners have already eaten the meal of condolence before you approach the table. When attending a morning *minyan*, you will likely be invited to partake of a small breakfast. After evening *minyan*, coffee and cake may or may not be served. In any case, should you be invited to eat, be moderate in your consumption. Normally, guests are not expected to eat meals with the family during the *shivah*.

Talk to your friends. Inevitably, you will encounter other friends and acquaintances at a house of mourning. Your natural instinct will be to ask about them, to share the latest joke, to shmooze about sports or politics. You may be standing with a plate of food and a drink, and if you did not know better, it would feel like a party. But the purpose of the *shivah* is to comfort the mourners.

You are in the home to be a member of the communal *minyan*. The appropriate topic of conversation is the deceased. Reminisce about his or her relationship to the mourners and to you. Of course, human nature being what it is, we tend to fall into our normal modes of social communication. This is not necessarily bad; however, you should be careful to avoid raucous humor, tasteless jokes, loud talk, and gossip.

Do not stay too long. A *shivah* visit should be no more than an hour. If a service is held, come a few minutes before and stay a few after. Mourners uniformly report how exhausted they are by the shiva experience; do not overstay your welcome.

Say goodbye. When you are ready to leave, you may want to wish the bereaved good health and strength, long life, and other blessings. The formal farewell to a mourner is the same Hebrew phrase offered at the gravesite and in the synagogue on Friday evening:

May God comfort	<i>Ha-makom yenakhem</i>
you	<i>etchem</i> [many mourners]
	<i>otach</i> [one female]
	<i>ot'cha</i> [one male]
	<i>etchen</i> [more than one
	female]
among the other	<i>b'toch sh'ar</i>
mourners	<i>a'vaylay</i>
of Zion and Jerusalem.	<i>Tzion v'Y'rushalayim</i>

Ha-Makom is a name of God that literally means "the place," referring to God's omnipresent nature, including at the lifecycles from birth to death. It is only God who can grant the mourner lasting comfort. The comforter comes to remind the mourners that the divine powers of the universe will enable them to heal and go on with a meaningful life. Ultimate consolation comes only from the omnipresent God.

"B'toch sh'ar avaylay Tzion v'Y'rushalayim" means "among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Once again, the message is "we are not alone." In fact, traditional Jewish practice requires a *minyan* of 10 in order to recite the Kaddish prayer. Personal bereavement is thus seen in the total context of the community.

The great genius of Jewish bereavement is to empower the community to be God's partner in comforting those who mourn. In making a *shivah* call in an appropriate and traditional way, we are the medium through which God's comfort can be invoked. In learning the art of coping with dying, we are, in fact, learning an important aspect of the art of Jewish living.



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Jewish Words of Comfort

Judaism helps provide the words to comfort mourners.

By Rabbi Maurice Lamm

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Jewish tradition understands the quandary of those who want to comfort mourners but cannot articulate words of comfort, so it provides a formulaic religious response to what is essentially an inexpressible emotion. Thus, consolers are able to express their sentiments in a soothing and spiritual way without fear that they might become tongue-tied in the face of irretrievable tragedy.

The Crown Jewel of Jewish Consolation

"May God console you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem (*Ha'makom y'nachem etchem betoch sh'ar avelei Tziyon vi'Yerushalayim*)."

This traditional farewell of mourners instituted by Judaism is carefully constructed and profound. It conveys positive feeling with layers of ever-deepening meaning, even for those who don't understand the literal Hebrew or who can hardly remember the words or even pronounce them correctly.

This formula also relies on God to take primary responsibility for consoling the mourners--to comfort is human, to console divine. Mourners might find it hard to fully accept a human being's personal words, but they may feel more readily consoled by an invocation of God's participation in mourning. The ideas embedded in this phrase are a summary of the religious and spiritual devices the tradition uses to bring the mourner some consolation.

Ha-makom

In this blessing, God is referred to by a specific and little-known name, "*Ha'makom*," which translates simply as "The Place." God is referred to as "place" because space affirms stability, solid ground, rootedness--the opposite of ethereal. A "space" term is used instead of a "time" term such as the Tetragrammaton--the four-letter word for God's name, which signifies eternity--because mourners need to inhabit the here and now.

Space is the framework for griever--the place of *shivah* [the week-long mourning period], changing one's usual *place* at services. Time, in contrast, is infinite, mercurial, and unmanageable.

Further, the use of the word "*makom*" averts a possible negative response from mourners. Calling God by this consoling name avoids thrusting God's more familiar, awesome name into the face of mourners who have been shaken to their roots by God's irreversible decree. That is, in fact, also the reason for not greeting mourners with the usual "*shalom*," since *shalom* is another name for Almighty God, a name hard to embrace at this disquieting time.

Y'nachem

The second word of the classic farewell blessing is the Hebrew word for "console," but it is not one always used for this purpose in the Bible. When the Israelites betray God's trust, God is depicted as va-y'nahem--"regretting" the creation of human beings or "regretting" taking Israel out of slavery. This seems to have everything to do with God's undergoing a change of mind, as it were, and nothing to do with God's consoling.

But we need to understand a link that is not immediately visible. Intrinsic to all consolation is a sense of deep regret. Regret gives rise to a need for change and triggers an acceptance of loss, which leads inevitably to profound consolation. It compels people to review, reassess, and readapt to a world that has permanently changed after a friend or relative has died. It points to a change in direction--adjusting to a new status and new relationships among all members of the family or business or inner circle, and submitting to self-transformation, if that is possible.

Betoch Sh'ar Avelei Tziyon vi'Yerushaliyim

The formula is incomplete, however, without its second half: "Among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." This phrase emphatically moves the consoler away from the natural tendency to focus solely on those presently grieving. It connects both the specific griever and grief in general in two salient and subtle ways.

First, the phrase broadens God's consolation to include "other mourners"--of Zion and Jerusalem--thereby expressing a critical imperative in the process of grief work: the universal need for mourners to share their grief, the natural interconnectivity of all mourners. Grievers are not alone, and they must know this so that they do not feel singled out unfairly by God, specially targeted for suffering. The phrase also brings the mourners to the realization that death, in all its guises, is suffered by everyone, "other mourners," and that it is an inherent quality of life.

Subliminally, yet another level of meaning is implied: Others are genuinely able to share their pain.

More subtly tucked into the folds of the phrase "the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem" is the teaching that the mourners' past grievous losses are connected with their present loss. Indeed, within our lifetime, we suffer and grieve for many losses: a loved one, a dear friend, a business relationship, a livelihood, or our prestige. Or we may mourn a ravaged community, perhaps a sacred city like Jerusalem, or a devoutly held idea like Zion. Many never resolve old grief; horrific incidents of the past may cast their long shadow over a new trauma. Even night has its shadows.

Grieving should be seen as an ongoing process of acknowledging cumulative misfortune rather than only a recent disaster. An entire collection of past losses thus insinuates itself surreptitiously into the fresh grief, though most mourners regard the new loss as a single monolithic burden.

In English, "grief" has no singular, no plural, only a comprehensive sense. Similarly, the Hebrew word for grief, *avel*, is a comprehensive term. So, too, is *"hefsed"*

(loss)—we speak of *hefsed merubah* (great loss) and *hefsed mu'at* (minor loss), but not in the singular or plural as such. On the other hand, "*nehamah*" (consolation) has a ready plural--"*tanhumim*" (many consolations).

Thus, centuries of Jewish usage, expressed in the common forms of daily language, shine a light on the significant contrast between accumulated grief and separate consolations. This linguistic insight into Judaism teaches two counterintuitive truths: First, all mourners, no matter how diverse their losses, share a common sadness, forming a communal net of sorrow, although each is unique. And yet a single mourner's particular experiences of grief form a personal net of troubles, shared by no one else.

Jewish tradition, in its Ashkenazic and Sephardic formulas, requires that this special Hebrew phrase be spoken because it incorporates a fundamental tenet of Judaism: We are the concerns of God, not only as unique individuals but also as one among many others who are suffering and who must always be included. In fact, an oft-repeated teaching of Judaism is that God heals us only if we first ask God to help others.

This is particularly true when we turn to God not to seek comfort for a personal loss, but for the survival of Zion and Jerusalem. That is why, when extending God's blessing to sick people, we mention "*sh'ar cholei Yisra'el*" (those others in Israel who are sick). We affirm that God is concerned not only with individuals but also with the whole community of Israel.

God is at once the public God of the People Israel and also the God of persons, of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, as we recite in every religious service. The French Catholic philosopher Blaise Pascal, one of the keenest minds of the 17th century, had this phrase sewn into his coat lining--"I believe in the God of Abram, Isaac, and Jacob, not of the philosophers nor of the wise"--because it reflected his closest personal belief in a personal God and because he wanted to guarantee that it went wherever he went....

The Most Consoling Words

Probably the most consoling words I have ever heard are these: "Tell me what your loved one was really like." The dialogue between mourners and consolers during *shivah* is not designed to distract the bereaved but to encourage the mourner to speak of the deceased--of his or her qualities, hopes, even foibles--and, of course, not to criticize the dead who cannot respond. Far from recalling the anguish of the loss, it gives those who are bereaved the opportunity to recall memories and to express their grief aloud.

Psychologists assure us that mourners specifically want to speak of their loss. Eric Lindemann, in his classic paper "The Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief," writes, "There is no retardation of action and speech; quite to the contrary, there is a push of speech, especially when talking of the deceased."

Both the mourners' words and their tears should not be avoided or suppressed. For mourners and for comforters, words truly make a difference. "Tell me what your loved one was really like" is a good beginning.



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Shachareet Rosh Hashanah
September 30, 2008 – 1 Tishrei, 5769
Rabbi John L. Rosove

WRITING YOUR ETHICAL WILL

Alfred Nobel, the Swedish chemist, woke up one morning to read his name listed in the obituaries by mistake instead of his brother who'd died the day before. The obit highlighted the fact that he was the inventor of dynamite and that he'd made a fortune by licensing governments to use this explosive for weapons and that he'd made it possible for nations to achieve new levels of mass destruction of armies and civilian populations.

Alfred was stunned to realize that his name would be forever associated with death and destruction. And so he decided to change course and took his vast fortune and established awards in various fields of endeavor which serve and benefit humankind.

Implicit in Nobel's change of life-script was his recognition of the difference between personal success on the one hand and personal significance on the other. Though in the obituary Nobel had been described as a brilliant chemist (which he was), he was struck by how hollow, inconsequential and negative his accomplishments had been to that point in his life, and he was determined to contribute something positive. Today hardly anyone knows that Alfred Nobel created dynamite (except for all of you because I just told you); instead we remember him as the man who created awards to inspire the most brilliant and creative minds, hearts and spirits of the last century to work on behalf of serving our greatest human interests.

If we were to write our own obituaries, what would we say? How would we wish to be remembered by others? What lasting and meaningful contribution would we be proud to tout as having defined our purpose, goals and life ends? If we could write a short message that would appear on our tombstones, what would that be? And would those who know us best agree that that statement best represents us?

These are questions that probe the essence of who we understand ourselves to be and what we care about most. What better time to ask such questions than now, on *Rosh Hashanah* morning when, for the next 10 days we'll be occupied with *cheshbon hanefesh*, taking an accounting of where we are in our lives.

In American culture most people leave trusts and wills (if they are wise!) in which we set down how we wish to allocate our worldly possessions to our children, grandchildren and heirs. Hopefully, we're able to leave something substantive materially to our families, to good causes, institutions and charities. But is our material wealth the most valuable thing we have to leave to others?

Whenever I'm asked to conduct a funeral, I always meet with the immediate relatives beforehand not only to better understand the essence of the person who's passed away, but also to give the mourners an opportunity to reflect on the love they shared and the lessons they learned from their loved one, and to share that with each other because so often close relatives don't know what the other's experience has been with the deceased. Towards the end of my time listening I ask this concluding question: "How would the one who has just died wish to be remembered?" Someone responds and then the floodgates open, and people pour

out memories and feelings, for better and worse. Only one time that I can remember in the 30 plus years I've been officiating at funerals has a mourner said – "Let's get my mother's 'Ethical Will' because she was clear in that document about what she believed, valued, and wanted us to do with our lives, and how she wanted us to remember her."

When I read this woman's statement, I was moved deeply and I asked the family if I or someone else could read her words at the funeral itself. They agreed, and I had the privilege of doing so. When I read her words it was as if she was speaking to us from the other side. Her words were eloquent, loving and wise.

Jewish tradition teaches that it's a *mitzvah* "to carry out the directions of the deceased." When a parent instructs a child about what the parent wants at the burial, these instructions are almost always considered obligatory, unless the request requires a child to violate Jewish law, do something unethical and immoral, or if the request impinges upon the child's ability to properly mourn. For example, though a eulogy is customarily delivered at a funeral, it isn't obligatory according to *halachah*, and if the deceased had not wanted a eulogy delivered, that request should be respected. But if a parent insists that a child not say *Kaddish*, this request supersedes his or her authority because the *Kaddish* is a key element in the child's mourning and the child has the duty and, most often, the need to say it.

During a period of about five hundred years, between the 12th and 17th centuries when Jews suffered impoverishment and deprivation, when they had little in the way of material possessions to leave behind for their heirs, they wrote documents known as "Ethical Wills." These notes contain no lists of assets and property, and to read them is to peer into the inner lives, hearts, minds, and souls of our ancestors, to learn what was of ultimate value to them, what they cherished, what they felt about their families, what lessons they learned distilled over a lifetime, what acquired wisdom and truths they hoped to impart to their children and grandchildren. So many of them are moving statements of exquisite eloquence and beauty.

The tradition of writing Ethical Wills actually began in Biblical times. The first example is found in the Genesis stories of Jacob, who instructed his twelve sons from his deathbed, and gave them directives and advice on their future.

One of the problems for so many today is that we've placed too much emphasis upon what we do, upon our material wealth and the bottom line, and not nearly enough on who we are, what we value and cherish above all else.

This summer I spoke with a member of our community who, by any standard is a success in life. He's a respected and revered leader, attorney, thinker, and a wonderful thoughtful *mensch*. He was complaining to me (as he has to his law partners on many occasions - apparently without effect) that the profit motive had become overly important in his firm, that partners' meetings had become primarily discussions about how to grow the firm, make more money, attract more prestigious clients and cases, engage the best and brightest young attorneys, not a bad thing at all, but to do so would mean paying these 26 and 27 year old attorneys exorbitant salaries higher than many of the incomes of the people in this room today who've worked hard for years to earn far more modest incomes.

For a number of years he's been asking – "WHY? Is THIS the reason we became attorneys?"

Recalling Nobel's story, my friend didn't need a wake up call himself because he could care less about whether he's remembered as the lawyer who made a ton of money and won the biggest cases. He'd rather devote more of the firm's time to taking on pro-bono work and doing good for people who can't afford attorneys.

Ever since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, we humans have asked if our toil in living has meaning and value beyond our ability to make ends meet. Most of us want to know whether what we've spent our time doing has significance. We wonder whether our tiny candles are bright enough to cast a measure of light, or will they be too dim and undetected at the end of our days? We question if what we do and what we've done is good enough, or is something greater expected of us?

When reading the treasure trove of Ethical Wills that's come down to us I was struck by two themes that animate most of them. The first is the sincerity and purity of the writers' concerns. And the second is that there seems to be confidence that these parents' words will be followed by their children and grandchildren because the children understood that their parents' instructions were intended to enhance the child's well-being.

For example, one dying parent instructed his child not to cut off relations with family when tensions would arise between them. Another told his sons and daughters to avoid drinking and eating in excess, to stay away from gambling and avoid risky business adventures. A third instructed her children to refine their speech, avoid volcanic bursts of anger and mean-spiritedness. She wanted her children to speak respectfully to each other and to others, to be kind, charitable, and generous of heart always, not some of the time. A father counseled his sons to be honest in their business dealings, pay their debts on time, and avoid behaviors that bring ill-repute on the family's good name. Some were written by people who didn't have children of their own, but were leaving these documents to their nieces, nephews and people they mentored in business. Yet another urged his children and grandchildren to study some Torah every day of their lives, to support the Jewish community generously, and to look out for and take care of their fellow Jews.

The Ethical Wills I've read are wonderfully inspirational. None, amazingly (as we might expect coming from Jews), were intended to produce guilt, to punish, blame, harass, or control a child "from the grave." To the contrary, they were open-hearted and generous.

An Ethical Will actually serves another purpose in addition to providing advice, counsel and wisdom after a life time of living. Writing them is also an exercise in our distilling as concisely as we can what we believe and value most. There's an old saying: "If you want to know how to live your life, think about what you'd like people to say about you after you die – and live backwards."

Thinking about the legacy we'd like to leave the people we love and care about most can help us keep our own priorities straight. Carefully considering how we want to be remembered allows us to formulate a kind of "strategic plan" for our lives even when we're young. Much as non-profit organizations, synagogues and businesses develop mission statements, an Ethical Will is a kind of personal "mission statement," and as such should articulate our own vision of what we are at our changeless core.

Victor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor who believed that he survived the concentration camps because he had important work he needed to complete (he developed the theory of Logotherapy), noted that we, in fact, don't invent our missions as individuals; we seek to detect them, to uncover them and then strive to fulfill them much in the same way that Michelangelo once remarked that he doesn't create images out of stone; rather, he releases what was trapped inside the marble.

We need only take time to reflect and realize what already lives within us, even if it's hidden away from both ourselves and others, and then articulate as clearly as we can what that is.

Jewish tradition doesn't have formal requirements about what should be written in an Ethical Will. Whatever we end up saying should reflect timeless and unchanging values and principles regardless of the situations in which we might find ourselves at any particular moment in our lives. They should be written as if our circumstances never change - though we know they do - and should express principles that can withstand the loss of a job, our homes and financial security, the disintegration of our marriages and friendships, and even the death of our loved ones and friends.

In his book "Living a Life that Matters" Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote: "Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it."

Rabbi Kushner is right, but for many of us that part of our souls is buried so deeply and obscured so much by life's traffic that we rarely focus enough on ourselves to clean the slate and ask - Why am I here? What is my life's purpose? Rather, so many of us just drift along and fail to do what would best free us to give our lives greater meaning.

I want to suggest to all of us here this morning to begin to write our own Ethical Wills during the next 10 days leading to Yom Kippur, regardless of our age, marital status, whether or not we have children or grandchildren. There's someone out there who would value what we have to teach and impart to them.

Think about this seriously. Select your words carefully. Do a draft and then put the document aside and continue to fine tune it, rewrite it as necessary crystallizing the essential truths that you've learned in your lives.

In the process of writing, you might first make a list for yourself of how you occupy your time - how many hours in a day or a week do you spend with the people you love, at work, in travel, in creating, reading, studying, listening, sitting, exercising, doing leisure activities, watching television, and surfing the web. Are we glued too much to a screen of some kind, scrolling around on a blackberry, persistently connected to a virtual matrix, a slave to our technologies? Do we spend too much time alone? Have we stopped learning? Have we not given enough of our time and resources to perpetuating Jewish life? And how much of our lives do we waste? Compare and measure these activities against your goals and dreams - and see where you are and what you might change in order to bring them into greater harmony with each other.

The most ultimate question we might ask of ourselves as we compose these Ethical Wills is this; are we living our lives in such a way that we're worthy to stand in God's

presence? It's that question that guided me 18 years ago when I wrote my own Ethical Will. I continue to ask myself that question frequently, whenever I study or pray, teach, or spend time with family, friends, colleagues, congregants, students, the community, public policy issues, and larger Jewish and Zionist causes. It's a question, frankly, that I always feel inadequate to answer because I know I haven't done enough, lived enough, learned enough, taught enough, prayed enough, given enough, created enough, advocated enough.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel noted that the greatest challenge we face in our lives is to comprehend the ultimate meaning of this moment. Quoting from Psalms he said:

"Mah a-sheev ladonai kol tag'mu-lo-hee alai"

"How can I repay unto God all God's bountiful dealings with me?"

(Psalm 116:12)

Heschel suggests that when life is an answer, that is, when we live our lives fully and well seeking to bring some measure of compassion and comfort, peace and justice into the lives of others, then death isn't an end at all, but a homecoming. And then he adds:

"The deepest wisdom [we] can attain [in our lives] is to know that [our] destiny is to aid [and] to serve. ... [Our] aspiration is to obtain; [our] perfection is to dispense. This is the meaning of [life] and death: the ultimate self-dedication to the divine....for this act of giving away [of our love, our possessions, our wisdom, our truths, and in the end, our lives] is reciprocity on [our] part for God's gift of life [to us – an ultimate wondrous, magnificent and mysterious gift]." (p. 296 *Man is Not Alone*)

On this holiest of days, we stand before God and ask, "Are we worthy to stand in this holy place?" For all of us, the answer has to be "No! We are not yet worthy, but one day we hope to be!"

May it be so. *L'shanah tovah u'm'tukah*. Amen!

Rabbi John L. Rosove
Kol Nidre – 5757
September 23, 1996

BEYOND TIME AS WE KNOW IT

Judaism and the Journey of the Soul after Death

More than two years ago, a friend told me of a fascinating and unusual book that he thought I might find of interest. Trusting his judgment I read it. It had such a powerful impact on me that it launched me on a personal spiritual journal that has taken me along a path I never imagined I would tread, and has opened me to an awareness of the character of my soul and the meaning of my life that is at once disconcerting, exhilarating and comforting. I want to speak with you on this night devoted to the soul about my spiritual odyssey these last few years, about what I have learned, and offer some thoughts about what it all might mean not only for me, but for us all.

Many Lives, Many Masters by Dr. Brian Weiss, a graduate of Yale Medical School and formerly the Chairman of Psychiatry at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in Miami, is the record of one patient's three year journey into what Dr. Weiss has characterized as hundreds of past life memories, one of which had her speaking in an ancient Gaelic dialect her knowledge of which she could not possibly have acquired through normal means. Dr. Weiss was intrigued by what he heard but came to no conclusion about the meaning of her so-called memories until one remarkable session in which his patient, Catherine, said the following to him while under hypnosis: "Your father is here, and your son, who is a small child. Your father says you will know him because his name is Avrom, and your daughter is named after him. Also his death was due to his heart. Your son's heart was also important, for it was backward, like a chicken's. He made a great sacrifice for you out of his love. His soul is very advanced...he wanted to show you that medicine could only go so far, that its scope is very limited."

Dr. Weiss was dumbfounded, for Catherine had told him specifics in his life about which she could not possibly have known; his father, Alvin's Hebrew name and his death from heart problems, his son Adam's tragic death at the age of 23 days from an extremely rare heart problem that could not be corrected by open heart surgery, and the impetus that Adam's death had on Dr. Weiss' decision to pursue psychiatry as a specialty. In that instant, the western-trained and educated, the scientifically skeptical doctor and psychiatrist felt linked in a mystical bond with the souls of his dead father and dead son leading him to conclude that Catherine had not imagined nor had she manufactured her account. Dr. Weiss' skepticism faded and my journey began.

I read voraciously everything I could find on the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul, now more than thirty volumes, mostly written by those who, like me, began as skeptics, western-trained medical doctors, psychiatrists, research scientists, theologians, and philosophers. I have also discovered a wealth of primary Jewish sources on this doctrine which the *Kabbalah* calls *gilgul hanefesh* (literally, "The rolling over of the soul").

As a student of our tradition, I am well aware of the dangerous waters into which I have ventured. Our sages historically have cautioned against taking speculative journeys into the unknown and the occult. The most famous case suggesting danger in this enterprise is the Talmudic legend of the *pardes*, the story of the four second century sages who ventured into the mystical "garden." One died, his soul unprepared for the consuming fire of the *Ein Sof*, God's infernal blaze. Another went mad. A third became a heretic. Only Rabbi Akiva, the oldest and wisest of the group, entered the garden *b'shalom*, in peace, and departed *b'shalom*, still whole and unscathed. From this account the rabbis warned of the deadly risks of venturing into the study of the mystical literature, but permitted its study and contemplation if and only if the Jew were male, over 40, married, with children, and grounded in knowledge of the Torah, for then even if the power of the *Ein Sof* sucked him towards the black hole of oblivion and out of this world, his mature age, his wife, his children, and the this-worldly character of normative Judaism would act as a potent counter-force pulling him back.

On all counts, I figured that I had met the minimum requirements to safely begin this journey even as I exercised caution and maintained a healthy skepticism.

I have learned that the doctrine of the transmigration of souls is not foreign to Jewish tradition at all, though admittedly it is relatively new to Jewish thinking and was accepted only by an elite minority of the community. It is unclear what percent of world Jewry accepted it before the European Enlightenment, though the mystical tradition of the *Kabbalah* holds it as a central belief, and it is alluded to frequently in Chassidic tales and mystical commentaries, in folklorist literature such as "The Golem" and "The Dybbuk", as well as in the popular Yiddish tales of Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

I wanted to know what you, our members thought about the afterlife, and so two years ago I sent to our members a survey asking you for your own views. I received close to 160 responses, most of the skeptical of the existence of life beyond the grave. Despite the dominant skepticism, I was surprised to learn of the extent and breadth of the "paranormal" experiences many of you had known.

One lawyer told of having seen an apparition hovering over the foot of his bed in his old Hollywood Hills home. A physician told of communicating with a disembodied spirit who told her of concrete events that had taken place in the lives of her family members and friends about which she was completely unaware, but which they would later confirm had taken place exactly as she had been told by the spirit presence. One woman recalled her immediate past life during the Holocaust when she was suffocated to death in a cattle car along with her husband who she believes has come back as her present day son, and which her son corroborates in his own past life memories separate and apart from his awareness of her experience.

Others, too, claimed to have known their spouses, children, parents, and closest friends in past lives. A Jew by-Choice revealed a past life memory as a young Jewish girl living during the Holocaust who died in the crematorium. In this life, she had grown up in a mid-western city knowing no Jews. From her earliest recollections, with no exposure to history books, films or survivors, she had vivid memories of people and places and of her own death at the hand of the Nazis. Since childhood, she felt powerfully drawn to Jews and to Judaism. Her conversion felt like a home-coming. Jewish mystical sources suggest that converts to Judaism were Jews in former lives.

Another woman felt a strange familiarity with specific great masterpieces of literature even though she was reading them for the first time. Many told of frequent *déjà vu* experiences. A common report was of the visit of the souls of dead parents, like Hamlet's father's ghost, soon after they had died and years later while asleep in dreams, and even while awake. Several of our congregants told me of having had out-of-body experiences after giving birth, and others of traveling through a long tunnel towards a brilliant light during near death experiences, of meeting dead relatives and friends who urged them to return to life, that their time for passage to the realm of souls was premature, that they had yet more living and learning to do.

There were others who told of intuitively knowing that events were occurring to their loved ones far away precisely when they did. For example, one woman recalled becoming acutely aware that her father, who lived in another city, had suffered a back injury at the exact moment when the accident occurred. One of our members sees auras, bands of different colored light, hovering around everyone reflective of their emotional or spiritual state of mind.

These people are not abnormal in any way. I know them to be intelligent men and women, well-educated and well-grounded in the world.

Much research has been conducted over many years by scientists into the veracity of the phenomenon of the soul's journey after physical death. Drs. Raymond Moody and Melvin Morse, in their studies of the near-death experiences of adults and children, have opened up our thinking about what lies beyond physical death in ways that have shattered a solely this-worldly orientation. Children reported feeling safe, secure and loved in God's embrace, and many adults felt God's presence in their lives for the first time, inspiring faith in the ineffable force that cannot be weighed or tested in the laboratory. One subject remarked, "I realized that there are things that every person is sent to earth to realize and to learn...to share more love...and to realize that every single thing that you do in your life is recorded, and that even though you pass it by not thinking at the time it always comes up later."

Those who had these Near Death Experiences became, if not full believers in reincarnation, more open to it as a real possibility for as they stepped for a moment beyond the threshold separating life from death they subsequently no longer regarded their lives primarily in physical terms, but rather in spiritual terms.

The leading researcher in this field is Dr. Ian Stevenson, a member of the Department of Psychiatry and Para-psychology at the University of Virginia. For more than forty years he has investigated reports of reincarnation all over the world. Most of his cases involve children who began to recall past-life memories between the ages of two and seven years old. Many of these children spontaneously spoke foreign languages and performed complex dances and songs that were unfamiliar to their families and which they had no opportunity to learn. Most often these children remembered their past lives in which violence or illness brought about an early death.

Dr. Stevenson examined over two hundred children with birthmarks who claimed to have been killed by bullets and bladed weapons that had pierced the corresponding part of their anatomy in the previous life precisely where the birthmark appeared. In seventeen cases, Dr. Stevenson was able to obtain actual medical documents that established that the past-life individual was killed in the precise way described. In

some cases, the individual had remarkable physical resemblances, similar to the personalities, common fears and phobias, even similar handwriting to the individuals from the former life.

To the uninitiated, this sounds fanciful, even bizarre. Scientifically there is no way to demonstrably prove the veracity of reincarnation as a reality. But Truth is more like a liquid than a solid. We may know that something is so even if there is not rock solid proof. In thinking about the very fact of human existence, a miracle to be sure, it is no more surprising to me for a person to be born twice than it is to be born once. It is a remarkable feat that one soul joins with one body to create a human life in the first place. If it can happen once, why not twice, three times or more?

Having said all this, we have to wonder about certain phenomena and the vast differences that distinguish people. For example, how do we explain the inspired genius of an Einstein, a Mozart or a Shakespeare? How can we account for the spiritual enlightenment of a Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or the Dalai Lama? Why is it that some people think and behave as moral Neanderthals while others exhibit a spiritual and moral refinement far beyond the ordinary? What is it about people that we apprehend when we sense that they are graced with "old souls?" Why is it that we are so powerfully and passionately attracted to some women and some men but not to others? Why do many of us harbor hysterical fears or phobias for no apparent reason? Why do we feel drawn irresistibly to certain times and places long since lost in the passage of the centuries but not to others? Why is it that siblings who are raised in the same home with the same parents can be so different from each other or so alike?

Could it be that the child prodigy and the enlightened soul, the irrational phobias, hatred and aversions, and inexplicable passions have developed in other lives?

I have come to believe that many differences distinguishing people are based upon more than simply genetics and DNA, family and social environment, education, values formation, and particular life experience. Though all these factors impact powerfully upon the life of an individual, there is more to each of us than this.

It is my conviction that God graces every human being with a soul, each of which has two aspects; the *nefesh*, or human soul, is that element of our beings that is full of desire and hungers for water, food, survival, security, physical intimacy, companionship, self-esteem, and personal fulfillment. The *nefesh* enables us to decide and to choose. It is that element that reveals our unique personalities.

The second aspect of our souls is the *neshamah*, the inner guiding presence of God, the light within, the place of goodness, the determiner of value, the source of conscience. Our souls embrace both of these aspects, not only God's ineffable essence through the *neshamah*, but also the accumulation of all past human life experience, positive and negative, through the *nefesh*.

Goethe said once, "This life, gentlemen, is much too short for our souls." And it is true. We cannot learn every lesson each time around, nor know all there is to know, nor grow in wisdom and goodness to our soul's full capacity in one lifetime. I know that the notion that we come back is contrary to established laws of science, but even science will have to concede that there are forms of knowledge that elude our understanding, insights that come into play in the form of dreams, whims, intuitions,

déjà vu, and other not terribly respectable phenomena associated with the mystical, the unconscious and pure chance.

A scientist and philosopher has written, "I had spent my entire life studying science, only to be met with the wretched realization that science was not wrong, but brutally limited and narrow in scope. If human beings are composed of matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit, then science deals handsomely with matter and body, but poorly with mind and not at all with soul and spirit." (Ken Wilber, *Grace and Grit*)

I have been drawn to matters of the spirit all my life, but I know that my father's sudden death from a heart attack when I was nine was the most powerful stimulus that catapulted me into confronting the ultimate reality of being and non-being. I was pained to think that my father's physical demise also meant the obliteration of his soul from the spiritual world. Periodically, over the many years since his death, I have dreamed vividly of him and have wondered if my dreams are merely symbolic and a projection into my own dreamscape of my need and yearning for him, or, whether during sleep, the spiritual world from without makes itself felt and known in the unconscious within. Have these dreams, the most recent being only several months ago, been a self-fulfilling device for me to experience oneness with him, or is there some transcendent spiritual connection and bond I have experienced with his soul during sleep that both he and I have willed, much like the meeting between Dr. Weiss and his son and father?

This yearning to know what lies beyond the grave, if I can know anything at all, is what led me to seek out someone like Dr. Weiss, trained in hypnosis. My experiences have been nothing short of extraordinary. The images and feelings I have recalled were starkly vivid and revealed to me insights and truths about myself I never understood before. It is as if a window of possibilities suddenly opened before me enabling me to peer into the firmament in which my soul has traveled. The resulting emotional-spiritual exhilaration and uplift afforded me not only a wonderful sense of release, but an overarching sense of hopefulness. I know that death is not an end, that the soul continues on its journey, that we are both moral and immortal beings. Through these memories and insights I gleaned, I came to a powerful new awareness that all of our lives are infinitely richer and more meaningful than I had ever imagined possible.

Reincarnation theory suggests that each of us is more than we think we are, that we have the potential for deeper self-realization and for expanded consciousness that we could not gain in any other way, that our lives are truly much deeper and broader than we conceive them to be here. Joseph Campbell has noted that "What we are reliving is but a fractional inkling of what is really within us, what gives us life, breadth and depth. But we can live in terms of that depth. And when we can experience it, we suddenly see that all the religions are talking about that."

The theologian Teilhard de Chardin has said that "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." The doctrine of reincarnation reinforces the truth held sacred in Judaism that our ultimate spiritual goal in life is to attain transcendence over the transitory. In such moments, we are catapulted into God's presence where we experience God's overarching love. There we glimpse the light of God's beneficence, grace and creative impulse. We feel a sense or oneness with all of life, a unity within apparent diversity, a bond of commonality with every individual man, woman and child, and deepened respect for

individual and group differences. Through transcendence, we glimpse the One in the many, and we feel compelled to give back to others out of a sense of duty.

Reincarnation helps to make us aware that our primary purpose in life is *tikun*, the healing of what is broken in our lives. Through *tikun*, we increase our capacity to love and to hope, we nurture hearts of kindness and we come to cherish every moment now with our loved ones. This goal is the central concern of *Yom Kippur*, and it is a model of living that we can carry into the year.

May this day, indeed every day, be one of expanding awareness, of enriched and resplendent color and translucent light. May each moment of living embrace the totality of our beings and draw us ever nearer to each other and to our loved ones, both the living and the dead. May our spirits soar in this New Year, refreshed and renewed, and may we be infused with the blessings of love, inspired with wonder and filled with gratitude for the souls of which our lives have been graced. Amen!

Living Will Declaration

To My Family, Physician and Medical Facility:

I, _____, being of sound mind, voluntarily make known my desire that my dying shall not be artificially prolonged under the following circumstances:

If I should have an injury, disease or illness regarded by my physician as incurable and terminal, and if my physician determines that the application of life-sustaining procedures would serve only to prolong artificially the dying process, I direct that such procedures be withheld or withdrawn and that I be permitted to die. I want treatment limited to those measures that will provide me with maximum comfort and freedom from pain. Should I become unable to participate in decisions with respect to my medical treatment, it is my intention that these directions be honored by my family and physician(s) as a final expression of my legal right to refuse medical treatment, and I accept the consequences of this refusal.

Signed _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Witness _____

Designation Clause (optional*)

Should I become comatose, incompetent or otherwise mentally or physically incapable of communication, I authorize _____ presently residing at _____ to make treatment decisions on my behalf in accordance with my Living Will Declaration and my understanding of Judaism. I have discussed my wishes concerning terminal care with this person, and I trust his/her judgment on my behalf.

Signed _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Witness _____

*If I have not designated a proxy as provided above, I understand that my Living Will Declaration shall nevertheless be given effect should the appropriate circumstances arise.

Source: *New American Reform Responsa*, CCAR, #156

ADVANCE HEALTH CARE DIRECTIVE

By this document, I, _____, of Los Angeles, California, intend to create an Advance Health Care Directive under the Uniform Health Care Decisions Act of the California Probate Code, and I hereby revoke all prior health care directives. This Advance Directive shall not be affected by my subsequent incapacity.

PART 1

POWER OF ATTORNEY FOR HEALTH CARE

1.1 **DESIGNATION OF HEALTH CARE AGENT.** I do hereby designate and appoint the following as my agent to make health care decisions for me as authorized in this document:

Name:

Address:

Home Phone:

Cell Phone:

Work Phone:

1.2 **ALTERNATE AGENT.** If my agent is not willing, able, or reasonably available to make health care decisions for me, or if I revoke his/her appointment or authority to act, I designate the following, in the order listed, to serve as my agent to make health care decisions for me as authorized in this document:

Name:

Address:

Home Phone:

1.3 **DEFINITION OF "HEALTH CARE DECISION."** For the purposes of this document, "health care decision" means any decision regarding any care, treatment, service, or procedure to maintain, diagnose, or otherwise affect my physical or mental condition.

1.4 **GENERAL STATEMENT OF AUTHORITY GRANTED.** My agent shall have the right to:

A. Consent, refuse consent, or withdraw consent to any medical care or services, such as tests, drugs or surgery, for any physical or mental condition. This includes the provision, withholding or withdrawal of artificial nutrition and hydration (tube feeding) and all other forms of health care, including cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR);

B. Choose or reject my physician, other health care professionals or health care facilities;

C. Receive and consent to the release of medical information.

D. Sign forms necessary to permit the refusal or withholding of treatment or for permitting me to leave the hospital against medical advice.

1.5 PERIOD DURING WHICH AGENT'S AUTHORITY IS EFFECTIVE. My agent's authority becomes effective when my primary physician determines that I am unable to make my own health care decisions. My agent's authority ceases to be effective when my primary physician determines that I am again able to make my own health care decisions.

1.6 AGENT'S OBLIGATION. My agent shall make health care decisions for me in accordance with this power of attorney for health care, any instructions I give in Part 2 of this form, and my other wishes to the extent known to my agent. To the extent my wishes are unknown, my agent shall make health care decisions for me in accordance with what my agent determines to be in my best interest, considering my personal values to the extent known to my agent.

1.7 AGENT'S POST-DEATH AUTHORITY. My agent is authorized, but not directed, as follows:

☐ Yes ☐ No To direct disposition of my remains.

☐ Yes ☐ No To make the anatomical gifts authorized under Section 3, if any.

☐ Yes ☐ No To authorize an autopsy.

PART 2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR HEALTH CARE

2.1 END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS. I direct that my health care providers and others involved in my care provide, withhold, or withdraw treatment in accordance with the choice I have marked below:

☐ A. Choice **Not** To Prolong Life

I **do not** want my life to be prolonged if (1) I have an incurable and irreversible condition that will result in my death within a relatively short time, or (2) if I become unconscious and, to a reasonable degree of medical certainty, I will not regain consciousness, or (3) the likely risks and burdens of treatment would outweigh the expected benefits.

In any of these situations, I request my physician(s) to allow me to die as gently as possible.

☐ B. Choice to Prolong Life

I want my life to be prolonged as long as possible within the limits of generally accepted health care standards.

2.2 RELIEF FROM PAIN. I direct that treatment for alleviation of pain or discomfort be provided at all times, even if it hastens my death.

2.3 OTHER WISHES. Other or additional statements of medical treatment desires and limitations:

_____ I hereby incorporate the Attachment on Page 7.

PART 3

DONATION OF ORGANS AND TISSUES AT DEATH (OPTIONAL)

3.1 Upon my death (check applicable choice or choices):

___ A. I wish to donate the organs, tissues or parts specified below, but **only** if I happen to be in a hospital at the time of my death (such as following an accident or stroke). If it is possible, I prefer to die at home or in a hospice facility where I can be made comfortable. I do not wish to donate any organs, tissues or parts if I am in my home or a hospice facility as my death approaches and it is possible for me to remain in my home or hospice facility to die.

___ B. I give any needed organs, tissues, or parts, OR

___ C. I give the following organs tissues, or parts only:

___ D. If I am donating any organs, tissues or parts, my gift is for the following purposes: Transplant, Research, Education. (cross out any that you **do not** want)

___ E. I **do not** wish to donate any organs, tissues or parts.

PART 4

MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS

4.1 PRIOR DIRECTIVE REVOKED. I revoke any prior Power of Attorney for Health Care, Living Will, or Natural Death Act Declaration.

4.2 USE OF PHOTOCOPIES PERMITTED. A copy of this form shall have the same force and effect as the original.

4.3 AUTHORIZATION UNDER THE HEALTH INSURANCE PORTABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACT (HIPAA). In addition to the other powers granted by this document, I grant to my Health Care Agent the power and authority to serve as my

personal representative for all purposes of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 and its regulations (HIPAA) during any time my health care representative is exercising authority under this document.

Pursuant to HIPAA, I specifically authorize my Health Care Agent as my HIPAA personal representative to request, receive and review any information regarding my physical or mental health, including, without limitation all HIPAA protected health information, medical and hospital records; to execute on my behalf any authorizations, releases or other documents that may be required in order to obtain this information; and to consent to the disclosure of this information. I further authorize my Health Care Agent to execute on my behalf any documents necessary or desirable to implement the health care decisions that my Health Care Agent is authorized to make under this document.

By signing this Advance Health Care Directive, I specifically empower and authorize my physician, hospital or health care provider to release any and all medical records and information concerning my medical condition to my Health Care Agent or my Health Care Agent's designee. Further, I waive any liability to any physician, hospital or any health care provider who releases any and all of my medical records and information to my Health Care Agent.

PART 5

DATE AND SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL AND WITNESSES

5.1 SIGNATURE: I hereby sign my name to this Advance Health Care Directive:

Date _____, 201____, at Los Angeles, California.

Signature

5.2 STATEMENT OF WITNESSES. I declare under penalty of perjury on under the laws of California (1) that the individual who signed or acknowledged this Advance Health Care Directive is personally known to me, or that the individual's identity was proven to me by convincing evidence, (2) that the individual signed or acknowledged this Advance Health Care Directive in my presence, (3) that the individual appears to be of sound mind and under no duress, fraud, or undue influence, (4) that I am not a person appointed as agent by this Advance Health Care Directive, and (5) I am not the individual's health care provider nor an employee of that health care provider, nor an operator or employee of an operator of a community care facility or a residential care facility for the elderly.

FIRST WITNESS:

Name:

Address:

Date:

Signature: _____

SECOND WITNESS:

Name:

Address:

Date:

Signature: _____

5.3 ADDITIONAL STATEMENT OF WITNESS. I further declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of California that I am not related to the individual executing this Advance Health Care Directive by blood, marriage, or adoption, and to the best of my knowledge, I am not entitled to any part of the individual's estate upon his or her death under a will or trust now existing or by operation of law.

Date:

WITNESS

Attachment to Advance Directive for Health Care

for _____ dated _____, 201__

If the extension of my life would result in a mere biological existence, devoid of cognitive function, with no reasonable hope for normal functioning, then I do not desire any form of life sustaining procedures, including nutrition and hydration, unless necessary for my comfort or alleviation of pain. If life sustaining treatment has been instituted and these conditions exist, I desire and direct that such treatment be withdrawn.

It is my desire that my Agent consider relief from suffering, preservation or restoration of functioning, and the quality as well as extent of the life being preserved when decisions are made concerning life sustaining care, treatment, services, and procedures. In making the decision to withhold or remove treatment, my Agent should ask the following questions: "*Is the proposed treatment a reasonable aid to recovery or merely a prolongation of inevitable death?*" My agent shall determine what is "reasonable," what is "aid to recovery," and what is "merely a prolongation of inevitable death," after consultation with my attending physician(s).

It is my desire that my Agent consent to and arrange for the administration of any type of pain relief, even though its use may lead to permanent damage, addiction, or even hasten the moment of, but not intentionally cause, my death.

Regarding the decision to withhold or withdraw life sustaining treatment, I desire that my Agent act after allowing a reasonable period of time for observation and diagnosis.

I request and direct my Agent to do any or all of the following:

- A. Terminate any of my physicians who refuse to carry out my above stated wishes and retain another physician for me who will agree to honor my wishes.
- B. Present my case and my medical situation to the Ethics Committee of the hospital or medical facility where I am confined for review, evaluation, and recommendation. I hereby authorize my Agent to disclose all pertinent information regarding my medical condition, and I hereby release my privacy interest in such information and will hold harmless any health care provider who discloses such information to my Agent or as directed by my Agent.
- C. Take any other action and pursue any other procedure that may result in carrying out my above wishes, including, but not limited to, changing hospitals or moving me to a hospice, private facility, or a private home.

I desire and direct that my above stated wishes be carried out by my Agent despite any contrary feelings, beliefs, or opinions of members of my family, relatives, or friends.

Date: _____, 201__

By: _____