

Yad b'Yad:

Holding the Hand of Mourners in Comfort

Book 3



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The Middle Months of Mourning: Introduction

The purpose of this booklet is to focus on the middle months of mourning. These are months with fewer prescribed rituals. Many mourners have found creative ways to bridge the gap between the first and last months of traditional observances of mourning.

Shomrim, Shivah, and Shloshim, the “3 S’s,” offer practical guidance during the first month of mourning. These practices have been passed down through the generations (Booklet 1). Similarly, the end of the mourning period is ritually prescribed, and includes an unveiling and Yartzheit (Booklet 4).

I have thought about why Judaism omits middle month rituals, other than Yizkor. Our religion is known to have come from sophisticated and psychologically-minded sages. The sages must have known about the protective nature of an “emotional fog” that many experience during these middle months. For some, that translates into moving through space and time clouded by a numbing, sleepy, unfocused existence. Others may experience this time as a frantic, busy, distracted, existence. Each mourner has his/her own tempo and style. There is no “normal” way to mourn. Perhaps the sages intentionally left this period of time for your own creation.

A PRAYER FOR THE COMFORT OF MEMORY

God, what I fear most is forgetting him. I've already lost his presence in my life, I can't bear the thought of losing his presence in my mind, my heart, and my soul.

I want to remember it all. His touch, his smell, the look in his eyes. Our conversations, our silences, even our disagreements. I want to remember him as he was without turning him into some kind of saint. I loved him in all his complexity, in all his imperfection.

Help me to remember, God. As I make my way through my busy and sometimes lonely days, may thoughts of him lead me back to times of smiles and laughter. Let my tears and pain be eased by the comfort of his memory.

I will carry the lessons he taught me always. I will try my best to live up to the example he set for me.

Send me strength, God, and comfort, now and always. Amen.

NAOMI LEVY, IN *Talking To God*, 2002

Creative Rituals

Creating a ritual is a powerful way for individuals, family, and friends to remember. It must be YOUR ritual, for if others suggest one, it is their ritual for you to follow. Given the paucity of rituals during this lengthy “middle period” of mourning, I offer ideas and encouragement to be creative and develop your own respectful, appropriate, and meaningful observances.

Following *Shloshim*, Earl’s beloved garden began to bud and bloom. Gardening was his passion, and it promoted equanimity. I discovered that bringing his beautiful flowers into the house and using the empty memorial candle container as a vase gave me comfort.

A second ritual developed during the preparation to sell the family home. This house was our gathering place for every *Shabbos* dinner and every holiday. Therefore, I asked my adult children and grandchildren to gather and walk around every corner of the house, to quietly say goodbye to the dwelling that was filled with Earl’s memories and collections. This could be a private, sweet, tearful and meaningful ritual for any family, whether staying or leaving the home.

Another ceremony developed when I invited Earl’s close cousins and our family to transplant a few of his roses. He would have been delighted knowing that his roses are now growing in the yards of his loved ones. This activity bridged the gap of time between *Shloshim* and *Yarzeit*.

REMEMBRANCE

At the rising of the sun and at its going down,
we remember them.

At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter,
we remember them.

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring,
we remember them.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of
summer, *we remember them.*

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn,
we remember them.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends,
we remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a
part of us as, *we remember them.*

When we are weary and in need of strength,
we remember them.

When we are lost and sick at heart,
we remember them.

When we have joy we crave to share,
we remember them.

When we have decisions that are difficult to make,
we remember them.

When we have achievements that are based on theirs,
we remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a
part of us as *we remember them.*

SYLVAN KAMENS and RABBI JACK RIEMER

We created yet another new ritual that would have been important to Earl. Tradition suggests that we leave a stone rather than cut flowers on Jewish gravesites. We, however, transplanted Earl's rose bushes on his grave and interspersed them with stones.

Candles are significant to us as Jews. The memorial candle burns for 7 days starting after the funeral through Shiva. The *Yahrzeit* candle burns for 24 hours to remember the anniversary of the death of our loved one. The Shabbat candles have a certain number of hours to burn. We burn candles at *Hanukkah*. Candles have a beginning and an end. They undergo a change of state--melting to wax. Mourners are also undergoing a change of state. Perhaps you would like to incorporate a candle in your new ritual.

Jewish Holidays Throughout the Year

Important Jewish holidays and festivals occur throughout the first year of mourning. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky offers ideas on ways that the holidays can impact mourners. The Days of Awe or High Holidays often present an especially poignant emptiness without your loved one. Sitting in *shul* for hours on Rosh Hashanah can be painful. The sound of the *Shofar* may jolt you back to the sound of filling the grave with dirt. The Yom Kippur *Yizkor* service is a powerfully reflective time. The focus on who will live and who will die is unavoidably reminiscent of your loved one who has died. *Sukkot* is a time to think about the fragility of life, a theme mourners are all too aware of. *Hanukkah* is a holiday that celebrates miracles during a threatening period in Jewish history. Mourning, for

BIRTHDAY POEM FOR MY GRANDMOTHER

(for L.B.M.C., 1890-1975)

*I stood on the porch tonight— which way do we
face to talk to the dead? I thought of the
new rose, and went out over the
grey lawn— things really
have no color at night. I descended
the stone steps, as if to the place where one
speaks to the dead. The rose stood
half-uncurled, glowing white in the
black air. Later I remembered
your birthday. You would have been ninety and getting
roses from me. Are the dead there
if we do not speak to them? When I came to see you
you were always sitting quietly in the chair,
not knitting, because of the arthritis,
not reading, because of the blindness,
just sitting. I never know how you
did it or what you were thinking. Now I
sometimes sit on the porch, waiting,
trying to feel you there like the color of the
flowers in the dark.*

SHARON OLDS

The Dead and the Living, 1992

many, can be a time of threatened faith. To watch others celebrate the joyous holiday of Purim can be a temporary relief from the pain of mourning. Elijah's empty chair at the Passover Seder table is all too symbolic of the empty chair of our lost loved one. And finally, *Shavuot* is our spring holiday. For those in mourning, perhaps it symbolizes the painful "winter" of loss that is followed by the "blossoming spring" of going forward with life.

Birthdays, Anniversaries, and Other "Hallmark" Celebrations

The anticipation of the "first" of any significant holiday without your loved one can be distressing. Marking these dates by creating a new ritual might be helpful.

There are no Jewish traditions for how to celebrate the birthday of a lost loved one. Now you are faced with the dilemma of how to mark this important date without your loved one.

My patients have taught me over the last 25 years of clinical practice in psychiatry that continuing to honor each birthday of a departed love one is powerfully important. Whether it is a parent, spouse or child, a special friend or relative, birthdays are never forgotten, just as death dates are never forgotten.

Judaism's focus is on death dates, as opposed to our American culture's focus on birth dates. Only one reference to birthdays is found in the Bible—Pharaoh's. The *Mishnah* points out that birthdays are considered

BIRTHDAY POEM

The last movie we saw with you has been nominated for an award—

You're not here to say I told you so.

The retractable back scratcher and chocolate bar

We were going to bring to you,

Gifts picked up in the drugstore checkout line,

Rest on the table by the door, getting dusty.

We talk of the things you tended on the earth.

The barbecue, the deck, the grape arbors

And the rain barrels to feed them,

The sprouts growing in the greenhouse.

The trail, the coastlines,

The crooked roads you led us down.

The big unfettered sound of your amusement.

Slowly, we begin to see the story in the black-and-white photographs:

The worried child you always were,

Your knit brows and hopeful smile as if asking,

Is everything all right?

Did I do something wrong?

You were supposed to get better.

We baked a cake for you

And we brought it to the place you loved

And scattered the pieces like ashes.

It was your birthday without you.

SALLY CHARETTE

solemn days, a reminder that one is moving closer to the end of life.

As Jews, we can borrow from our American culture's traditions. My dear friend Brenda died several years ago of ovarian cancer. Every year on her birthday, her friends and relatives gather for a meal and a time to remember her. Some read a poem, which reminds them of Brenda. Some tell a sweet story of an experience with her. Some use the gathering to remember a trait or virtue of Brenda, and then reflect on how that trait has made an impact on their own life. This has been a meaningful way for Brenda's circle of friends to keep her alive.

As well as the birthday, the loss of a spouse presents another poignant date to remember - the wedding anniversary. "We would have been married ___ years!" is a common statement. Again, I urge you to find your own ritual for this significant date. Private or with others, it is not helpful to try to ignore it - it is nearly impossible.

Creativity

Our congregation is welcoming to many styles of practicing Judaism. Using the rituals that Judaism so wisely provides us does not prohibit us from being creative. Many congregants are part of interfaith marriages and families. One congregant, Sandy Axel, shares below her interfaith experience of mourning her father:

For those of us who have chosen Judaism as our spiritual home, the process of mourning for a loved

MOURNERS KADDISH

May God's great name be
extolled and hallowed
throughout the world

And may God's kingdom be
established in our lives and days
and the lives of all of the House
of Israel
speedily in approaching times
Amen.

**May God's great name be
Praised forever and ever.**

Blessed and praised and
heightened, carried and glorified,
raised and chanted is the name of
the Holy Blessed One who is
above all blessings and praises.
Our guide and comforter,
redeemer for all eternity. **Amen**

May a great peace descend from
the heavens upon all who live,
and upon the house of Israel and
let us say **Amen.**

May the One who makes peace
in the high places
bring peace upon us
and all of Israel, and let us say
Amen.

one can be complicated. How do we honor the one who has passed, and the traditions of our birth family, while staying true to ourselves and the faith we have embraced as adults?

Creativity and sensitivity to our family's needs and our own can help guide our mourning process. When my father died, our family worked together to create observances that were meaningful for all of us. A devout Catholic, my father attended Mass weekly; how would I honor this devotion, but stay true to myself?

We had a funeral service for Dad at the funeral home, which followed the Catholic rite, but at the cemetery, I said Kaddish at his graveside. We had shiva minyan AND a wake, which satisfied both my needs and the needs of my family. I recited the Mourner's Kaddish for 11 months. And on the anniversary of his death, my sisters and mother gathered from around the country to remember him --- I went to minyan to recite the Mourner's Kaddish once again (but did not recite El Malei Rachamin), and then we all went to the cemetery to put flowers on his grave. We then went to a Catholic shrine to light a candle for him, and once we returned home, I lit a Yahrzeit candle, too.

This is the pattern I will follow each year on the anniversary of his passing, to honor and remember him, and to stay true to this life I have chosen for myself.

YIZKOR for one well-loved:

You, _____, were my _____. I remember you now, my beloved, my friend. I recall the days of love, companionship, and happiness we shared and the trials we overcame. Although we are parted now, the bond that unites our souls can never be severed. You live now and always within my heart, and you sweeten my life. I have contributed *tzedakah* in your memory to perpetuate the goodness which you brought to this world. May the Infinite, which has claimed you, bless you and keep you and grant you eternal peace, Amen.

Yizkor

The ritual that Judaism does offer us, not only during the middle months of grieving but also throughout each year, is *Yizkor*. *Yizkor*, which is Hebrew for “remember,” is a memorial service that takes place four times a year: 1) the last day of Passover, 2) the second day of *Shavuot*, 3) on *Shemini Atzeret*, and 4) on *Yom Kippur*. For many Jews, this word is familiar as part of the *Yom Kippur* liturgy. Yet for many, the knowledge that it is also said three other times during the calendar year is often not known.

Yizkor is based on the belief of the eternity of the soul. Therefore it is traditional to give *tzadakah* in honor of the loved one who has died. This is a deed that the loved one can no longer do him/herself. Another tradition is to light a *Yizkor* candle, which burns for 24 hours.

The first *Yizkor* service of the year of mourning could be experienced in a completely different state of emotions from the second, third, or fourth. It could open floodgates of tears. Our synagogue appreciates that some mourners are uncomfortable with the many firsts, including *Yizkor* services. Therefore, we will contact you before the first *Yizkor* service. If you would like, a volunteer will attend the service with you and sit by your side. Feel free to decline if that is not your preference. *Yizkor* can be a time for personal healing and growth. As we recite *Kaddish* together with Jews all over the world, we remember that death is an inevitable part of life. We mourn those who died before their time, those who died in suffering and pain, those whose lives enriched the world, and we

YIZKOR for one who may also have been a source of pain or difficulty:

You, _____, were my _____. My memories of you are both painful and pleasant. I can neither fully embrace nor fully negate the love I feel for you. I can fully acknowledge the many effects you had on my life and the lessons I learned in our relationship while you were alive and since your death. I have contributed *tzedakah* in your memory. I pray for increasing resolution in our connection and increasing peacefulness for your spirit.

remember the living. Saying *Kaddish* is not a prayer that praises the dead. Rather, it is a prayer that praises God and the power of God in the world.

Another emotional day in my experience was on the second day of *Shavuot*. Across the country, many congregations, including ours, use this date to dedicate those who have purchased a memorial plaque for the synagogue. Was it the harshness of metal? Was it the first time to see the death date under my husband's name stamped into a permanent marker? Or was it because it followed yet another *Yizkor* service? It was hard to sort out at the time of this writing, but again, I urge you to have that relative or friend with you for support. *Yad b'Yad* volunteers would be happy to accompany you to this, if you would like, "holding your hand" through a potentially powerful short service.

Mourning is Individual

Not all of us mourn using prayer. For some, nature is the best vehicle of comfort. For some, *Tzedakah* comforts and is part of our tradition. For some, finding volunteerism and "mitzvah opportunities" bring the most comfort. Mourning is such an individual process. There is clearly no right or wrong way to journey through mourning and grief.

For me, smiling at a photo of my husband every morning starts my day thinking about him and it has become a daily practice and one that comforts. It fits nicely with a little mantra of *Modah Ani*, Equanimity. It rhymes

They still live on earth in the acts of goodness they performed, and in the hearts of those who cherish their memory.

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and is simple. It serves me to thank God for letting me wake every morning and it serves to remind me of my husband's strongest "soul trait" - equanimity. This daily prayer grounds me for the difficulties I experience going through routine life after his death.

This bibliography may be useful during your mourning period. Some of these references have been used to compile the Yad b' Yad Booklets.

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