

## LOSS AND MOURNING

### Study Guide by Beth Huppin

This short video and accompanying study guide focus on Jewish teachings about providing comfort to mourners as well as more general questions of loss and meaning.

Jewish traditions regarding comforting mourners provide practical guidance to help them and their community through a painful time. After [burial](#), which typically takes place as soon after death as possible, Jewish law changes focus from [caring for the deceased](#) to caring for those who are in mourning. Jewish law and tradition offer time and space for the emotional needs of mourners.

### Providing Food for the Mourner

*HANAN: Not to get technical, but wouldn't it have been easier to just have it delivered?*

*DADDY: No! It's important that we bring the kugel and sit with her!*

<i>Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 378</i>	שולחן ערוך, יורה דעה שעח
A mourner is forbidden to eat of their own [food] at the first meal [after burial].	אבל אסור לאכול משלו בסעודה

Food should be provided for the mourner, especially for the first meal after burial. However, if it is possible, food should be provided throughout the entire week of mourning. While it is technically permissible to have food sent to the mourner's home, when we deliver food to mourners in person, we offer the comfort of our presence in addition to physical nourishment. If we are unable to deliver a meal in person or are unable to focus on the needs of the mourner, we may fulfill the technical obligation to bring food via delivery. Sometimes this is appropriate or even necessary. Still, Daddy is trying to explain to Hanan that sitting with the mourner is important. If it is done in a sensitive way, it is a significant part of the *mitzvah* (commandment).

### Consoling the Mourner

<i>Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, chapter 207</i>	קיצור שולחן ערוך - סימן רח
It is a great <i>mitzvah</i> to console mourners...If the comforters perceive that the mourner wishes them to leave, they are not allowed to remain there.	מצוה גדולה לנחם אבלים... כשרואים המנחמים שהאבל פוטר אותם, אינן רשאים לישוב אצלו.

It is a great [mitzvah](#) to console mourners. How we console them might depend on our relationship with the mourner. One powerful way to provide comfort is through a personal visit. However, as the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* text states, we must be sensitive to the needs of the mourner when visiting. We need to be aware of our own state of mind so that our visit isn't about *our* needs. (See more on how to visit below.) If we aren't able to visit, either because it is physically impossible or because we realize we are not in an emotionally appropriate place to do so, sending a card or food lets mourners know we are thinking of them.

## Loss as Part of Life

HANAN: *It's just so sad. I just want to be able to say something to make it better for her.*

DADDY: *We all lose, Hanan. It's part of life.*

Psalm 144:4	תהלים קמד: ד
A person is like a breath, whose days are like a passing shadow.	אדם להבל דמה ימיו כצל עובר:

Hanan doesn't understand that he can't erase the pain of Shoshana's loss. Daddy reminds him that loss is part of life, something everyone experiences. Like the Psalmist who acknowledges that life is brief and temporary, Daddy tries to help Hanan accept the reality of loss.

## The Needs of the Mourner

HANAN: *(annoyed) Yeah, but we don't all lose in the same way.*

DADDY: *That's why she speaks first. It's about her - we're just there to be with her. To support and console her.*

Mishna, Pirke Avot 4:18	פרקי אבות ד:יח
Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: Do not try to appease your friend during their hour of anger; nor comfort them at the hour while their dead still lies before them...	רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר, אל תרצה את חברך בשעת כעסו, ואל תנחמןו בשעה שמתו מטל לפניו...

Deborah Lipstadt, "The Lord Was His," in <i>Jewish Reflections on Death</i> , edited by Jack Riemer, pg. 51	
The <i>Mishna</i> notes that, immediately after death and prior to interment, it is impossible to console a mourner. The rabbis may have realized, as many psychologists maintain today, that it is important – if not vital – for the mourner's future mental health, that at this initial period, grief be worked through and anguish expressed.	

Hanan's recognition that every death is a unique loss provides an opportunity for Daddy to teach him that one of the most important Jewish laws about visiting mourners is to stay focused on the needs of the mourner.

For example, the *Pirke Avot* text reminds us that, unless we are very close to the mourners, we shouldn't even try to engage with them until after the burial. Speaking words of consolation before the burial is both futile and, as Deborah Lipstadt explains, counter-productive in terms of the healing process.

## Letting the Mourner Take the Lead

Because each person mourns in their own unique way and mourns differently at various times in the process, we should let the mourner decide what to talk about and even whether or not they want to talk.

<i>Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah</i> chapter 376	שולחן ערוך, יורה דעה שעו
The comforters are not permitted to open [conversation] until the mourner opens first.	אין המנחמים רשאים לפתוח עד שיפתח האבל תחלה

Jack Riemer, quoted in the chapter “Don’t Take My Grief Away” in <i>A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort</i> , by Dr. Ron Wolfson, pg. 202
If the mourner wants to talk, you listen. If the mourner wants to listen, you talk. I remember when Wolfe Kelman, <a href="#">zikhrono livrakhah</a> , lost his sister, Dr. (Abraham Joshua) Heschel, <a href="#">zikhrono livrakhah</a> , said, “We have to go.” We went to the airport, we flew to Boston, got into a cab, and went to the house. Heschel walked in, he hugged them, he sat silently, for an hour. He didn’t mumble a single cliché, “How old was she?” What difference does it make? “Time will heal.” Time won’t heal. “I know how you feel.” You don’t know how I feel. None of the clichés. He just sat there in silence for an hour. And then he got up, hugged them, and we left. I learned that you don’t have to be glib. You just have to care.

Traditional words of comfort when greeting mourners during <a href="#">shiva</a> , the seven days of mourning after the burial. (Note that the word for God here is “ <i>HaMakom</i> ,” which literally means, The Place.)
<b>המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים</b> <b>May The Makom/The Place/God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.</b>

After the burial, it is appropriate to visit the mourners. Comforters must remember that the visit is about the needs of the mourner, and we should let them take the lead. We can begin the visit by offering traditional words of comfort, but then, we wait for the mourner to speak. If the traditional words feel awkward, it would also be appropriate to begin with “I’m sorry for your loss,” or “May you be comforted.” That’s all. Then, sometimes we sit silently together. Sometimes we tell stories about the deceased. And, sometimes we talk about the local sports team. The decision is the mourner’s to make. The story about Rabbi Heschel visiting Rabbi Kelman is a beautiful illustration of focusing on the needs of the mourner and following their lead.

## Being Present

*HANAN: I mean, what do you say to that?*

*DADDY: You don’t say anything, Hanan. You listen. And just be...present.*

*HANAN: But how do you ever repair that hole? If I were the woman in the video, I would feel so guilty.*

DADDY: *That's because you think you can control, Hanan. But that's the perspective of a child. You can control your actions, but you can't control whether you live or die, Hanan.*

It is common for a new death to remind us of other deaths. Visiting Shoshana, Hanan is reminded of seeing a video of a woman telling of her childhood during the Holocaust. The woman recalls her mother giving her own meager food to her as a child, pretending she wasn't hungry. Hanan is overcome with the enormity of this mother's love and of the woman's loss of her mother. Like Hanan, we might feel overwhelmed in the face of unimaginable loss. Daddy acknowledges that trying to explain or take away the loss is impossible. We offer presence, not words.

Daddy also shows Hanan that in telling this story about her mother, she has kept her mother's memory alive. In this way, the mother's love continues, integrated into the life of her daughter.

### The Importance of Community

DADDY: *The most important thing, Hanan, is for Shoshana not to feel alone.*

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, quoted in *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*, by Ron Wolfson, pg. 182  
 Having a *minyan* in the house is like bringing the synagogue into the home. It is opening oneself up to the healing powers of the community...

<p>Job 2:12-13; 3:1</p> <p>When they saw him from a distance, they could not recognize him, and they broke into loud weeping; each one tore his robe and threw dust into the air onto his head.</p> <p>They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights. None spoke a word to him for they saw how very great was his suffering.</p> <p>Afterward, Job began to speak and cursed the day of his birth.</p>	<p>איוב ב:יב-יג, ג:א          וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת-עֵינֵיהֶם מֵרְחוֹק וְלֹא הִכִּירוּהוּ וַיִּשְׂאוּ קוֹלָם וַיִּבְּכוּ וַיִּקְרְעוּ אִישׁ מְעִלּוֹ וַיִּזְרְקוּ עָפָר עַל-רֹאשֵׁיהֶם הַשָּׁמַיְמָה:          וַיִּשְׁבוּ אִתּוֹ לָאָרֶץ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְשִׁבְעַת לַיְלוֹת וְאִין-דָּבָר אָלָיו דָּבָר כִּי רָאוּ כִּי-גָדַל הַכָּאֵב מְאֹד:          אַחֲרֵי-כֵן פָּתַח אִיּוֹב אֶת-פִּיהוּ וַיִּקְלַל אֶת-יוֹמוֹ:</p>
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During the first week after burial, a time when the mourner might want to retreat into their own world of grief, staying in bed, not eating or caring for themselves, the community comes to them. Rabbi Schulweis describes this as a powerful message of caring and of holding the mourner through the initial shock and grief. The community provides food, visitors, and a [minyan](#) with whom the mourner can say [Kaddish](#).

Job's friends, upon hearing of his unfathomable losses, come to be with him. Their initial silence is a lesson in showing up and being present. Their silence allows Job the space he needs to express the great depth of his grief and is understood by Jewish tradition as the model for visiting mourners. Later, the friends try to comfort him with words of explanation for his losses. Their initial helpful quiet presence gives way to an unnecessary and unproductive attempt to make sense of the mourner's pain. If the mourner expresses despair or cries, the comforter need only be present to their pain. Jewish tradition, as well as modern psychology, remind us that it is impossible to erase pain. Providing a space for grief through our presence is a gift we give to the mourner.

## The Place of Comfort

To illustrate the power of presence, Daddy tells Hanan a story about a Jewish woman and an Arab woman who both lost sons in the same war. Tzafira found comfort from looking into Fatima's eyes. Unlike Job's friends, both women knew the futility of "explanations" for their pain.

*DADDY: Then the hope is that as she mourns and reflects, and returns to the place...the hope is that from the place...she can gain a new perspective, grow a new horizon that incorporates the memory of her loved one.*

*HANAN: What place?*

*DADDY: The place where we can be ourselves, without pretending. The place where we can connect with, and be embraced by, something larger than ourselves.*

Daddy understands that true comfort takes place over time, by finding a way to transform and incorporate loss into something new and positive within our identity. This process of growth and change requires patience and hard work. The support of the community can help.

Daddy intentionally uses the word "place" when talking about the potential to connect with something larger than ourselves as a way of moving forward. The Hebrew word for "place" is *makom*, which, as we saw earlier, is also the name of God we use in the traditional words of comfort:

**המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים**

**"May The *Makom*/The Place/God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."**

### [Makom - The Jewish Chronicle \(thejc.com\)](http://thejc.com)

A surprising and interesting use of the word *makom* is as a name of God...

A traditional way of comforting mourners is to say *HaMakom yenachem otcha*, May The Place (God) comfort you...

...God is not found in any particular location, rather, God is immanent in all places.

...[T]he formula *HaMakom yenachem* reminds the mourner that God, the source of comfort, is not distant, but may be found anywhere.

### [The Place of Comfort: \*HaMakom\* | Rabbi Shefa Gold](#)

The ancient and traditional way to greet mourners is, "The Place (i.e., The Omnipresent One) will comfort you (pl.) among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

The Place of Comfort is where I know that I am held, supported, and encouraged, even in my mourning, even through the passage of my darkest grief. The Comfort of Place is in knowing God's omnipresence; knowing and feeling that God is here, wherever I travel. That presence will manifest differently and uniquely in each and every place.

This is a blessing that we can give to each other and receive for ourselves as we travel through all the high and low places of our lives.

These two related understandings of *HaMakom*/The Place help us see the potential for healing from grief. The comforters, by their presence and attention to the needs of the mourner, provide the place from which healing may begin. When we make room, we might find that something bigger than ourselves is present when we sit with a mourner. We become a conduit for that which is larger than ourselves.

### Making Sense of Loss

*HANAN: Why do we experience loss, Daddy?*

Job 38:4,7	איוב לח:ד,ז
Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Speak if you have understanding.  When the morning stars sang together And all the divine beings shouted for joy?	איפה היית בְּיַסְדֵי־אָרֶץ הַגָּד אִם־יִדְעַת בִּינָה:  בְּרִן־יַחַד פּוֹכְבֵי בִקְר וַיְרִיעוּ כָּל־בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים:
<i>Mishna, Pirke Avot 4:15</i>	פרקי אבות ד:טו
Rabbi Yannai said: It is not in our hands [to explain the reason] either of the security of the wicked, or even of the afflictions of the righteous.	רבי ינאי אומר, אין בְּיַדֵּינוּ לֹא מַשְׁלוֹת הַרְשָׁעִים וְאִף לֹא מִיַּסוּרֵי הַצְּדִיקִים...
From <i>Yom Kippur</i> liturgy, <i>Unetaneh Tokef</i> Prayer	ונתנה תוקף
But <b>Repentance</b> (repairing and returning to our true selves), <b>Prayer</b> (being in relationship with that which is Greater than ourselves) and <b>Tzedakah</b> (being in caring relationship with others) <b>have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny.</b>	ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה

Daddy quotes verses from the end of the book of Job in which God seems to rebuke Job, telling him not to question God's ways. A theology asking us to accept God's ways without question is comforting for some. On the other hand, it can be painful or infuriating to others. And, for still others, that theology works very well, until it doesn't. Rabbi Yannai offers a different approach. Rather than say that God has a reason for everything, he simply acknowledges that sometimes the world can be a very painful place. Losses feel unfair, inexplicable, and overwhelming. There is no one correct Jewish way to make sense of loss.

**The message of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer that we say on *Yom Kippur* may be a reminder that we are not powerless. Our destiny as human beings includes pain and loss in addition to joy and delight. The words of the *Unetaneh Tokef* remind us that the harshness of our experiences of pain and loss can be tempered by being part of a community where we hold others and where we allow others to hold us.**

**Following is a limited book list for further information.** Each book has a bibliography with additional excellent resources.

***For more information on Jewish mourning and comforting practices:***

*A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*, by Dr. Ron Wolfson. This book includes extensive practical information and guidance for both mourners and comforters.

*Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew*, by Anita Diamant “Does a wonderful job of showing how Jewish ritual can help mourners heal and how friends and community members can be an important part of that healing.” —JewishFamily.com

*Mourning and Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner’s Path Through Grief to Healing*, by Rabbi Anne Brener. Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, described *Mourning and Mitzvah* as offering “an exploration in depth of the place where psychology and religious ritual intersect, and the name of that place is Truth.”

*This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, by Rabbi Alan Lew. In this book, Rabbi Lew takes readers on a spiritual journey from the tragedy of the Destruction of the Temple on [Tisha B’Av](#) to the joy of building a small, fragile [sukkah](#) on the holiday of [Sukkot](#). Communal memory of the Temple is transformed and incorporated into the healing communal joy of the holiday of *Sukkot*. This is similar to a personal journey after loss. As Daddy tells Hanan regarding Shoshana’s loss, *the hope is that from the place...she can gain a new perspective, grow a new horizon that incorporates the memory of her loved one.*

***For more on incorporating memory in new ways as a form of comfort:***

See the poem [When All That’s Left is Love](#), by Rabbi Allan S. Maller.

***For more on God as Place:***

*God was in this Place and I, I Did Not Know: Finding Self, Spirituality and Ultimate Meaning*, by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. The first words of the book’s title are from [Genesis 28:16](#), spoken by Jacob upon awakening from his ladder dream, alone, after fleeing from his brother. With these words, he acknowledges God’s Presence in this unexpected place. The book is an exploration of various meanings of this verse.