Prayers and Ideas for Visitors to a House of Mourning
Sefer HaShiva
Prayers and Ideas for Visitors to a House of Mourning
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Dedicated to the memory of Ronald and Lily Coffer and Simeon and Lena Conick
Dedicated in loving memory of Dr J C (Joss) Leigh by his daughter Sara
Dedicated to the memory of

Judge Aron Owen

אהרון בן אלימלך הכהן

and

Rose Owen

שושנה בת אהרן זלמן

Louis Moont

אריה בן מרדכי

and

Joyce Moont

לאה בת משה

By their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren
Thank You

The US wants to give a huge thank you to the more than 200 volunteers, men and women, that are on call to prepare bodies for burial - the Chevrah Kadishah. They never look for thanks, they just quietly get on with doing one of the most selfless mitzvot that anyone can do, since the person they are helping cannot say thank you.

The Chevrah volunteers are exemplars of ‘chesed shel emet’ (the sincerest kindness). The work of the Chevrah is complex and is often not discussed publicly, so that it remains altruistic and dignified. These amazing members of our community ensure that our loved ones receive a Jewish burial in keeping with thousands of years of Jewish tradition and practice.
A few years ago I visited Israel with a Tribe group of United Synagogue Youth and I took them to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. They were shown a film about the history of Jewish life in Europe - especially life in poor Jewish villages. In every village, there was a soup kitchen, a free lending society and a host of charitable organisations.

After the film, one of the teenagers turned to me and asked, “The Jewish community was so poor – how could people give so much charity?”

“Why do you think?” I replied.

His answer was profoundly beautiful, “I suppose they wouldn’t have been a community otherwise.”

Somehow Jews know that community is vital – and a community without caring for each other is not a community. That care is essential at the time of the loss of a loved one.

In my role as a rabbi, I have attended hundreds of shiva houses over the years and I am always struck by the diversity of our community. Yet, at a shiva, we are united by our connection to the mourners.

This book is not just a prayer book. Yes, it contains the prayers we say in a shiva house, but it is far more than that. It contains ideas and explanations about the prayers. It also includes stories, insights, frequently asked questions as well as a guide to the shiva house itself.

We all come together at a shiva house as part of a community whose members care for each other. This book of prayers and insights is for all of us.

Rabbi Andrew Shaw
Director, US Living & Learning
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*In this book words and names which may need further explanation are italicised on the first occasion that they appear in each article. Foreign language terms appearing in articles are also italicised. The glossary on page 221 gives more explanation about all these terms.*
Introduction
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The preparation of this book has been a huge privilege and a sacred task. We hope that it will enable those attending a shiva to gain a greater appreciation of how Judaism approaches bereavement and help them to bring comfort to those in mourning.

We extend our immense gratitude to the many people who have helped to bring this book to fruition. It would be impossible to thank them all adequately without making these acknowledgments overly long and so we apologise for not mentioning them all by name. Their involvement has nonetheless been crucial.

First and foremost, our thanks go to our contributors, from the following United Synagogue and United Hebrew Congregation communities as well as from several United Synagogue departments:

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We are extremely grateful to the professional staff of the following US departments: London Beth Din, US Living & Learning, Marketing, Community Services, Burial Society, US Chesed and Tribe for their efforts towards the production of this book.

A large group of volunteers, including a number of rabbis, as well as a broad cross section of our community, read through our drafts. We very much appreciate their counsel and suggestions which have greatly enhanced this publication.

We particularly thank Lord Sacks, who as a foremost spokesperson, teacher and exponent of Judaism for all British Jews and for Judaism internationally has inspired the Living, Learning and Caring philosophy of the United Synagogue. We thank him for his support of, and assistance with, this book as well as for his creative, scholarly and inspiring teachings about prayer which we have endeavoured to follow in this book.
Rabbi Shlomo Levin, Dr Jeanne Katz and David Turner of South Hampstead United Synagogue, Rabbi Baruch Levin of Brondesbury Park United Synagogue, Rabbi Yehudah Black of Kenton United Synagogue, Rabbi Elchonon Feldman of Belmont United Synagogue, Rev Alan Greenbat of the Office of the Chief Rabbi, Candice Woolfson and Joshua Luks of Finchley United Synagogue and David Frei, Registrar of the London Beth Din, have also been valuable sources of practical advice.

The excellent 1981 edition of the *Prayer Book for a House of Mourning*, by the late Rabbi Abraham Rosenfeld, of blessed memory, provided a scholarly precedent for us to work from as did the 1983 edition of *Eternal Life, A Handbook for the Mourner*, by the late Rabbi Shlomo Pesach Toperoff, of blessed memory, of the United Hebrew Congregation of Newcastle upon Tyne.

We thank Rabbi Dr Shlomo Riskin, Chief Rabbi of Efrat and chancellor of Ohr Torah Stone institutions in Israel, for his kind permission to reproduce a chapter from his book, *Listening to God*.

Much of the approach to understanding prayer presented in this book is based on the teachings of Rabbi Dr Irving Jacobs, former Principal of Jews College and a member of Wembley United Synagogue. We thank Rabbi Jacobs for his scholarship and pedagogy and have tried to be as faithful as possible to his teachings.

Stephen Pack, President of the United Synagogue, Jeremy Jacobs, Chief Executive of the United Synagogue and David Kaplan, Community Services Director of the United Synagogue, have helped to create an educational hub at the United Synagogue offices which has given us the opportunity to work on this project. Thanks are also due to Johnny Chippeck z''l whose support and encouragement inspired much of this work.

The transition from idea to printed work could not have happened without the hard work of the US Marketing project team: Ian Myers, Richard Marcus, Ruth Millet, Danielle Fox and, in particular, Josh Saunders whose creativity has so shaped the finished work.

Our final thanks go to God, for granting us the priceless opportunity of labouring in His vineyard and for enabling this book to come about.

We end with a fervent prayer that this book will provide religious inspiration for all who use it, until the day when the ancient biblical words of the prophet Isaiah in first Temple times, recited at the end of the *shiva* memorial prayers, will be realised:

“He [God] will destroy death for ever; and the Lord God will wipe away the tears from off all faces, and remove the reproach of His people from the whole earth; for the Lord has spoken it” (Isaiah 25:8).

May that day come very soon.

Rabbi Michael Laitner  
Editor

Fiona Palmer  
Editor

Elul 5773 / September 2013 (London)
During our life cycle events we instinctively turn to our roots, connect with our heritage and re-enact our traditions. During the mourning period for a loved one, our timeless Jewish rituals provide timely comfort and inspiration.

Our laws of mourning are unique. Based on Biblical precedents but not Biblical law, they have been fashioned by our Sages to provide a highly effective therapeutic process for the bereaved. As a result, in shiva houses we see Jewish tradition at its finest. Mourners are cocooned by the warmth, care, consideration and empathy of family members, friends and the wider community. A hugely rewarding symbiotic relationship often follows. Those who grieve give strength and provide comfort to the visitors, prompting many to exclaim, “We came to give strength and we emerged strengthened.”

The Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) teaches, “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting” In both situations one performs an important mitzvah. At a wedding, the joy of the bride and groom is enhanced through the participation of others in their simcha. During shiva the mourners derive inner strength and encouragement from visitors. But attendance at a house of mourning can have the edge over a simcha on account of the sobering impact the experience has on the visitor. A shiva visit can enable visitors to emerge with a determination to make the most of the limited gift of life that is ours.

Mindful of the benefit that can be derived from a shiva call, US Living & Learning has produced this Sefer HaShiva – Prayers and Ideas for Visitors to a House of Mourning. Including much more than prayers to be recited, this book has primarily the visitor to the shiva house in mind. The essays, thoughts and ideas seek to enable a simple shiva call to become an uplifting educational experience that instills pride in our Jewish precepts, traditions and ritual.

May this publication bring greater awareness and appreciation of our life-enhancing traditions and may our precious memories of our loved ones help pave a path of comfort and inspiration both during the shiva and beyond.

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis
A mourner’s loss of a close family member or friend is one of life’s most painful experiences. One who was part of their life is no longer there and their world threatens to fall apart. They are forced to come face to face with mortality itself, and the knowledge that all that lives, dies.

Judaism recognises that to grieve is to be human. Our faith does not command stoic indifference in the face of death, nor does it allow for wild expressions of sorrow. Instead, through the various stages of bereavement, Judaism and Halakhah sets out a precisely calibrated sequence of grief, from the initial, numbing moment of loss itself, to the funeral and the return home, to the period of being comforted by friends and members of the community, to a more extended time during which one does not engage in activities associated with joy.

The week of shiva, during which mourners are visited by family, friends and neighbours and rarely left alone, forces the bereaved out of themselves and back into the land of the living. It is a pivotal moment in the grieving process, one that helps mend the broken bonds of a relationship. Shiva is a form of reintegration, a radical insistence that it is not in and by themselves that mourners restore the meaningfulness of a life, but in the company of others.

Ultimately, Jews are a people and Judaism is a religion that adheres to Moses’ great command, Uvacharta va-chayyim, “Choose Life.” Our God is the God of Life. He is, to us, like water is to the desert (“God, you are my God; I search for You, my soul thirsts for You, my body yearns for You, as a parched and thirsty land that has no water,” Psalms 63:2), quenching our thirst, and at our lowest points, helping to heal our loss and bringing us back to life. For it is in life that we are able to remember and honour those we have lost. Our loved ones may have died, but what they lived for lives on in us. Judaism, through our Torah and traditions, has found a way to sustain the delicate balance between grief and consolation, between the loss of life that gives us pain, and the re-affirmation of life that gives us hope.

That is why I welcome this new book of prayers and thoughts for a shiva from the United Synagogue and commend those who contributed to it and oversaw its production. I hope the insights and teachings contained within its pages help us to deliver some comfort and a sense of renewed hope to the bereaved as we say:

“Hamakom yenachem etchem betoch she’ar avelei Tzion veerushalyim. May the Almighty comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Lord Sacks  (Chief Rabbi 1991 - 2013)
The US vision is one of inspired Jews, with enriched lives, passing our precious heritage on to future generations. Our work focuses on the three foundations of orthodox Jewish life: Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Chasadim which we refer to as Living, Learning and Caring.

It is our commitment to Living, Learning and Caring that has given rise to this Sefer HaShiva. This US publication exemplifies our approach to orthodox Jewish life by engaging its readers with authentic Jewish teaching in a way that speaks meaningfully to every member of our community. At one time or another, we all will encounter the need to bring solace to our friends and family at a difficult time. This book is no mere academic exercise; it practically addresses one of the most sensitive areas of human experience. Along with the prayers needed in a house of mourning, it contains many inspiring essays and explanations. A reader will find here thoughts and ideas not only of interest to them but which, we hope, will help them to bring comfort to the bereaved.

We have both recently suffered bereavements. We know how challenging such a time can be. We have of course also visited countless shiva houses over the years and we could only have dreamt of a resource such as Sefer HaShiva being available in years gone by. We hope you find this book a source of inspiration and consolation. We are immensely honoured to have played just a small part in ensuring that this book is now available to all.

May we all only know joy and happiness in the years to come.

Stephen Pack  
US President

Jeremy Jacobs  
US Chief Executive
This book is not intended as a comprehensive guide to the laws of mourning. There are a number of such publications which deal sensitively with the needs of Jewish mourners. Rather, this publication has been specifically written to provide guidance and inspiration to visitors to a shiva house as they perform the mitzvah of comforting a mourner.
A Guide to Shiva: Q & A
Rabbi Daniel Roselaar

At a shiva house you may encounter a number of ideas and practices with which you are not familiar. The following frequently asked questions may help you to better understand the shiva process that a mourner is going through.

Q: What does shiva mean?
A: Shiva literally means ‘seven’ and refers to the initial seven days of mourning (inclusive of the day of burial) observed by a mourner. This is often referred to as ‘sitting’ shiva. Normally, shiva begins immediately after burial and usually takes place at either the home of the deceased, or one of the mourners, or in another person’s home. If a bereavement occurs on Yom Tov, then shiva starts after that entire Yom Tov finishes (though technically the last day of Yom Tov in the Diaspora will be counted as the first of the seven days of shiva). Yom Tov always ends a shiva, regardless of when the shiva started.

Q: Who sits shiva?
A: Somebody who has lost any of the following seven relatives: mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son, spouse. In Hebrew a mourner is termed an avel (the plural is aveilim) and are said to be in aveilut, meaning mourning.

Q: What is the purpose of sitting shiva?
A: Sitting shiva serves a dual purpose. In part it provides mourners with an opportunity to contemplate their bereavement and to consider the loss that they have sustained. It also creates an
environment for them to pay tribute to and honour the memory of the person who has passed away. Traditional teachings state that the soul of the deceased watches its relatives during the shiva period and is comforted when it senses that they are observing the mourning rituals.

Q: Why are restrictions placed on mourners during the shiva period?

A: The restrictions placed on mourners enable them to withdraw somewhat from the rest of society. This embodies the idea that their loss is so great that their world has come to a temporary standstill, even though it is business as usual for everyone else.

Q: What kind of restrictions apply during the shiva week?

A: Broadly speaking there are two kinds of restrictions. The first kind limits the mourners’ attention to themselves, whilst the second kind limits their interaction with other people.

Q: How do mourners limit their attention to themselves?

A: Mourners may not cut their hair or trim their nails and men sitting shiva may not shave. Mourners should also not shower or bathe, though if their personal hygiene is being compromised they may use lukewarm water as a reminder to themselves that they are not bathing for pleasure. They may comb or brush their hair but they should not apply makeup or wear jewellery. They should also not launder any clothing or wear freshly laundered clothes (other than underwear). Throughout the shiva, mourners wear the garment torn at the cemetery prior to burial. Mourners do not wear leather shoes. They also refrain from sexual relations. Throughout the shiva the mourners sit on low chairs or on the floor (unless this would cause health problems), as another demonstration of their loss.
Q: How do mourners limit their interaction with other people?
A: Mourners stay in the shiva house throughout the week, though they may return to their own homes in the evenings if they are sitting shiva in another person’s house. They do not engage in any of their regular business activities. They also try to avoid doing things that will distract them from the focus of their mourning. Mourners are allowed to thank visitors for attending the shiva. If it is not possible to arrange for a minyan in the house a mourner may travel to the synagogue to say Kaddish.

Q: When does shiva end and what happens when shiva coincides with Shabbat and Yom Tov?
A: The shiva normally ends on the morning of the seventh day following the burial, inclusive. The local rabbi, a relative or a friend normally attends the shiva house on the final morning of the shiva to end the shiva by asking the mourners formally to rise from their shiva chairs and finish the restrictions of the shiva.

Some aspects of shiva change on Friday afternoon and Shabbat. The mourners’ local rabbi should be on hand to advise them of the details of these changes as well as any other variations such as the conclusion of shiva brought about by the onset of Yom Tov (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succot, Pesach and Shavuot). If you do not have a local rabbi, please contact the United Synagogue Burial Society for advice at burial@theus.org.uk

Q: What is the role of visitors to a shiva house?
A: Visitors are there to comfort and console the mourners. The primary topics of conversation should be about the life and achievements of the deceased. If the visitors knew the person who passed away, they should share their memories and if not, they should ask the mourners to speak about the deceased. Sometimes it is appropriate for visitors to wait for the mourners to speak, rather than initiating conversation. In some communities, the practice is for
mourners not to greet visitors, at least for the first three days of the shiva. The primary concern for visitors must be to think sensitively about the most appropriate form of behaviour to help the mourners, taking each shiva in its own context.

**Q:** Why are prayer services held in the shiva house?

**A:** In part for practical reasons, since the mourners are not supposed to leave the house and need to have a minyan for the recitation of Kaddish. Whilst the obligation to recite Kaddish falls on male mourners, a female mourner may recite Kaddish if she so wishes, both at the shiva and in the synagogue. She should say Kaddish along with at least one or more males (even if the male is not currently in mourning).

A male mourner during shiva should lead weekday prayers, if he is able to do so. Mourners can go to Shabbat services at their local synagogue, although in many communities they sit in a different seat to usual. They also step out for the first part of the Friday night services before being formally welcomed into Shabbat prayers by a rabbi and/or synagogue warden.

Mourners still sit shiva even if no prayers take place at their shiva house. Family and friends should still visit and help the mourners in this situation.

**Q:** What happens after shiva?

**A:** Certain restrictions, such as cutting hair or nails, remain in place until the 30th day after burial (sheloshim). Sheloshim denotes a less intense form of mourning than shiva. There is a moving custom to organise some Torah study in memory of the deceased, to be completed at a group gathering called a siyum, at the end of the sheloshim. This siyum is a positive communal activity in memory of the deceased. Sheloshim ends the formal mourning period for all mourners, other than for those mourning a parent, which continues until the first yahrzeit (Hebrew calendar anniversary of
the deceased's passing). If a Yom Tov occurs during the sheloshim period, the Yom Tov terminates that period, allowing mourners to participate in the Yom Tov.

When mourning a parent, Kaddish is recited for the first 11 months following bereavement and then again on the yahrzeit each year. Shortly before the night when the yahrzeit begins, a memorial candle is lit. If the yahrzeit falls on Shabbat, a memorial candle is lit on Friday before Shabbat candles. When mourning other relatives, Kaddish is normally recited up to and including sheloshim (although it can be recited for the whole of the first 11 months) and then on the yahrzeit each year.

During the year of mourning, mourners do not attend joyous or live musical celebrations and do not buy new clothes, unless absolutely necessary.

Some communities have study and social groups for mourners, to help at this difficult time.

All of these practices are designed to give mourners time to contemplate their loss rather than just heading quickly back into the normal rhythm of daily life. May shiva provide comfort and healing to the mourners and an opportunity for visitors to show their friendship and care for those who have been bereaved.
Information for Visitors to a Shiva House

Rabbi Michael Laitner

There are a number of practices which are a special feature of a shiva house. The following notes explain some of these features, which a mourner might request your assistance with. (Note that this is not a comprehensive list of all the practical requirements for Jewish mourners – in this regard more detailed information is given to mourners by their local rabbi and the US Burial Society.)

1. In a shiva house a candle is lit (typically a yahrzeit - memorial - candle, although any candle will do). This may be lit from the time of death onwards. The candle stays alight throughout the shiva, including the whole of the seventh day. A seven-day candle is often used but normal candles may also be lit, one after another. (The flame does not need to pass from one candle to the next.) The Biblical Book of Proverbs (Mishlei), states that ‘The soul of mankind is the candle of God,’ (20:27), from where we derive the practice of lighting a yahrzeit candle to demonstrate the endurance of the soul even after physical passing. Yahrzeit candles are available from Jewish grocery and book shops.

2. Low ‘shiva’ chairs, shiva prayer books, spare kippot (skullcaps), help with taking services (if required) and for fixing service times can in most cases be provided by your local shul and rabbi. Alternatively, the US Burial Society can be reached by phone on 020 8950 7767 or via burial@theus.org.uk to provide assistance.

3. Prayers at a shiva do not require a mechitzah (a physical separation between men and women) since a shiva house is not a designated place of prayer. Nevertheless, men and women stand separately during prayer.

4. A relative or friend provides the Seudat Havra’ah, the simple meal for mourners, when they return from the burial. It includes a drink, bread (sometimes a bagel) and a hardboiled egg symbolising that
we cater only for our basic needs at such a time. These symbolise the cycle of life. Lentils may also be served, since rabbinic sources teach that the Biblical patriarch Ya’akov (Jacob) provided these to his father Yitzchak (Isaac) when the latter sat shiva for his father, Avraham (Abraham). Grace after meals differs in a shiva house, (see page 770 of the Singers Prayer Book, green edition.)

5. Mirrors on public display are covered as it is not appropriate to focus on our physical image when the physical image of the departed is now in the process of decay. Additionally, they are covered since prayers are normally held at a shiva and we do not pray looking in a mirror.

6. A shiva house is not a reception or a wake, such that mourners ought not to feel any pressure to provide catering for visitors. Accordingly, standard Ashkenazi practice is that non-family members do not eat or drink in a shiva house unless they need to for reasons of health or are weary from travel. Conversely, the practice in some Sephardi communities is that visitors to a shiva taste food, since by making a berachah before and after eating, they perform a mitzvah for the merit of the deceased.

7. As mourners should not prepare meals unless there is nobody else to do so for them, family and friends can help by providing meals.

8. Understandably, mourners can be profoundly affected during the time of shiva. There may be many ways that family and friends can assist in the particular context of each shiva and after the shiva too.

For more information, assistance or support, please contact your local rabbi, US Living & Learning at landl@theus.org.uk or the US Burial Society at burial@theus.org.uk

Please visit www.theus.org.uk/shiva/sittingshiva to see the JOG: Jewish Online Guides, How to… video on 'Sitting Shiva - Mourning at Home'.

A full list of US communities can be found at www.theus.org.uk
GREETING THE MOURNERS
Rabbi Gideon Sylvester

Seeing a close friend or family suffer bereavement can be hard enough, but finding the right words to comfort them is often particularly awkward. Many people feel nervous before visiting a shiva house, unsure of what to say or how to conduct themselves. Fortunately, Judaism eases the path with sensitive laws which guide us through our first encounters with those who are grieving.

The first rule is, relax, you do not have to say anything. The halachah recognises the mourners’ need for space to express their grief, it understands that sometimes, they are not in the mood for chatting. Therefore, we do not open a conversation with them. We wait until by words or gestures they indicate that they are ready to speak. Even if you sit in the shiva house for some time without exchanging a word with the bereaved, you will have fulfilled the mitzvah of visiting them and you will have brought them the comfort of knowing that their friends and colleagues care about them and are there supporting them. That is enough.

If the mourners do speak to you, try to listen carefully, to gauge their mood and what they would like to talk about. Try to avoid intrusive questions. If you are able to share a lovely story about the deceased, it will be in keeping with the purpose of the shiva and greatly appreciated by those who are piecing together their memories of their loved ones. Be aware that the mourners may be under enormous strain and may well be exhausted from their experiences. Particularly where there are elderly mourners, they may wish to rest in the afternoon and they will not necessarily appreciate visits very late at night. They also need quiet times to eat.

During the shiva, mourners are not in a position to shop or cook for themselves, so whether they are alone or surrounded by a large family who need to eat regular meals, they will appreciate gifts of food which can easily be served to them.

We avoid using the greeting “shalom” to mourners since it is a name of God representing peace and tranquillity which may be the very opposite
of how they are feeling. Also inquiring how these people feel while they are in the depths of their grief may seem out of place. Since there is a general prohibition on greeting mourners, it is generally tactful to avoid lavishing greetings on anyone else in the room.

There are other specific greetings which are used when arriving or leaving the shiva house. British Jews tend to use the friendly, “I wish you long life” or “I wish you chayim aruchim”, the Hebrew equivalent. These words are drawn from the blessing which we say when announcing the new month in synagogue.

Mourners who are bereft may feel that there is little point in carrying on with their lives. Judaism recognises these feelings and it invites friends and neighbours to give support by providing them with their first meal when they return from the funeral. It calls on us to visit the mourners through their initial week of grief so that they feel supported and cocooned with love. Wishing them “long life” reminds them that despite the enormous loss that they have suffered, their lives are still valuable and important. In the case of a tragic death, however, it may be best to avoid this expression since it may cause more sadness than consolation.

A universally accepted custom on parting from the mourners is to say the words: “Hamakom yenachem etchem betoch she’ar avelei Tzion ve-ru’hashlyim” – “May God comfort you amongst the mourners for Zion and Jerusalem”, this can be said in either Hebrew or English.

I particularly like this greeting since it stresses that the mourner is not alone, but stands alongside the entire Jewish people who are in some sense mourning for the destruction of the Temple as well as for any personal losses they may have suffered. It very gently hints that just as the rest of our people have found sufficient comfort to continue their lives, so too, with time this mourner will gather the strength to continue their life, albeit bearing a painful loss.

The idea of referring to God as Hamakom also signifies that the Almighty is ever present, with us both in our moments of joy and in these more difficult moments of loss.

Since there is no public mourning on Shabbat, mourners during shiva are ushered into the synagogue after the Kabbalat Shabbat prayers on Friday night, and the rabbi or a congregant welcomes them by saying “Hamakom yenachem…” In many communities, people do greet the mourners with
the customary “Shabbat Shalom” at that point, to emphasise the peace represented by Shabbat, even amidst the week of shiva.

Ultimately, so much depends on sensitivity. A beautiful story in the Jerusalem Talmud recalls how Rabbi Hoshaya the Elder visited a town where he met mourners on Shabbat. He was unsure of the local customs, so he greeted them with the words, “I do not know whether your local custom is to greet mourners on Shabbat or not, but I wish you well in accordance with whatever your custom may be.” (Moed Katan 3: 5)

No doubt the mourners appreciated his frankness and sensitivity.

For additional perspectives, please watch Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis’ “Ask the Rabbi” presentation on this topic at www.theus.org.uk/shiva/greetingthemourner
NOTE

As this PDF is an extract from the full Sefer HaShiva book pages 30 to 143 containing the Prayers for a Shiva House are not included.

If you are printing out this download please be aware that the Hebrew pages may contain God’s name and should be treated respectfully.
Thoughts for the Shiva House
Thoughts for the Shiva House: List of Essays

In this section you will find a wide variety of essays focusing on both prayer and thoughts connected with a shiva house. These essays can also be downloaded from www.theus.org.uk/shiva

Our Prayers

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We may intuitively view prayer as an opportunity to ask God to fulfil needs that we feel unable to meet ourselves. But there is a basic problem with this. Surely God needs no reminder of our requirements. He must know exactly what we need and when!

Traditional Jewish sources teach that when we pray, we are actually involved in a process of self-judgment. That is why the verbal root of the Hebrew word tefillah, prayer, is pillel meaning to judge, or consider.

We pray to change our own perception of life, trying to internalise the enduring, universal words of the siddur, granting ourselves an opportunity to reflect on what really matters. When we say the words ‘Blessed are You God... Who heals the sick,’ for instance, we strengthen our belief in His ability to do so as well as asking God to grant our requests.

When said with sincerity, prayers can begin to work on us, shaping our view of life and helping us reconnect to God. Our prayers set the standard for us – they represent Jewish aspiration, guiding us as to what we should ultimately be aiming for.

Even though we have not yet, and indeed may never achieve these aspirations in full, by aiming for them, we will get closer to them than we might do otherwise. In our individual life journey, the siddur has a message for most occasions – providing us with a timeless Jewish perspective.

Prayers are held in a shiva house since a mourner does not go out during shiva unless it is absolutely necessary. Prayers provide a focal point for visitors to connect with the mourners, to pray for the deceased and for the mourners themselves. Praying in a shiva house provides an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of life itself and the importance of making the most of every moment.

It is important to note that all elements of shiva are observed even without formal communal prayer services. Any sincere prayer in a shiva house, whether part of a service or not, can provide both spiritual benefit to the deceased and solace to those mourning. May all our prayers, and especially those at a shiva house, provide us with the inspiration that we need.
The Shema: Our Acceptance of God as King

Sharon Radley

The most emblematic of Jewish prayers, we recite the first line of the Shema at least four times in daily prayers. The Shema has three paragraphs, the first two sourced from Devarim whilst the third is in Bamidbar.

Its first paragraph comes from Moshe’s (Moses’) first valedictory speech at the end of the Children of Israel’s forty years in the desert, shortly before his death and their entry to the Land of Israel. It is at this final stage of Moshe’s life that God instructs him to reinforce acceptance of God, perhaps to show his continuing belief in God, despite his impending death.

The paragraph lists several mitzvot such as loving God, and the mezuzah, for example. These help us to put the acceptance we declare in the first line of the Shema into practice.

The major themes of the second paragraph, also part of the same valedictory speech, are acceptance of God’s mitzvot and reward and punishment. The third paragraph focuses on tzitzit as a reminder for all mitzvot and concludes by remembering the Exodus from Egypt, which we must do morning and evening.

At various times, notably during the merciless Roman persecutions in the Land of Israel (such as the Bar Kochba revolt, 133-136 CE) “Shema Yisrael” was the prominent rallying cry of religious belief and Jewish independence. As such, the Romans tried to ban it, knowing its spiritual power. We revisit this during Yom Kippur prayers when we read the emotional story of the sage Rabbi Akiva, martyred during the Bar Kochba revolt, who recited the Shema and epitomised its lessons even as Roman executioners put him to death.

The Shema reaffirms our acceptance of God, even at times of sadness. We state this belief aloud to encourage us to embrace it as best we can. We cast our minds back to leaders like Moshe and Rabbi Akiva, learning from their faith in both God and the continuity of Judaism.
Phone companies like to tell us that it is good to talk. That goes for our relationship with God as much as it does for our relationship with people. Amidah means ‘standing’ which reflects our deportment when we are saying it. It is the central focus of every daily prayer service, and is a special moment in time when we talk to God.

In early biblical times, prayer was ‘freestyle’. People composed their own prayers in tune with their sense of spiritual awareness or personal circumstances at a particular time. Prayer was a creative spiritual art by which we built a connection with God.

With the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE and our exile to Babylon, we gradually began to lose this art and our Hebrew linguistic skills. This is when the Amidah emerged. The scholars of that period, the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah including the leading figure of Ezra, identified the need for a consistent liturgy. This led to the formulation of the Amidah and the development of our siddur, ensuring that the art of prayer would not be lost. It now became a creative spiritual art within a structure.

Those scholars also understood that the changes in the landscape of Judaism following the destruction required them to bring the memory of the Temple to the people wherever they were. In addition to a consistent liturgy, fixed daily prayers to commemorate the daily offerings in the Temple now became part of Jewish life with the Amidah at their centre.

As our main ‘phone call’ with God, the weekday Amidah contains 19 blessings divided into three sections: shevach (praise of God); bakasha (requests of God, written in the plural since we do not just pray for ourselves) and hoda’ah (thanks to and acceptance of God). It is recited quietly to allow us a private, personal ‘call’ to God. Other than at Ma’ariv, it is followed by an audible repetition by the prayer leader for the community, emphasising the communal aspect of prayer and helping those lacking fluency to learn the prayers by hearing them aloud. Ma’ariv is different
because it represents the continuation into the night of the afternoon offering which was brought in the Temple.

At a shiva, the Amidah also provides us with words and a connection to God when we might find this hard. It can help to focus our thoughts on those who are mourning, and their needs. Each Amidah should be like another ‘phone call’ to God, making us more sensitive to what it means to be a Jew.

A phone call, of course, is a dialogue. As we reach out to God in prayer, we show our willingness to bring Him into our lives, ‘inviting’ Him into our lives, acknowledging His involvement in everything. This is not always easy. It requires persistence, faith and a belief in God’s plan for this world and the next, which are all easier said than done. It is a continual work in progress. Yet each attempt should bring us closer to the serenity that connection with God brings. This is expressed by King David in Psalm 16, when he stated that “I have set God before me at all times. He is at my right hand and I shall not be shaken.”

If we succeed in making these connections through the Amidah we recite at a shiva, then we have also accomplished something for the soul of the departed. May our ‘call’ to God be answered favourably.
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Spotlight on Kaddish
Dayan Ivan Binstock

Kaddish is a sanctification of God and of life, rather than a prayer about
death. It praises God and asks for a better world. As such, its frequent
recitation during prayer and especially at a shiva, provides a clue to the
ongoing miracle of Jewish survival.

How so? When saying Kaddish, we emphasise our faith in God’s
sovereignty and the importance of sanctifying life each day through positive
actions, even at a time of mourning.

The commitments expressed in Kaddish bring spiritual merit to the soul
of the deceased and challenge us, hard as it can be, to avoid depression
by resolving to contribute to life as best as we can.

Kaddish is recited mainly in Aramaic. It expresses the hope that we may
soon see the Messianic age when the whole world will recognise the
sovereignty of God.

It exists in the following forms:

1. Chatzi (Half) Kaddish and Kaddish Titkabel (Full Kaddish). These
   serve to punctuate the daily services, marking transition points
   from one stage to another and marking its conclusion respectively;

2. Kaddish Yatom - Mourner’s (or literally, Orphan’s) Kaddish, is said
   by a mourner during the first 11 months of the year of mourning
   for a parent and on a yahrzeit. When mourning for other relatives,
   there is no obligation to say Kaddish. However, one may wish to
   join the children in Kaddish during the first 30 days of mourning
   (sheloshim). When there are no children saying Kaddish, it is
   meritorious for other family members to say Kaddish or to arrange
   for Kaddish to be said for 11 months;

3. Kaddish Derabanan – This Kaddish is said after learning a portion
   of rabbinic teaching. Such teaching often closes with a short ethical
   passage beginning with the words: ‘Rabbi Chananya ben Akashya
   omer...: Kaddish Derabanan is said by a mourner or on a yahrzeit;
4. Burial Kaddish – This is an expanded form of Mourner’s Kaddish with additional lines that refer to the ultimate resurrection of the dead. It is recited by a child at the funeral of a parent, on days when Tachanun is said;

5. Siyum Kaddish - In essence, this is a combination of the Kaddish prayers at points 3 and 4 above. It is said at the conclusion of a volume of the Talmud, the main source of rabbinic legal and ethical teachings, or of a Seder (one of the six sections) of the Mishnah, the foundation text of the Talmud.

The origins of Kaddish are shrouded in antiquity. It would seem that the earliest references are to a prayer being said to mark the conclusion of rabbinic learning. It is probable that such a prayer was introduced during the Hadriani persecutions in the second century CE, subsequent to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, when Torah study was forbidden and a Messianic redemption was urgently awaited. A post-Talmudic work, Massechet Soferim (8th century), refers to a form of Kaddish as part of the service, adjacent to Barechu and the Torah reading, as well as at the end of the service.

Both early and late Midrashim refer to the merit that accrues to the soul of a parent when a son leads a synagogue service and thereby prompts the community to respond in sanctifying God’s name.

The final stage in the development of Kaddish occurred in the medieval period. During the persecutions of the Crusades, many families were bereaved. In a number of cases the mourners were orphans, under the age of Bar Mitzvah, and therefore ineligible to lead the synagogue service. It became the norm to adapt the Kaddish for use by orphans at the end of the service. Hence the origin of Kaddish Yatom or Orphan’s Kaddish, which is now commonly called Mourner’s Kaddish.

Strictly speaking, the Kaddish after a rabbinical lesson, Kaddish Derabanan, need not be said by a mourner. However, it is common practice for mourners to say this Kaddish. Herein lies a profound lesson.

The link between Mourner’s Kaddish and Kaddish Derabanan (and between Burial Kaddish and Siyum Kaddish) is not simply an overlap of words. It expresses the idea that we are marking the completion of what is ultimately a spiritual entity. The study of Torah is at the heart of Jewish
life, so completing a unit of *Torah* study has tremendous spiritual as well as intellectual significance, demonstrating our interaction with teachings that stretch back to the revelation at Mount Sinai.

Let us look at some of the key phrases in the *Kaddish* prayer:

**Yitgadal Veyitkadash Shemei Raba** – Magnified and sanctified may His great name be. This is a paraphrase from the biblical book of Ezekiel, 38:23, “Thus will I magnify and sanctify myself.” It is significant that the prayer became known as *Kaddish*, “sanctification”, after the second of these words rather than the first, emphasising that *Kaddish* is a prayer which sanctifies God’s name rather than just magnifying or praising it.

**Veyamlich Malchutei, Bechayechon Uvyomeichon Uvchayei Dichol Beit Yisrael** – May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of all the House of Israel. The mourner (or prayer leader) now switches focus to pray for both the people around him and for the wider community that they should merit to see the redemption of the times of the Messiah.

**Ba’agala Uvizman Kariv Ve’imru Amen** – Soon and swiftly and say, Amen. May the Messiah come soon, and may the process leading to redemption proceed swiftly. The leader continues to address his audience that they should affirm his prayer with Amen.

**Yehei Shmei Rabah Mevarach Le’alam Ulal’e’may Al’e’my-ah** – May His great name be blessed forever and for all time. This phrase is the nucleus of *Kaddish*. Responding here is more important even than answering the *Kedushah* prayers, which are the highlight of the repetition of the *Amidah* prayers (see the article on the *Amidah*). The *Talmud* (Shabbat 119b) states that “one who responds *Amen Yehei Shmei Raba* etc with gusto and sincerity will have an evil decree rescinded.” This emphasises the significance and sanctification of *Kaddish*, by Jews blessing God, especially when they do so at tough times.

*Kaddish* continues with eight more praises of God's name (*Yitbarach Veyishtabach*...Blessed and praised...) that express how God's Name is beyond any other form of adoration that is possible in the world.

In *Kaddish Derabanan*, a paragraph is inserted here to pray for the welfare of those who study *Torah*, both those present at the recitation and elsewhere. ...**Yehei Lehon Ulechon Shlama Raba, China Vechisda**
Verachamin... – May there come to them and to you, great peace, grace, kindness and compassion...

Every form of Kaddish then concludes in the same manner as the Amidah, similar to Grace after Meals and the Priestly Blessing, with a request for the quintessential blessing - peace. The well-known formula for Kaddish is as follows: Oseh Shalom Bimromav, Hu Ya’aseh Shalom Aleinu Ve-al Kol Yisrael, Ve-imru Amen – May He who makes peace in His high places, make peace for us and all Israel – and say: Amen. We pray that God provides peace both on earth and in the heavens, both a physical and a spiritual peace.

Kaddish is recited in the presence of a minyan, normally whilst standing. May your Kaddish prayers bring comfort.
KADDISH: SANCTIFYING LIFE
Rabbi Andrew Shaw

When we say Kaddish we are making a powerful declaration of our commitment to living a positive life. I will try to illustrate this with a story which inspires me. It was told by the Israeli author, Amos Oz, and was related to me by Lord Sacks. Whilst this story did not take place in the context of a shiva, its message is especially powerful for such a time. I will paraphrase it here.

Amos Oz’s father was an academic, who, during Amos’ childhood, spent a long time writing his greatest work. Finally, he finished the book and five copies appeared in the local bookshop. Mr Oz Senior came home delighted. However, this delight soon evaporated as the book did not sell. As you can imagine, the mood at home darkened.

One day, Mr Oz Senior burst through the door in joy. “My book has sold out” he cried! Suddenly the looming despondency dissipated. The household breathed a sigh of relief.

Sometime later, Amos’ father sent him to borrow a bag of milk from a neighbour. As he entered the neighbour’s flat, Amos saw, to his amazement, all five copies of his father’s book. The neighbour looked at him and said, “Don’t you ever tell your father.”

What a wonderful, quiet act of life-changing kindness. Would the neighbour ever have dreamed that Amos would grow up to be an internationally acclaimed writer and share this story with us?

This act of kindness is rooted in a commitment to living a positive life. Kaddish is a prayer about sanctifying life and asking for a better time ahead. While we pray to God for this, we cannot remain passive and expect it to come without any effort from us. Like Amos Oz’s neighbour, we need to be on the lookout for opportunities to make life better, enriching life with mitzvot including performing acts of Chesed (kindness). During the shiva period, such acts can be especially powerful when we seek to bring comfort at a time of sadness.
As anybody who enjoys a good book or film will appreciate, a great ending helps you to remember the story. Our prayers are no different in this respect, which is why every statutory prayer service has Aleinu at its conclusion since this prayer provides a ‘take home’ message.

Aleinu describes our obligation and privilege to praise God, the unique opportunity of being Jewish, God’s majesty over heaven and earth, our hope for a better future, for global monotheism, recognition of and commitment to God as part of a society of tikun olam (repairing the World) under the sovereignty of God. It ends with the famous line introduced by “ve’ne’emar”, often sung, which anticipates the day when the whole world will accept God’s dominion.

When we close the siddur at the end of prayers, the powerful messages of Aleinu and their summary of central themes of our prayers should reverberate and resonate as a Jewish vision for us as we head off into the world, especially at a shiva. It is an emblematic Jewish prayer.

Aleinu was originally only said in the middle of the Musaf prayer service on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Its recitation in daily services probably began in Ashkenazi (central and northern European) communities, in the 12th or 13th centuries. Why?

The answer that we suggest has a particular significance for a time of bereavement. Eyewitnesses to the killing of martyred rabbis at Blois, France, in 1171, reported that those martyrs recited Aleinu in song as their end neared. Its last line, mirroring the first line of the Shema prayer, emphasises that there is only one God. This made a tremendously powerful and inspiring impression on onlookers who reported this to rabbis elsewhere. Perhaps in response, Aleinu became incorporated into daily prayers, as a symbol of Jewish pride, faith and hope for better times ahead. Rather than pray for the destruction of our enemies, we pray for a better world. This may have turned it into an even more emblematic prayer than it was before.

As we gather at a shiva to ask God to look after the soul of the deceased and to comfort those mourning, Aleinu should inspire us to continue bringing its Jewish vision to the world each day.
The Memorial Prayer: Powerful Words

Chayli Fehler

The world is full of memorials to visit, from Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, a memorial to those who died in the Holocaust, to the Cenotaph War Memorial in London and Ground Zero in New York. These memorials are physical reminders of events that should not be forgotten.

In contrast to these physical memorials, the Jewish Memorial Prayer seems intangible. A prayer seems just to comprise words which are said and then vanish. So, what function does it serve?

This prayer’s central themes are God’s sovereignty, a request for God to accept the soul of the departed, protect it, pardon its transgressions, reward its good deeds and grant it the everlasting good of the world to come. The prayer then provides what is almost a wish list of how we might ask God to look after the deceased and comfort the mourners. It asks Him to provide comfort for those in mourning - comforting them as a mother comforts a child - maintain His everlasting connection with His people as well as His commitment that one day, tears of sorrow will vanish.

The Memorial Prayer provides a continuing memorial which accrues spiritual merit for the soul of the deceased and asks for comfort for those mourning. The words of the Memorial Prayer are not intangible. They are a mission statement.

The Memorial Prayer expresses the dictum articulated by the second century Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel when, in the Jerusalem Talmud (volume Shekalim 11a), he queries whether the righteous need a tombstone, since “their words are their memorial”.

This may seem counter-intuitive. How can words last longer than stone? The answer is found in part with Rabbi Shimon himself. Unfortunately, we may not know where his tombstone is but we still discuss and consider his words of Torah study. His words are a real memorial.

The Memorial Prayer, in its various guises for shiva, yahrzeit or a cemetery visit, stresses the power of words. As well as petitioning, it provides a
way to remember the deceased and emphasises central Jewish values while doing so. It is a sensitive partner to the tombstone and helps us to remember both the deceased and some of the most important principles Jews must consider. It is a real memorial.
Psalm 27 is recited from Rosh Chodesh Ellul (the beginning of the month before Rosh Hashanah) until and including Shemini Atzeret straight after the festival of Succot. It is part of the regular Ma’ariv prayers, not specific to shiva prayers.

The Midrash Tehillim, one of the earliest rabbinic commentaries to the Book of Psalms, finds parallels between the opening verses of this psalm and the festivals at this time of year.

The first phrase, “Adonai Ori”, God is my light, uses ‘light’ as a metaphor to refer to the positive judgment that we hope to receive on Rosh Hashanah. The second phrase, “Ve-yish-ee”, and salvation, is a metaphor for Yom Kippur, a day on which we make a fresh start. A subsequent phrase, “Ki Yitzpeneini Besuccoh”, can be seen as a metaphor for Succot and the protection God provides in general. This psalm, said twice daily during this period, helps us to prepare for the High Holydays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as well as for Succot.

In addition, this psalm contains thirteen references to God’s Name which correspond to the “Thirteen Attributes” of God which are recited as part of the Selichot penitential prayers in Ellul through to Yom Kippur, culminating in the Ne’ilah prayers.

The month of Ellul is a time for introspection in advance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is also a time when we visit the burial grounds to remember deceased relatives and to emphasise the importance of emulating their good deeds as we look forward to the year ahead. As such, the themes of this psalm are particularly touching at a shiva.
Psalm 49: Words of Comfort

Rabbi Baruch Davis

The additional prayers that we recite in a shiva house are designed to encourage us to reflect on the subject of death, to pray for the departed and to strive to bring comfort to the mourners.

Psalm 49 makes for some grim reading: No-one, not even the rich and famous, is spared from the grave and mankind, despite its splendour, does not endure, but is “like the beasts that perish.” If we look at the life-cycle superficially, we see that all die and no-one takes their wealth or achievements with them.

But this is not the way Judaism sees things. We are comprised of body and soul. The soul is our essence, the ‘real us’; the body is simply the means of expression in this world. When we pass away to the world of souls, we have no need for the body anymore. What then do we take with us? The answer is that we take our good deeds, as seen from God’s perspective. Here there is no difference between rich and poor. God’s question to us is: What did you do with the hand you were dealt?

The final line of Psalm 49 is thus a variation on an earlier, similar line: “Mankind who, despite its splendour, lacks understanding, is like the beasts that perish.” Clearly, then, a person who strives to understand the deeper meaning of life is not like the beasts that perish.

This concept, that our souls, the real ‘us’, pass to the world of souls is the meaning behind another sentence in this psalm: "God will redeem my soul from the grave".

This in turn enables us to understand the phrase in the Memorial Prayer that follows Psalm 49: “O shelter his/her soul in the shadow of Your wings… in the path of life… bliss for evermore". There is reward in the world of souls. This reward is increased when we incorporate our departed loved ones’ positive attributes into our own lives and also when we perform mitzvot in their memory.
These words provide a degree of comfort to us in that they reassure us that, when a loved one leaves us, it is not ‘all over’.

Even so, the pain of separation is often very great to bear. And so we implore the Almighty to bring comfort to the mourners for their loss; we recognise that we need God's help in bringing comfort to others. This prayer also reminds us of our mission in attending the shiva: to strive to bring comfort to the mourners.
Psalm 16: Relating to God’s Will

Alison Harris

In the company of those who are mourning, how should we relate to God and His will? The words of Psalm 16, said at the shiva, address these profound questions.

Although we think of David, author of this psalm, as the greatest king of Israel, his life was beset by troubles. He fought external enemies, struggled against internal division, and even faced rebellion within his own family. At times he had to flee for his life. David's psalms contain meditations on human behaviour, contrasting human betrayal with the love, protection and the constancy of God. When troubles beset David, he prayed to God. His words at those times offer guidance for us at challenging moments, such as a shiva.

David may have composed this particular psalm whilst fleeing, perhaps either from Saul, the previous king, or Absalom, David's son, both of whom sought David's life.

Accordingly, in the opening verse, David seeks God’s protection. At a time of extreme vulnerability, having suffered a great loss, these words remind us that God is there as our refuge, trusting that He will take care of us. In particular, this psalm contains the famous verse, “I have set God before me at all times, He is my right hand, I shall not be shaken,” which appears in many synagogues near the Holy Ark or the bimah, as a reminder of God’s presence and is a motto of Jewish faith and aspiration.

Despite his suffering, David, in the following verses, pledges his loyalty to God, affirms his satisfaction with his lot and expresses the serenity that an unceasing connection with God brings.

David's words directly address the conflict we may feel as we struggle to accept the loss that God has ordained. We say David's words in order that we should believe them. We may find it difficult to understand why God’s
judgement is true and just, but we remind ourselves that it is so, hard as that might be.

The last verses of the psalm refer to the soul’s immortality. These words reassure us that the souls of the departed survive after death; they are now enjoying God's eternal protection.
Did you ever hear the story about Alfred Nobel, the man who created the prizes that bear his name? In 1888, Nobel, the man who invented dynamite, was reading his morning papers when, with a shock, he found himself reading his own obituary. It turned out that a journalist had made a simple mistake. It was Nobel’s brother who had died. What horrified Nobel was what he read. It spoke about “the dynamite king” who had made a fortune from explosives. Nobel suddenly realised that if he didn’t change his life that was all he would be remembered for. At that moment he decided to dedicate his fortune to creating five annual prizes for those who’d made outstanding contributions in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature and peace. Nobel chose to be remembered for peace.

What will we be remembered for? That is the question Judaism makes us confront. Let me tell you a true story, tragic but also deeply inspiring. It happened in the summer of 2010. A young man, Marc Weinberg, brilliant, gifted, with a devoted wife and two beautiful young children, had been diagnosed with leukaemia. For two and a half years, helped by advanced medical technology and lifted by the prayers of friends, he fought with all his strength against the civil war raging inside his body. In the end it was too much, and he died, still in his mid-thirties.

Marc was no ordinary young man. He was a person of the most profound religious belief and practice, who spent every spare moment of his crowded, short life helping others and bringing out the best in them. By the sheer force of his example he transformed lives. He taught people the power of possibility and helped them become better than they thought they were.

Was this his reward? To die so young? Abraham once asked, “Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?” There are moments that can shake your faith to its foundations. Yet, as I stood at his funeral, this was not the feeling that swept over me. Instead I felt a strange, quite unexpected access of faith.

For around me, gathered at short notice, were more than a thousand mourners, many of them his age or younger. Through their tears I saw the difference he had made to their lives. He wasn’t rich or famous. He had
lived all too briefly. Yet each of them had a story to tell of how he had helped them, inspired them, befriended them when they were lonely, lifted them when they were suffering some personal crisis. Each of those blessings had given rise to others in turn, in a series of ever-widening ripples of good.

There is a film, *Pay It Forward*, in which the hero, a young schoolboy, is set an assignment by his social science teacher. “Come up with a practical plan to change the world and improve humankind.” Moved by the plight of people he sees in difficulties – a homeless man, his alcoholic mother, his badly scarred teacher – he suddenly envisages a way. Normally, kindnesses are reciprocated. They are “paid back.” What if they were paid *forward*? What if we made it a condition of doing someone some good, that they agreed to do good to someone else in need? Could you not make virtue contagious, creating an epidemiology of generosity?

The film ends on a note of tragedy. The child dies. But the story is a tutorial in hope, because the child does succeed in changing lives in ways no one could have foreseen. That is what I felt among the crowd of mourners that day. We had come to honour the memory of one who, without ever saying so, taught people to pay it forward, and he had left behind him a vast legacy of blessings. And yes, he died young and left a tidal wave of grief. But he had also taught us how never to let grief, or suffering, or sadness have the last word. Before he died, he taught us how to live.

*We wept that day. I believe God wept too.*

Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Nobel prize winning writer, once speculated that *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead, is our way of offering comfort to God for the loss of one of His children. Mortality is written into the human condition, but so too is the possibility of immortality, in the good we do that continues, long after we are here, to beget further good. There are lives that defeat death and redeem existence from tragedy. We knew, that day, that we had known one of them.

None of us knows how long we will live. We just know that one day we will die. Life is too short to waste on “the small stuff.” Judaism teaches us the simplest, deepest truth of all. You make a blessing over life by *being* a blessing to those whose lives you touch.
The Soul in Judaism

Lauren Levin

The soul is an enigma. It is so intangible that it can be very difficult to actually relate to it. In contrast, our bodies are a physical reality. We see them. We have books that show us how the anatomy works. However, it is the soul which is our essence, the part of us that we know least about.

The soul refers to the part of God within us. From the first account of the creation of Adam in Bereishit, it is clear that humankind differs from all other creations in the world. When Adam was created, the Torah states that God blew breath into Adam’s nostrils. When we blow into something, we exhale from deep within us. It was this breath that gave Adam a soul within his physical body, as the Torah explains, “And the Lord God formed mankind of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul.”1 Human beings have the breath of God within them.

Soul and body may however appear a somewhat incongruous combination, a blend of physical earth and spiritual divinity. Despite these opposites, body and soul are intrinsically linked and interdependent. A body without a soul is lifeless, like a light without a light bulb, or a computer without software. Similarly, a soul without a body is like looking at a sheet of music, but not having an instrument with which to bring it to life. Our soul longs to fulfil its mission in this world and needs our body to carry this out.

The biblical monarch, King Solomon, presented an extremely powerful image of the soul-body relationship as a burning candle. The flame is like the soul, and the wick of the candle is like the body. The flame always wants to rise higher, connecting with God, just as the soul yearns to return to the spiritual heights from which it descended. The wick is what grounds the flame, keeping it bound to the world. Yet the wick will only allow a flame to rise if there is enough oil. This oil can be seen as our good deeds which enable us to ascend in holiness to God.2

At the moment of death, the body and soul separate. The body has come to its end, but the soul is eternal and returns to where it came from.

We live this in microcosm every day. The Talmud relates that ‘sleep is one sixtieth of death.’3 It is for this reason that upon awakening we thank
God for returning our souls in the *Modeh Ani* prayer which is found at the start of the *siddur*. A new day brings a fresh opportunity to fulfil our soul’s unique purpose in the world.

In our morning prayers, we also state, “My God, the soul that You gave to me is pure…and You will take it away from me in the future.” This reminds us of the temporary nature of the soul’s sojourn in the body. During the second century CE, in *Talmudic* times, a plague took the lives of the great sage Rabbi Meir’s two sons. They passed away on *Shabbat* when their father was at the synagogue. When he returned, their mother, Bruria, said to her husband: “Someone lent me an article and now he has come to reclaim it. Do I have to return it?” Rabbi Meir was surprised by the obvious question, and replied that of course she did need to do so. She took him to their sons’ deathbeds. As he began to weep, she gently reminded him of his earlier answer: “You said we must return the article. God gave and now God has taken. May God’s name be blessed.”

Along with our physicality, God has entrusted us with another precious lifetime gift, our soul. We may live in a material world, but through nurturing the soul we can connect with God and come into contact with a timeless eternity. At a *shiva*, we may be consoled by the thought that the soul of the deceased continues to ascend spiritually as it journeys into the next world.

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2. *Midrash Mishlei* (Proverbs), Chapter 31
NANNAS THE BUTCHER

Sefer Hadorot

The story below is related in Sefer Hadorot, a work describing various Jewish personalities and events, written by Rabbi Yechezkel Halperin (d. 1746). Its message of ‘simple greatness’ is inspiring at a time of bereavement. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Elem, who lived centuries ago in Israel, was known as ‘The Light of Israel’ because he enlightened the whole world with his wisdom and knowledge of Torah.

One night, in a dream, he heard a voice saying: “How fortunate you are, Rabbi Yehoshua, for when you enter the World to Come, you will dwell together with Nannas the butcher, for his reward is equal to yours.”

Rabbi Yehoshua awoke with a start. “How very strange! All my life I have studied Torah and obeyed all its commandments, and I have many students to whom I teach Torah all day long. Yet my reward in the World to Come is the same as that of a butcher, of whom I have never heard.”

Next morning, consumed by curiosity, Rabbi Yehoshua asked some of his students to help him to find Nannas the butcher.

The rabbi and his students travelled for many days, searching towns and villages for Nannas the butcher, but nobody had heard of him.

Finally they reached a small town where the people knew Nannas. Rabbi Yehoshua lost no time in hurrying to find him. He may not have heard of the butcher, but the butcher had certainly heard of him, and was overcome with awe at the sight of his distinguished visitor.

“Why has such a wise and learned rabbi come to visit me; I am just a simple, uneducated butcher?” he asked.

“Tell me,” said Rabbi Yehoshua gently, “What do you do when you are not working in the butcher shop?”

“I have an elderly father and mother,” Nannas replied. “They are unable to care for themselves. Every day, before I go to work, I wash them, dress them and feed them. I do everything I can to help them.”

Rabbi Yehoshua took the butcher’s hand and kissed it. “How sweet and pleasant are your deeds!” he exclaimed. “How fortunate I am to be your companion in the World to Come!”
What follows are brief and necessarily inadequate thoughts on a very difficult topic. I would therefore at the outset ask for forgiveness from any reader to whom these reflections cause any further pain, and express the hope that instead they provide guidance for a deeper encounter with the rich resources of our heritage on this painful issue.

There are several kinds of approach to suffering in Jewish tradition. Suffering is too deep and complex a phenomenon, and Judaism too rich and insightful a faith, for any single or simple prescription to be satisfactory.

Of all the books of Tanach, it is Sefer Iyov, the Book of Job, which is most directly relevant to the theme of suffering. Job, a righteous man, tragically loses his family and wealth. In response to Job’s suffering, his friends take a view which has strong intuitive religious appeal and which apparently provides a clear answer to the question of why suffering occurs. They argue that suffering is always Divine punishment for sin.

Yet as Lord Sacks has noted, the biblical text makes clear that God prefers the questions of Job to the answers of his friends. At the end of Sefer Iyov (42:7), God tells Job’s friends that they “did not speak to Me correctly as did My servant Job”. As Professor David Shatz, professor of philosophy at Yeshiva University in New York, puts it: “The Book of Job is cogently read as a protest against the view that suffering implies sin’. Sin can lead to suffering, but the presence of suffering does not entail that there has been sin.

While there are classical rabbinic sources that nevertheless link all suffering to sin, the Talmudic sages propose many other possible explanations for suffering that resist such linkage. They also sometimes suggest that there simply is no such explanation that we can comprehend.

One of the best-known rabbinic suggestions is the concept of “yissurin shel ahavah”, the “sufferings of love”, which are visited on righteous people in order to allow them greater reward in the world to come. Nonetheless, the rabbis’ conclusion was that the absence of suffering is better.
In one of several similar and moving episodes in this vein, recounted in the Talmud (Berachot 5b), Rabbi Yochanan goes to visit the sick Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba. Rabbi Yochanan asks: “Are your sufferings precious to you?” Rabbi Chiyya replies: “lo hein velo secharan” – “neither they nor their reward”. Rabbi Yochanan asks Rabbi Chiyya to give him his hand, whereupon “he took his hand and healed him”.

Thus far, the implicit question on which we have focused is: “Why does suffering occur?” The position of one of the 20th century’s greatest Jewish thinkers, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, is that this is the wrong question. The right question about suffering is not why but how – how to respond to it.

In his essay “A Halakhic Approach to Suffering”, Rabbi Soloveitchik sets out the three basic propositions fundamental to his perspective. First, suffering and evil are real, and they are bad. Judaism does not pretend otherwise. Rabbi Soloveitchik makes the powerful point that if the halachah did not consider bereavement as negative, it would not mandate mourning practices. It clearly does recognise it as negative and deeply painful, despite the belief that the deceased move on to existence in a better world.

Second, we must never make peace with evil and suffering, but rather defy and oppose them with everything we have. That is why Jewish tradition is so enthusiastic about medicine, with its power to cure and to diminish suffering, as well as about scientific advances which enable us to control our environment.

The third proposition is the faith that ultimately evil and suffering will be defeated. We may lose battles, but we will win the war. As we say, quoting Isaiah 25:8, at every shiva: “He [God] will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face”.

For further reading

Lord Sacks, Explaining Suffering - A Personal View (booklet published by the United Synagogue in 1982).

For contemporary Jews, the idea of some sort of imminent messianic apocalypse fails to resonate. We expect Judaism to be relevant to our lives, offering guidance and practical advice in handling our everyday challenges.

Yet according to Maimonides (Rambam) in his Thirteen Principles of Faith, belief in the coming of the Messiah takes its place as one of the central tenets alongside belief in God and the veracity of the transmission of the Torah.

This is indeed a puzzle, for if one day the Messiah arrives, bringing world peace and leading us back to the Promised Land, doubtless we will offer our thanks and praise to the Almighty. Why though must we, in the words of Maimonides, ‘yearn and long for that day’? What would be missing from our Jewish observance if we were to take one day at a time and seek to live in the moment?

Simply put, four thousand years of Jewish history would be lost, were we to close our eyes to God’s Messianic promise.

Even those with the most rudimentary knowledge of Jewish history will be aware of many of the ups and downs that we endured throughout the millennia. Most recently we suffered the devastation of the Holocaust, and decades on we are still conscious of its impact. Living in the wake of the Holocaust, and reflecting on the broader scope of Jewish history, we may find ourselves wondering where it is all leading.

The Messianic vision asserts our belief that Jewish history leads ultimately to the fulfilment of God's promise to Avraham that we will one day establish in the Land of Israel an enduring sovereignty, an eternal Temple and a lasting peace.

The Messiah is a person, explains Maimonides, an inspirational leader with wisdom, integrity and an ability to unite the Jewish People. Although we certainly need leadership, the Messianic vision is not so much about
one person, but about the people as a whole; the Messiah is simply the person who God chooses to lead us to that final destination.

Twice we built our Temple in Jerusalem as we established autonomous rule over the Land of Israel and twice in history was our Temple destroyed as we were driven out of our Land into exile. Yet, we must never stop dreaming, never stop believing. For two thousand years we dreamed of returning to the Land of Israel until that dream came true. We dreamed of standing at the Western Wall, dreamed of living as Jews in our Homeland, dreamed of raising our children in the historic towns and cities walked by our forefathers. We dreamed, believed, prayed and our eyes witnessed miracles.

Jewish history is like a great epic, with each chapter more fantastic than the one before. The storyline is a closely guarded secret, but the one thing we do know is that God – The Author – has promised us a happy ending. For all the joys of our return to the Homeland, though, we are not yet living ‘happily ever after’, and there are surely more chapters and more plot twists still to come.

Countless references to the Messianic era in the daily liturgy and in the prayers recited at a time of bereavement, serve to remind us that there is a much bigger picture. The shiva is a time to remember that for the departed relative or friend the light of the next world is the happy ending to the suffering of this world. Each life is a chapter in a book, and though that chapter has ended, the legacy remains and the story continues. It is the time to remember that this moment of darkness is a small part of a story that will one day come good.

To believe in the Messiah is to believe in a Jewish destiny, a happy ending for the Jewish People promised to us by a loving God and delivered through His timeless Providence.

To believe in the Messiah is to know that tears of sorrow will someday be turned into tears of joy.
Tragically, the Palestinian intifadas and the suicide bomber attacks have taken the lives of too many people from Efrat – placing me (as the rabbi) in the very difficult and even impossible position of informing close relatives – at times aged parents, as well as young children – of the murder of their loved ones. The following incident – which occurred about a decade before my aliya – immeasurably helped me to come to grips with the enormous sacrifices our community is forced to make.

Toward the end of the Yom Kippur War, I received a call from the Israel Bonds Office, asking that I guide a group of leading businessmen – some of whom had not previously donated to Israel – on a special tour of the country. I could plan out every detail of the itinerary for the five days of the tour as long as I understood that my goal was to try to get forty million dollars out of these forty individuals by the conclusion of the “mission.”

I immediately agreed, especially because I felt very guilty about still living in America at the time, and yearned for an opportunity to do what I could for the struggling Jewish state. Among the participants were a few people whom I knew from before, most notably, Jerome Stern, then vice president of Lincoln Square Synagogue, a very beloved friend to this day and a devoted friend of Israel; Seymour Abrams, head of a bank in Chicago, who had become a devoted friend and a generous supporter; and Larry Phillips, then CEO of Van Heusen Shirts.

I travelled on the plane with a donated Sefer Torah earmarked for a newly established community, and the fact that the wooden “atzei chayyim” (roller handles) kept moving dangerously close to the eyes of my seatmate (Harvey Kruger, soon to be President of the American Friends of the Hebrew University) got us off to a rather inauspicious start. We arrived at Ben Gurion airport just two days before the final cease-fire. We visited the Golan and we even brought back some war maps, which I still have. Obviously, we went to the hospital to visit those wounded in battle. It was a very full and emotionally wrenching trip.
Whilst on the plane to Israel, I had been shocked to see a particular notice of mourning in the Jerusalem Post. When I had first begun my career as the rabbi of Lincoln Square Synagogue, one of the earliest rabbinical functions I attended was a farewell brunch for Rav and Rebbetzin Schwartz, for their impending aliya. Rav Schwartz was a European rabbi living on the West Side, not really a practicing rabbi, but very well known and a Talmud scholar of note. He had lost his entire first family, wife and children, in the Holocaust, remarried in America and now had two sons, a teenager and a pre-bar mitzvah.

In 1964, he and his family decided to move to Israel, and because he was so close to all of the rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of the West Side gave the Rav and Rebbetzin a farewell reception. I was a newcomer and I really barely knew them, but nevertheless I attended the brunch.

Later we were all shocked and saddened to hear that their eldest son had been killed in the Six Day War. And now, on the plane, on the way to Israel toward the end of the Yom Kippur War, I saw that their second son, their only remaining son, had been killed in action as well. I knew that I had to pay a condolence call. The notice had the day of the funeral as well, and I calculated that the day that we arrived in Israel would be the last full day of shiva (seven days of mourning).

I got everyone settled into their rooms in the King David Hotel. I then excused myself from the group and said that I would have to leave for a short time while they got organised and rested. The Schwartzes lived at 8 Shimoni Street in a small apartment, and there must have been close to a hundred people who had come to try to console. The Rav and Rebbetzin, who looked much, much older than I remembered them, were sitting on cushions on the floor. Everyone else was standing. The room was heavy with the press of the people and with an ominous and shrieking silence, a silence that seemed to scream out to the very heavens.

Jewish law dictates that when you pay a condolence call, the visitor is not supposed to speak first; the mourner is. The visitor must listen to what the mourner has to say and respond to whatever that happens to be. And if the mourners choose not to speak, then no one speaks. The Rav and his wife were sitting and not speaking, so no one was speaking. I stood in the back of the room for about twenty minutes. I didn't even know if Rav Schwartz remembered me at all.
Since I felt a responsibility for the group waiting for me back at the hotel, I began to leave, and, as I did so, I walked past Rav and Rebbetzin Schwartz, saying what one always says when one leaves a house of mourning: “HaMakom yenachem etchem betoch she’ar avelei Tziyon vee’rushalayim. May the Almighty comfort you among the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Rav Schwartz looked up at me. “Rav Riskin, yes?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Rav Riskin,” he said, “why is the subject of the prayer that you express to a mourner, ‘HaMakom?’ ‘HaMakom’ means place. Yes, in this context it’s a synonym for God, because the whole world is God’s place. But wouldn’t it have made more sense for consolers to say ‘HaShem yenachem etchem,’ ‘May the God of compassion comfort you,’ or ‘May Elokim, the God of creation comfort you.’ Why use ‘HaMakom?’ the Place?

“I’ll tell you why,” he continued, “I understand it now for the first time. When my family was destroyed in the Holocaust, there was no comforting me; it was so senseless, so absurd. But now that I have lost my only remaining sons and have no chance for other children, I am sad, sad beyond even the ability to speak, but I am comforted nevertheless. At least this time my sons died so that the Jewish people could live. They died in defence of Israel. They died in defence of Yerushalayim. They died in defence of the Jewish future. ‘HaMakom,’ the place: Jerusalem, Israel, the Jewish State. HaMakom menachem oti, the place comforts me among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

I had entered the room in order to give comfort. I left the room having received it. And so very often, as a rabbi living and functioning in Israel, when close friends, beloved congregants, and students have been murdered in a war or a terrorist attack, I’ve repeated this magnificent interpretation and truth taught by Rav Schwartz. ‘HaMakom menachem otanu’: in our fateful times, the place does comfort us; Israel and Jerusalem, for whose sake our loved ones gave their lives, comfort us.
Life After Death

Rabbi Dr Harvey Belovski

At certain moments we all ponder what will happen to us after we die. These thoughts may be triggered by a powerful personal experience, an illness, visiting a shiva, or just a reflective or melancholic moment. As we get older, we are likely to dwell on the subject more, but when the life of a loved one nears its end, and in the immediate aftermath of bereavement, questions such as ‘What happens next?’; ‘Where is she now?’; ‘Does he know what’s going on here?’ can become all-absorbing.

Although in the Torah, direct references to the afterlife are scarce, the later biblical prophets do discuss it. Subsequent literature such as the Talmud abounds with references to olam haba, literally, ‘world to come’, a ‘place’ or condition experienced after life here has ended.

While the Talmud describes an apparent physical experience after death, e.g. ‘the righteous will sit with crowns on their heads’, Rambam (Maimonides) insists that these statements must always be read allegorically, since the after-death state is actually exclusively spiritual. Surprisingly, most Talmudic references to olam haba, do not consider what happens there, but address whether people qualify for it and under which conditions. According to the Mishnah and another statement of Rambam, the quality of one's afterlife is determined not only by one's behaviour in this world, but also by one's beliefs. Encouragingly, the Talmud points out that although most people take a lifetime to secure their afterlife, some are able to acquire it in a moment of spiritual transformation, for the power of one significant religious act can earn part of the eternal reward of olam haba.

From these ideas and others, a unique Jewish picture emerges of what happens to us as Jews after we die. We do not accept that we completely cease to exist after death, nor believe in a place where the unrighteous people suffer forever. Instead, Jewish sources encourage us to think of olam haba as a function of our actions and convictions in this world. Put another way, when we leave this world, we experience the result of our successes and failures here. To the extent to which we have lived good, Jewish decent lives, characterised by integrity, altruism and mitzvah-observance, our olam haba will mirror this.
I once heard a fascinating metaphor for this approach to *olam haba*: our world is akin to building a radio that will be switched on in the afterlife. If we utilise our brief years on earth to assemble the parts of the radio correctly, when we die, we will enjoy uplifting radio music forever; but if we use our time here less productively, our music will be disturbed by irritating interference on the radio; worse still, there may be no sound at all.

In addition to the possibility of earning *olam haba* with one act, we may be further comforted by the rabbinic maxim that every Jew, with virtually no exceptions, has ‘a share in *olam haba’*. So we all make it there one way or another, since despite shortcomings we may have, we all perform good deeds that qualify us for some kind of spiritual future or we cannot have lived as Jews.

While *olam haba* is not a physical place but an individual experience, it is consoling to remember that the *Torah* refers to death as being ‘gathered to one’s people’ - allowing us to reconnect with loved ones who entered the soul-world before us. Apparently, that attachment to our family is not limited to the spiritual world, since the *Talmud* teaches that those who have passed on somehow remain aware of what is happening in the world they have left behind.

The source for the Hebrew acronym inscribed on every headstone – ת.נ.צ.ב.ה. – is a blessing offered by Abigail to her future husband and king-in-waiting David. It means - ‘may his / her soul be bound up in the bond of [eternal] life’ and expresses the comforting certainty that we live on beyond death in a spiritual guise.

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2. Commentary to *Mishnah*, preface to Chapter 10 of *Sanhedrin* - 'Perek Chelek'.
6. Ibid.
7. First occurrence at *Bereishit* 25:8.
9. *Shemuel* (Samuel) 1 (25:29)
Resurrection of the Dead

Rabbi Dov Kaplan

The belief that God will bring back the dead to life (Techiyat Hamaytim) is a universally accepted component of traditional Jewish faith. Even, Rambam (Maimonides) who approaches Jewish tradition in a rationalistic way included the resurrection in his 13 Principles of Faith. It is understood by Rambam to mean that the body and soul of individuals will be reunited once again after having been separated at the moment of death. The person will then enjoy a second and long life in a redeemed world, although Rambam notes that we do not know exactly how this will come about.

We serve God who is the Creator of all life. He created us at birth and He will mercifully grant us a second life. To explain this idea, the Talmudic rabbis utilised an analogy of a fruit-bearing tree. Just like a tree, humans grow, mature, and bear fruit. However, with the winter cold and darkness, the tree bares its branches and seems all but dead. Subsequently, as prescribed by nature, when the season changes the rains fall and the sun shines again. Wondrously, the tree wakes up and comes alive to flower and bear fruit anew. While both biblical and rabbinic sources do not offer a unanimous view on how resurrection will take place, they do all agree that it will take place. See for example, Ezekiel 37:12, the prayer of Hannah in Samuel 1, 2:6 as well as Daniel 12:2 and 13.

We express this belief in the blessing which is recited during the funeral procession: “You are blessed, God, who took life justly… but are destined to justly return the soul and revive the dead”. This illustrates its centrality to Jewish faith. At a time when we accompany a person on their last physical journey to their resting place, we nonetheless proclaim our faith in resurrection of the dead.

Our statement of this belief is not confined though to times of bereavement. It also appears in a much more familiar prayer, the daily Amidah. It is the central theme of the second blessing of the Amidah, a prayer which is recited at least three times a day, appearing at least five times in that blessing.
A Jew who prays daily will therefore mention resurrection of the dead at least 15 times each day. Given that the siddur is also a handbook of Jewish theology and philosophy, the rabbis who compiled and developed the Amidah prayer evidently wanted the concept of resurrection to be on our minds. By doing this, they also wished to stress its centrality to Judaism in the face of those who denied it. We do not hide this belief. We broadcast it loud and clear.

This second blessing in the Amidah is one of three that specifically praise God. The title of this blessing is gevurot, meaning mighty or miraculous deeds. Resurrection of the dead is the primary example of God’s might and miracle making mentioned in the blessing. By giving this idea such prominence in our prayers, the Talmudic rabbis wanted to keep it at the forefront of Jewish consciousness.

The belief can also be found elsewhere in the siddur. These references include the blessings preceding the morning service (i.e. the blessing of “Elohai Neshamah”– page 16 in the Singers Prayer Book, green edition - which ends with us blessing God for restoring the souls of the dead) and in the concluding words of the Yigdal song, said in the mornings and during Friday night prayers – pages 12 and 308 respectively in the Singers Prayer Book, green edition. Our belief in resurrection of the dead is one of the reasons that Judaism forbids cremation.

Hopefully, this belief gives comfort to those mourning. It means that a relative or friend, who perhaps only a short time ago was a breathing, thinking, and loving person, not only survives through their soul but will also experience some form of resurrection to live again.
JEWISH THOUGHTS ON BEREAVEMENT

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

It’s not easy

Why is it customary for a hard-boiled egg to be eaten at the meal served to mourners when they return from a funeral (the seudat havra’ah)?

Some explain that nearly all other foods, when boiled, become softer. Eggs, however, become harder. The egg conveys this lesson: When the heat is on in life and we are confronted by difficulties and challenges, we need to summon our inner resources of strength to fortify ourselves, hardening our resolve so that we will prevail.

Jewish tradition acknowledges that it is very difficult to endure bereavement. We should never underestimate both the short and long term impacts that the passing of a loved one has. We need to strengthen ourselves to face a new, sad reality.

Our loved ones live on

The Torah’s first detailed description of bereavement is a source of timeless inspiration. After the passing of his wife, Sarah, we are told that Abraham “came to eulogise Sarah and to cry for her.” (Bereishit 23:2)

Intriguingly, in the Torah, there is a small letter kaf in the Hebrew word לולבכה, velivkotah – and to cry for her. This small kaf tells us that, upon her passing, Abraham mourned for Sarah deeply, but not excessively. He was reassured by his knowledge that his wife had gone to the spiritual pastures of the world to come. Although she had passed away physically, her soul and accomplishments lived on.

On a Yahrzeit, there is a custom which is gaining in popularity to drink a lechaim following the morning service in synagogue. While this might seem counter-intuitive on a day that recalls a loss, it actually conveys an uplifting message: in the midst of our sadness, we recognise that the soul of the deceased is being blessed in Heaven. A Yahrzeit is therefore also the anniversary of the day on which the soul returned home to eternal...
Spiritual life, an occasion which calls for a *lechaim*. We can rest assured that our loved one is at peace.

**Expressing our grief**

As noted above, the *Torah* tells us that Abraham “came to eulogise Sarah and to cry for her”; in that specific order. His words of tribute prompted him to weep and were intended for that purpose. Abraham recognised that grieving openly is a healthy and necessary process that makes it easier to cope with a sad reality. Jewish tradition appreciates the long term adverse effects of bottled-up emotion and encourages us to express our feelings.

**Their legacy on earth**

A further reason why Abraham was comforted was his awareness of Sarah’s impact on others. Her legacy would live on for all time. Her noble values and virtues would endure through her descendants as well as through many others whose hearts she had touched and whose minds she had moulded.

The rabbis of the *Talmud* described this idea movingly, stating that the true tombstones of the righteous are their deeds (*Jerusalem Talmud*, *Shekalim* 11a). Engraved lettering on a stone remains even after the engraver leaves. So, too, when a person makes a deep impact on others and passes away, the mark remains and will be internalised and transmitted further throughout all time.

Sir Christopher Wren’s epitaph reads *Si monumentum requiris circumspice* - if you seek his monument, look around you. Similarly, to find the true monuments to our loved ones, we need just look around and see the people they have positively influenced and inspired. This is their greatest legacy and it should bring us genuine comfort.

**Comforting ourselves**

The original *Torah* usage of the term *nechamah* (comfort) indicates a change of direction (see *Bereishit* 6:6). The lesson that emerges for us is that we can best bring comfort to ourselves by being active and taking on fresh initiatives. This could be a project in memory of the deceased or it could be a new activity or endeavour through which one is engaged constructively and productively. Accepting changed circumstances and taking on a change of direction in one’s daily pursuits will help to bring some comfort under difficult circumstances.
The bereaved can give a lot to others

The longest single-word palindrome in Hebrew is ولכשתשכלו – velechishtashchlu – meaning, and when you become bereaved.

The forwards and backwards movement in this word indicates that while receiving kindness from others, those who are bereaved also have an opportunity to inspire others through the manner in which they handle their painful loss. Witnessing the mourning of a united family, filled with faith and powered by positive recollections and reflections can inspire visitors to say, “We came to give strength and we emerged strengthened.”

I hope these thoughts bring comfort and consolation.
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FOR
THE
SHIVA
HOUSE
In times of need, our communities can offer great support and comfort to those who have been bereaved. There are many words for community in Hebrew. The words kehillah and chevrah are two of the most commonly used.

Kehillah implies the physical gathering together of different people to form a congregation. It is one of the words in the United Synagogue’s Hebrew name, Kehilah Kedoshah Kenesset Yisrael, denoting how the US provides communal services from cradle to grave. The word chevrah comes from the Hebrew lechaber which means to join or connect; a chaver in Hebrew is a friend. This is one reason why the Hebrew term for a burial society is Chevrah Kadisha, a holy fellowship, describing the dignified acts of final kindness to the deceased that take place around the time of burial. In essence kehillah describes what a community is, whereas chevrah describes what a community does.

Our rabbis and communities are always there to offer comfort and support, during shiva and beyond. Those who are grieving can benefit greatly from the warmth and companionship of other congregants during synagogue services, especially from those who have also suffered a loss.

Mourning does not have to take place alone. Every community provides both the facilities of a kehillah and the warmth of a chevrah, especially for those in mourning, be it through prayers or over a coffee after daily weekday services. When members of a community help to carry the burdens of others, the mere gathering of people under one roof transforms a kehillah into a chevrah.
One of the most touching accounts in Bereishit (Genesis) describes the response of Ya’akov (Jacob) to the passing of his beloved wife Rachel, who dies unexpectedly, on the way to Hebron (Bereishit 35:20). Rather than take Rachel to the family burial plot in the Cave of Machpela in Hebron, Ya’akov buries Rachel at the location of her passing. When doing so, he consecrates the Bible’s first recorded tombstone, a matzeivah, a Hebrew word that we still use for a tombstone today. Matzeivah indicates something which is fixed in the ground, denoting permanence.

Matzeivah in this context refers to the physical aspect of the tombstone as a place where we provide an honourable burial for the deceased and indicate the location of a burial ground to passers-by.

Another Hebrew word for a tombstone is tziyun, meaning a marker. This word shares the same verbal root as the word tziyon, Zion, a term which marks the spiritual potential of the Land of Israel. Used for a tombstone, tziyun indicates a place where we mark the spiritual accomplishments of the deceased and return to in order to garner inspiration from the deceased’s life. A tombstone is a physical marker which also sets us a spiritual marker.

These themes are apparent in the prayers that we recite at the dedication of a tombstone.

In one of its stories about Rachel, the Tanach focuses on the meanings of both matzeivah and tziyun as well as explaining a ‘benefit’ of Rachel’s unusual burial place. Sefer Yirmiyahu (the Book of Jeremiah 31:14 -16) records thoughts about Jewish exiles trudging from Jerusalem into Babylonian captivity after Nebuchadnezzar’s raid on the city in 598 BCE, some years before its destruction. They pass the tomb of Rachel. Yirmiyahu describes how the ‘presence’ of ‘mother’ Rachel soothes the captives and the permanence of her tomb helps to reassure them that they or their descendants will return to Israel. They gather both spiritual (tziyun) and physical (matzeivah) comfort from Rachel’s tomb.

We should all receive the physical and spiritual comfort of both matzeivah and tziyun in the days, months and years after the setting of a tombstone.
Ya’akov ‘Did Not Die’…

Judy Ginsbury

The *Talmud* tells us that our patriarch Ya’akov (Jacob) ‘did not die’ (*Taanit* 5b). What can this mean, as aside from the obvious problem that Ya’akov is no longer alive, the *Torah* (*Bereishit* 49:33) itself refers to Ya’akov’s passing?

The *Shiltei Gibborim*, a 16th century Italian commentary to the *Talmud*, explains that ‘the righteous are alive in death’ ... ‘for their name, memory and deeds remain forever’ (*Avodah Zarah* 20a). We can learn from this that there are a number of powerful things we can do to ensure that the departed ‘live on.’ Here are five suggestions from the treasure trove of Jewish teaching:

1. Talking about and recalling their ‘name, memory and deeds’;
2. Emulating the deeds and actively practising the positive traits of the deceased, especially by performing *mitzvot*. In particular, giving charity as an act of kindness in their memory;
3. Saying *Kaddish* for the spiritual benefit of the deceased;
4. Naming new generations after them;
5. Studying *Torah* in their merit (your rabbi or rebbetzen can provide suggested material or see the “Learning for a *Shiva* House” section of this book which contains such material).

My grandfather Nat Lyons, to whose blessed memory I have dedicated this article, passed away 41 years ago. His memory is very much alive to this day both because he was an exceptional man and because we have done our best to remember him in these ways.
The Talmud (Berachot 6b) teaches “the main ‘reward’ of a Shiva house is silence.” Where are the roots of this statement?

The Torah tells us (Devarim 14:1-2) ... ‘You are children to the Lord your God – you shall not cut yourselves... For you are a holy people to the Lord your God and the Lord has chosen you for Himself to be a treasured people ...’. The medieval commentators Ramban and Seforno explain that this injunction against practising such extreme self-mutilation mourning rites, which were characteristic of heathens, is forbidden for Jews due to our belief in God. Somebody who believes that death is an absolute end and that there is nothing beyond the physical will be utterly confounded by death. However, somebody who truly believes in God as the ultimate, infinite Creator and Supreme Being never has reason to be completely and utterly ‘lost’, even at a time of numbing and intensely painful grief. Jewish law and tradition do not forbid mourning, tears and deep sadness at a time of intensely painful loss. Instead, they actually encourage them - but within a context of recognition that we are not, God forbid, condemned by the death of a loved one to experience either desolation without hope or grief without relief.

Many ask why the greeting of comfort traditionally extended to mourners invokes divine healing by using the name ‘HaMakom’ for God? Several profound answers have been suggested for this. One is that the word HaMakom is connected to the Hebrew word ‘lekayem’, to sustain. We invoke that name of God which indicates His capacity to sustain us even through the most devastating and apparently disastrous situations.

We allude to this idea every morning in the Baruch She’amar prayer where we praise God for being ‘gozer um’kayem’; literally ‘decreeing and fulfilling’. A homiletic interpretation of this phrase suggests that God both ‘decrees’ and at the self same time ‘sustains’ – prepares and enacts the healing and comforting balm which will allow us to yet live on through the pain, hurt and dislocation that a ‘harsh’ decree inevitably engenders.
I once visited a friend, someone who is highly-intelligent, knowledgeable and full of faith and belief, who had suffered the immense trauma of losing a precious child to a cot-death. The friend said something to me which was extremely moving. ‘I have no complaints, nor questions of God. I believe in Him and accept that which has to be. I am just struggling with the deep sadness and pain which my wife, family and I feel at the loss of our precious baby and for that, perhaps, there is no other answer than silence’.

Such nobility of silence in the face of loss is a silence in which one awaits and even anticipates the balm of Divine healing and sustenance.

How can we access such faith and belief; such certain knowledge of eternal spiritual life as to sustain us at a time of probably the deepest vulnerability and insecurity to which a human being can be exposed?

King David in the very last verse of Psalm 48, recited every Monday morning at the conclusion of Shacharit, tells us ... ‘for this is our God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us for evermore.’ The Hebrew word for ‘evermore’ in this verse is ‘almut’ which can also be read as ‘al mavett’ – literally ‘over death’; meaning He will guide us (even) through death.

The seeds of ultimate comfort are sown in the ‘positive’ silence of the house of mourning which allows the mourner to access depths of spiritual truth which might not otherwise be accessible to him or her. An awareness, for example, that the soul, which is the essence of a human being, can only be in one place at any one time when it is contained within the human body, is actually ‘released’ by death and is now able to be in many places, with each of his/her loved ones at every moment, just like God Himself!

In fact, through the prism of true silent faith and belief, we can come to appreciate that in death we actually encounter a capacity to embrace eternity. That with tenacity and commitment, we can overcome the apparent hopelessness of bereavement with the hope and certainty of knowledge that all is not lost. As ‘children of God’ we are no more protected from the sadness and tension of this temporal world than we can protect our own precious offspring from such angst. However, what should be apparent is that just as our children are comforted by the certainty of our unconditional and unending love for them, so too should grieving mourners be comforted by sustaining love – and even more – from God, the One who extends ultimate love and healing to each and every one of His ‘children’.
LEARNING MISHNAYOT FOR THE SHIVA HOUSE

Learning Mishnayot for the Shiva House
All Jews are teachers, either formally or simply through the Judaism they live and practise, since by doing so they perpetuate the remarkable story of the Jewish people.

At a shiva, as we struggle to adjust to the loss of a relative or friend, Jewish tradition urges us to seek ways of finding inspiration and meaning from the journey of life. One way of doing this is to study selections from the Mishnah which is one of the earliest formulations of Jewish law and ethics.

The Hebrew letters that form Mishnah also form the word neshamah, meaning the soul. Such study, in memory of a deceased person provides spiritual merit for their soul as well as solace to those who are mourning.

For the following pages, we have chosen seven Mishnayot from Pirkei Avot, found in the siddur after Shabbat afternoon prayers, which we feel are especially appropriate for a shiva. A short, informative commentary accompanies each Mishnah.

You can use these Mishnayot and commentaries either for private reflection, or for public teaching and discussion which may be followed by Kaddish Derabanan (see page 212) in the presence of a minyan.

You will find further resources at www.theus.org.uk/shiva, or by consulting your rabbi or rebbetzen who are ready to help.
In the period of the Second Temple (4th Century BCE), the supreme Jewish authority of the day was the Great Assembly which was made up of 120 rabbis and prophets. Responsible amongst other things for the formulation of our prayers and our berachot (blessings), its influence on Jewish life persists to this day.

In this mishnah one of its last members, Shimon HaTzaddik, provides a vital lesson in what a person needs to live a fulfilled life. He focuses on three things: Torah, divine service and acts of lovingkindness. These correspond with the three relationships that a person can have in this world: a relationship with self, with God and with others.

By internalising the lessons of the Torah we refine who we are. With divine service¹, through prayer and the performance of mitzvot, we express and develop our commitment to God. And through acts of lovingkindness we demonstrate that we care for others and not just for ourselves. These values are at the very heart of what it is to be Jewish (and it is no accident that the mission of The United Synagogue is to engage people with Jewish living, learning and caring).

The greatness of Shimon HaTzaddik is attested to by his membership of the Great Assembly. Moreover he was a Cohen Gadol – a high priest, whose encounter with Alexander the Great spared the destruction of Jerusalem². Speaking in the closing days of prophecy, this great Jewish leader teaches us a timeless lesson that is of particular importance in a...
shiva house. At a time of loss a person’s thoughts may turn inward, yet at the same time we speak to God and are consoled by the presence of others who care.

1. Divine Service - Avodah: In the times of the Second Temple, divine service - avodah would describe the sacrifices offered in the Temple. In a world without a Temple, we are taught that prayer stands in their place. (Deuteronomy 11:13, Talmud Bavli: Taanit 2a, Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 1:1).

2. The Talmud (Yoma 69a) records that upon encountering Shimon HaTzaddik dressed in the white linen garments associated with the High Priest’s Yom Kippur service, Alexander withdrew his advancing forces, explaining that before his every battle, he would dream of the image of a man dressed all in white, whom he now recognised as Shimon HaTzaddik.
Hillel and Shammai, who lived around the turn of the first century CE, were two of Judaism’s greatest scholars.

Their students disputed many questions of Jewish law. These disputes could easily have become personal rather than academic. Perhaps this Mishnah was Hillel’s lesson to his students to avoid or settle disputes, to love and pursue peace without letting things get personal. Hillel declares that we should follow the example of Aaron, Moses’ brother, who was renowned for his successful dispute resolution techniques.

In the everyday stresses of our busy lives, we can get caught up in disputes, especially with those closest to us. We should instead aspire to Hillel’s teachings.

At a shiva, we try to focus on the good that the deceased accomplished, seeking inspiration from this. A shiva is a place to pursue peace.
Three Quiet Steps to Greatness:
Pirkei Avot 1:15

Rabbi Jason Kleiman

Shammai used to say: Make your Torah study a fixed habit. Say little and do much; and greet everyone cheerfully.

This Mishnah was formulated by Shammai the Elder, who lived in Israel towards the end of the first century BCE. This was a time of upheaval in Jewish life, with internal and external challenges, requiring a positive, practical approach, as demonstrated by the three sections of this Mishnah.

First, never be overwhelmed by the seemingly vast enterprise of studying Torah and achieving ‘Jewish literacy’. Instead, set aside times for study and you might be surprised by what you achieve, especially if you are reconnecting with Judaism due to bereavement. Your local US or Hebrew Congregation rabbi and synagogue can help with suggestions, as can the US Living & Learning department at landl@theus.org.uk.

Secondly, we are all familiar with clichés like, “he’s all talk.” Who would like to be described that way? Instead, let achievements speak louder than words. Words also have real power, for good or for bad, to help or to hurt. Always make sure to be a person of your word. Quietly and without fanfare, surprise yourself and others by over-achieving.

Finally, never forget the impact of a smile and a pleasant demeanour, especially when somebody else is in need.

At the difficult time of bereavement, when we are likely to think of our own legacy, I hope you can use Shammai’s teachings for positive and practical help in times ahead.
Rabbi Yose said: Let the property of your fellow be as precious to you as your own. Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it does not come to you as an inheritance. And let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven.

Rabbi Yose was one of the five pre-eminent students of the famed Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, based in the Israeli town of Yavneh, who led the revival of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Rabbi Yose had a reputation for great piety and kindness. Perhaps the uncertainty of those times, after a form of national ‘bereavement’ due to the destruction, prompted his emphasis on looking after other people’s property as well as one’s own, as a way of maintaining an ordered society with respect for ourselves and others.

Rabbi Yose tells us that the Torah does not come to us as an inheritance. He uses the word yerushah meaning a static legacy. This warns us that if we do not live our Judaism and make it a morashah, a living heritage, it will be lost. At a time of bereavement, we must aspire to create a morashah from the legacy of the deceased, since inherited values which are not practised will not endure.
Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the task is great, the labourers are lazy, the reward is much, and the Master insistent.

Rabbi Tarfon lived and taught in the difficult period following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Renowned for his wisdom and generosity, he was known as “the father of Israel.”

In this pithy teaching, he uses the relationship between worker and employer as a metaphor to describe our time on earth.

Life is short and there is much to be done, yet we are often too busy experiencing life to have time to think about who we really are and our connection to God. Nevertheless, the Master (God) is insistent that we act to make such a connection. The rewards He offers are immense, but He also demands that we make something of ourselves.

At a time of bereavement, we may also face our own mortality. This can be challenging. If we realise the value of every moment and utilise it, the challenge can be less daunting.
THE GREATEST CROWN:  
Pirkei Avot 4:17

Rabbi Adrian Jesner

The Greatest Crown:  
Pirkei Avot 4:17

Rabbi Shimon said: There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship – but the crown of a good name surpasses them all.

Rabbi Shimon lived in Israel during the second century CE. He was among the courageous group who established a religious centre at Usha, in the Galilee, after the failed Jewish revolt against Roman rule led by Shimon Bar Kochba (132-135 CE). He also spent 13 years studying Torah in hiding from the Romans which makes his observations about these three crowns particularly relevant.

Rabbi Shimon tells us that the first crown - that of Torah - can rest on any Jew who studies Torah, acquires its wisdom and puts it into practice. Without observance of and belief in the Torah, a Jew is incomplete. This crown is available to any Jew but some are blessed with greater opportunities to grasp it than others.

The second crown - that of the Priesthood - relates to worship. Our prayers are mainly based on the service that took place at the Beit Hamikdash in Jerusalem. This crown is only available to Cohanim (priests), whose role was much reduced after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash.

The third crown - that of kingship - relates to the awe and majesty due to a sovereign. It is only available to a select few.

Remarkably, as Rabbi Shimon then tells us, none of these three crowns are the best. Rather, he says that the crown of a good name, accessible through good deeds by anybody whatever their background, is superior to the other three. This is quite a statement from such a scholar! What matters most is the positive reputation you build as a Jew, whatever your position or scholarship.
As we gather at a shiva to console mourners and remember the deceased, we should consider these crowns, especially the crowning glory of a good name.
Timeless Truths of Judaism: Pirkei Avot 4:27

Rabbi Boruch Boudilovsky

Pirkei Avot 4:27

Rabbi Meir said: Do not look at the container but at what it contains, for a new flask may contain old wine, and an old flask may not contain anything, even new wine.

Rabbi Meir, who lived in Israel during the second century CE, was part of a cohort of rabbis who helped Judaism recover and flourish despite the Roman destruction of the Temple and the subsequent horrific Hadrianic persecutions.

In those times of despair, Rabbi Meir’s words encouraged people to look beneath the surface of life, and to discover how the ‘old’ vessel of Judaism may contain relevant and timeless truths.

In our contemporary society, the ‘old’ vessel of Judaism still has so much to offer. Going back to ancient teachings can provide us with new, fresh and much needed guidance to life.
Magnified and sanctified may His great name be, in the world He created by His will. May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of all the House of Israel, swiftly and soon – and say: Amen.

May His great name be blessed for ever and all time.

Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, raised and honoured, uplifted and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He,

For an explanatory essay about Kaddish please see ‘Spotlight on Kaddish’ on page 153.

A transliteration can be found overleaf on page 214.

The Rabbis’ Kaddish
The Kaddish, one of the most important of all prayers, had its origins not in the synagogue but in the house of study. It grew out of a custom, still widely practised, of ending every discourse or sermon with the hope that we may speedily see the coming of the messianic age, when the sovereignty of God will be recognised by all the dwellers on earth. It is written mainly in Aramaic, the language most widely spoken by Jews in the first centuries of the Common Era.
between any blessing, song, praise and consolation uttered in the world – and say: Amen.

To Israel, to the teachers, their disciples and their disciples’ disciples, and to all who engage in the study of Torah, here or elsewhere, may there come to them and you great peace, grace, kindness and compassion, long life, ample sustenance and deliverance from their Father in Heaven – and say: Amen.

May there be great peace from heaven, and good life for us and all Israel – and say: Amen.

Bow, take three steps back, then bow, first left, then right, then centre, while saying:

May He who makes peace in His high places, in His compassion make peace for us and all Israel – and say: Amen.

Wait a few moments and then take three steps forward.
The Rabbis' Kaddish Transliteration

Note: 'ch' is pronounced as in the Scottish 'loch'

In the presence of a minyan the Mourner / Leader says Rabbis' Kaddish:

Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'meh rabba. B'al'ma dee v'ra chiruteh, v'yamleech malchuteh, b'chayeychon, uv-yomeychon, uv-chayey dee chol beyt Yisra-el, ba-agala uvizman kareev, v'imru Amen.

All:

Y'heh sh'meh rabba mevarach l'alam ulal'mei al'ma-ya.

Mourner / Leader:

Yitbarach v'yishtabach v'yitpa-ar v'yitromam v'yitnaseh v'yit-hadah v'yitaleh v'yit-hallal sh'meh dee kud'sha, b'reech hu. L'ela*

(*Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur say: L'ela, L'ela)

min kol birchata v'sheerata tushb'chata v'nechemata, dee amiran b'al'ma, v'imru Amen.

Al Yisra-el, v'el rabbanan, v'al talmeedayhon, v'al kol talmeeday talmeedayhon, v'al kol man dee as'keen b'oryta dee b'atra haden v'dee bechol attar v'attar, yehay lehon ulchon sh'lama rabba, chinna v'chisda v'rahamin v'chayyin areecheen, umzona r'veecha, uforkana min kodam avuhon dee vishmaya, v'imru Amen.

Y'heh sh'lama rabba min sh'maya v'chayim tovim aleynu v'al kol Yisra-el, v'imru Amen.

Bow, take three steps back, then bow, first left, then right, then centre, while saying:

Oseh shalom bimromav, hu b'rachamav ya'aseh shalom, aleynu, v'al kol Yisra-el, v'imru Amen.

Wait a few moments and then take three steps forward.
SUPPORT FROM

The US
LIVING • LEARNING • CARING
The US is here to help and support its members throughout their lives. The US Burial Society, Chesed Department and US Community Cares Groups, as well as our Living & Learning initiatives and, of course, our communities, rabbis and rebbetzens, provide a range of services for people in times of bereavement as well as other times of hardship.

In this section you will find an article by Melvyn Hartog, Head of US Burial and one from Stuart Bloom and Michelle Minsky from US Chesed. If you have access to the internet, take a look at our JOG: Jewish Online Guides at www.theus.org.uk/jog and our “Ask the Rabbi” videos at www.theus.org.uk/atr. They focus on a range of Jewish practices including those related to bereavement such as ‘Sitting Shiva – Mourning at Home’ and ‘How to Say the Mourner’s Kaddish’.

If you want to know more about support from the US please call 020 8343 8989 or email info@theus.org.uk. Further information and details of local US synagogues can be found at www.theus.org.uk.
The following may be of interest to both mourners and visitors to a shiva house.

In case you are unfamiliar with the procedure surrounding bereavement, we thought we would take this opportunity to describe how the US Burial Society looks after its members at some of life’s difficult moments.

Jewish law stipulates that burial should take place as soon as feasible for the spiritual benefit of the deceased, while recognising that this is a necessary (although painful) task for mourners to perform. After bereavement, mourners must start to deal with the sad reality of their loss. The Burial Society provides a professional service, striving to help mourners and their families with sensitivity, compassion and practicality so that the burial process is conducted with as much dignity as possible.

Our role does not end with burial. Our bereavement advice service is available to provide support after the shiva finishes. For further information, do contact us using the contact details provided at the end of this article.

At a time when we are reminded that our own passing is inevitable, it is important for us to consider organising our personal affairs while we have the capacity to do so. For mourners, the stresses of bereavement can be compounded when uncertainties exist about the deceased's intentions. For example, a will that contains wording for the tombstone dispels any doubts that may exist about a person's intentions.

Bereavement is a time for families and friends to come together. They can consider how to keep the name of the deceased alive, perhaps by making a donation, even something inexpensive like a siddur to a local synagogue or to provide an amenity at the cemetery. This can engender a warm feeling of connection, especially if family and friends can see something tangible which has been dedicated in memory of the deceased.
We encourage mourners, as soon as is feasible after the shiva, to arrange a time for the stone setting. The timing of the stone setting is a matter of custom rather than law. In the UK, we normally advise waiting at least six months after the date of passing, due to geological conditions.

If you are unsure about anything, please do not hesitate to ask any of our rabbis or our colleagues. We know this can feel awkward, but never be embarrassed to ask a question. We are all here to help, not to judge.

If you have been bereaved, we wish you a healthy, peaceful and long life.

To contact the US Burial Society about any aspect of our services, please telephone 020 8950 7767 or email office@usburial.org.uk.

The standard United Synagogue membership package for your local US synagogue includes membership of the Burial Society (the Funeral Expenses Scheme). For further details, please contact your local synagogue (a full list of US communities can be found at www.theus.org.uk) or call the US Membership Department on 020 8343 5687 or email membership@theus.org.uk.
US Community Cares: Here for our Members

Michelle Minsky and Stuart Bloom

US Community Cares (USCC) is here to help at times of bereavement. Our volunteers, some of whom are specially trained as bereavement befrienders, often provide significant practical support to mourners, not just at a shiva but also during the weeks and months of difficult adjustment that might follow.

We have over 40 Community Cares support groups in communities throughout The United Synagogue, who provide practical and emotional support in times of need to all US members. This support is given by over 1,000 well-trained volunteers who wish to help the people living in their community. As well as supporting the bereaved, volunteers can assist with shopping, simple DIY, taking people to hospital and GP appointments and will visit someone in their home for a friendly chat and much more besides. If professional support is needed, volunteers will have access to details of how to obtain further help.

If you, or someone you know, might need some practical help or support now or at any time in the future, please contact your local care co-ordinator, either directly or through your synagogue administrator (a list of community contact details can be found at www.theus.org.uk). Alternatively, you can also contact USCC at the United Synagogue’s central office by emailing chesed@theus.org.uk or phoning 020 8343 6238. We will then give you the contact details of your local care co-ordinator.

If you are interested in getting involved as a volunteer in your local community, please use the contact details above. We would be delighted to hear from you, even if you only have limited time to offer.

US Community Cares is an integral part of the Chesed Department of the US that aims to help not only our own community but people in the wider world through our Project Chesed initiatives. We also offer assistance with Pesach costs for needy families and bursaries so that no child whose family is suffering from financial hardship is excluded from Tribe events and programmes. We also oversee Jewish Visiting which includes hospital and prison visiting/chaplaincy.
Glossary
AHARON – The biblical character Aaron, brother of Moses and Miriam.

ALEINU – A concluding prayer for formal prayer services. It is followed by “mourner’s Kaddish”.

AMIDAH – The central prayer of every statutory service. Also known as ‘Shemonah Esreh’.

ANSHEI KENESSET HAGEDOLAH – ‘The men of the great assembly’, a council of 120 Jewish scholars from Israel and Babylon, founded in approximately 520 BCE which functioned for about 300 years as the religious leadership of the Jewish people. Famous members included the biblical figures Mordechai and Ezra.

ASHKENAZI – Referring to practices of Jewish communities which developed in Northern Europe.

AVIGAYIL – The biblical figure Abigail who married King David.

BAMIDBAR – The Book of Numbers.

BEIT HAMIKDASH – The Temple. Two Temples stood in Jerusalem and served as national religious centres for the Jewish people. The first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the second by the Romans in 70 CE.

BERACHAH (pl. ‘berachot’) – Two meanings: 1) a type of prayer praising God and 2) a prayer in which we ask God to bless someone.

BEREISHIT – The Book of Genesis.

BIMAH – A raised platform in the synagogue where the leader stands when conducting services.

BIRKAT COHANIM – The priestly blessing, also recited in some prayers and given as a general blessing at significant times.
CHANUKAH - Festival of ‘Dedication’. Eight-day festival beginning on 25 Kislev, celebrating the rededication of the Temple and the miracle of the oil. Each night, Chanukah candles are kindled.

CHAZAL – The rabbinic sages of the Talmud.

CHESED – Acts of kindness.

CHOL HAMO’ED – Intermediate Days of Pesach and Sukkot. Outside Israel, the four middle days of Pesach and five middle days of Sukkot.

COHEN (pl. Cohanim) – Priests. They worked in both Temples which existed in Jerusalem. Their descendants today are also called Cohanim.

COHEN GADOL – Referring to the High Priest who served in both Temples in Jerusalem.

DAYAN – Literally, a judge. A rabbi who has an advanced level of rabbinic ordination and may sit on a rabbinic court (Beth Din).

DEVARIM – The Book of Deuteronomy.

ELLUL – The month in the Jewish calendar preceding Rosh Hashanah. It is a particular time for self introspection and preparation for the Yamim Noraim.

GEMARAH – See Talmud.

HALACHAH / HALAKHAH – Jewish law.

HALLEL – A collection of psalms said on joyous days in the Jewish calendar, such as Yom Tov and Rosh Chodesh.

HAVDALAH – The ceremony at the conclusion of Shabbat and Yom Tov.

HEICHE KEDUSHAH – A shorter version of the Minchah prayers, normally used when a room is crowded or if Minchah prayers take place close to nightfall. Our practice is that immediately after the half-kaddish prayer, the leader recites the Amidah prayer until the end of Kedushah at which point all others present start the Amidah, having responded with Amen and to Kedushah at the appropriate points up to then.
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KABBALAT SHABBAT – Service to welcome Shabbat.

KADDISH – A prayer sanctifying God’s Name, often associated with mourners. See the article on page 153 by Dayan Binstock in this book for further explanation.

KEDUSHAH – The central part of the repetition of the Amidah. Where possible, stand with your feet together for Kedushah. There are no interruptions during the Kedushah prayers.

KEHILLAH – A community which provides Jewish facilities for its members from cradle to grave. ‘Kehillah’ is one of the words in the Hebrew name for the United Synagogue, ‘Kehilah Kedoshah Kenesset Yisrael’.

L’CHAIM / LECHAIM – Literally, ‘to life’. This is a popular Jewish blessing. Sometimes, it is recited whilst eating refreshments, often on a yahrzeit, to accompany the mitzvot of making berachot over food and sharing food with others, actions which accrue spiritual merit for the soul of the person whose yahrzeit is being marked.

MA’ARIV – The evening service.

MASHIACH – The Messiah who will bring all Jews back to Judaism and the Land of Israel, at a time of peace for the whole world. Jews pray daily for the Messianic era.

MEZUZAH – Biblical passage on a parchment scroll placed in a case and affixed to a doorpost.

MIDRASH – Rabbinic commentaries on the Torah emphasising religious messages that emerge from the Torah rather than just the straightforward meaning of the text. There are many Midrashim (plural), such as the ‘Midrash Tehillim’ on the Book of Psalms.

MINCHAH – The afternoon service.

MINYAN – Quorum. A gathering of at least ten Jewish males who are 13 years or older, required for some sections of prayer services, such as Kaddish.
**MISHNAH** – A foundation Jewish legal text, originating at the Biblical Revelation at Mount Sinai. The structure of the Mishnah was compiled by Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi in the Land of Israel, in approximately 180 BCE.

**MITZVAH** (pl. mitzvot) – Commandment(s) for Jewish living and belief whose source is in the Torah.

**MODEH ANI** – The start of the prayer said upon awakening.

**OLAM HABA** – The ‘world to come’ where the soul travels after a person passes away.

**PESACH** – Passover. An eight-day festival (seven days in Israel) beginning on 15 Nisan. Outside Israel, the first two days and last two days are Yom Tov, whilst the middle four are Chol Hamo’ed. We celebrate how God brought us out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus.

**PIRKEI AVOT** – The ‘Ethics of the Fathers’, a section of the Mishnah. It is commonly studied on Shabbat summer afternoons.

**PURIM** – A festival on 14 Adar (or 14 Adar Sheni in a Jewish leap year) celebrating the miracles by which God saved the Jews of Persia from the destructive plans of Haman, an enemy of the Jews.

**RABBI** – Literally, a master or teacher. Rabbis have a variety of different spiritual roles, most commonly in the UK as spiritual leaders of Jewish communities and synagogues.

**RAMBAM** – Acronym for Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135-1204), a scholar, philosopher and doctor whose writings on Jewish law and philosophy are essential tools for Jewish study.

**REBBETZEN** – Sometimes used to describe the wife of a community rabbi. Also known as ‘rabbanit’ in modern Hebrew.

**ROSH CHODESH** – A ‘mini’ religious festival, when special prayers are recited, which is the transition into a new month in the Jewish calendar.

**ROSH HASHANAH** – New Year. A two day Yom Tov beginning on 1 Tishrei. It is a time for setting spiritual priorities for the year ahead.
SEPHARDI – Referring broadly to practices of Jewish communities which developed in North Africa, Southern Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the Iberian Peninsula.

SEFER TORAH – A Torah scroll, containing the Five Books of Moses as used for prayer services.

SHABBAT/SHABBOS – The Sabbath, which commences shortly before sunset on Friday and concludes shortly after nightfall on Saturday. Jewish communities issue weekly times for the start and conclusion of the Sabbath. Jewish law proscribes public mourning on the Sabbath since such mourning does not fit with the ‘refreshment of the soul, which is in the nature of the Sabbath.

SHACHARIT – Morning prayers.

SHALOSH REGALIM – The Three Pilgrim Festivals (Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, including Shemini Atzeret). They are known together as the Shalosh Regalim, because on these festivals pilgrims from all over ancient Israel and beyond travelled to the Temple in Jerusalem.

SHAVUOT – Pentecost. A festival, celebrating when God gave the Jews the Torah at Mount Sinai.

SHELOSHIM – The first 30 days of mourning, starting from the day of burial.

SHEMA – One of the fundamental Jewish prayers, taken from verses in the Torah.

SHEMINI ATZERET – A two-day festival outside Israel beginning on 22 Tishrei, following on from Sukkot. The second day of Shemini Atzeret is known as Simchat Torah.

SHEMOT – The Book of Exodus.

SHIVA – Shiva literally means ‘seven’ and refers to the initial seven days of mourning (inclusive of the day of burial) observed by a mourner.

SIDDUR – The prayer book.
**SIMCHA** – *Simcha* literally means happiness or joy and is used to refer to a Jewish celebration such as a wedding.

**SIMCHAT TORAH** (Rejoicing of the Torah) – When we celebrate the completion of the *Torah* reading for that year and begin it again.

**SIYUM** – The conclusion of a significant piece of Jewish study, such as a volume of the *Talmud*, sometimes studied for the spiritual benefit of a deceased loved one. A *siyum* often includes a meal to mark this achievement.

**SUCCAH** – A dwelling with a roof made of detached foliage, often green leaves or specially designated bamboo, used during the festival of Succot.

**SUCCOT** – Tabernacles. A seven day festival when Jews dwell in a ‘*succah*’ and use the four species (*arba’ah minim*). Outside Israel, the first two days are *Yom Tov*, the next five are *Chol HaMo’ed*, followed by the festivals of *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah*.

**TACHANUN** – Prayers of supplication which follow the *Amidah* prayer at weekday *Shacharit* and *Minchah* prayers. They are omitted on days of national joy in the Jewish calendar and at a *shiva* house since these are neither times nor places for such prayers.

**TALLIT** – A four-cornered garment used by men during certain prayers with fringes (*tzitziot*) attached. The prayer leader often wears a *Tallit*.

**TALMUD** – Although the Oral *Torah* was originally passed on by word of mouth, it was eventually written down in two stages: the *Mishnah* and the *Gemarah*. These two combined make up the *Talmud* which was completed in approximately the year 500 CE. The *Talmud* has two editions, the Babylonian and the Jerusalem.

**TANACH** (Hebrew Bible) – An acronym made up of the first three letters the three sections of the Hebrew Bible, namely *Torah* (Pentateuch), *Nevi’im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings).

**TEFILLAH** – ‘Prayer’ or ‘Service’.

**TIKUN OLAM** – Ensuring that society functions properly.
TISHA BA'AV – Fast day, 9 Av. Primarily commemorating the destruction of both Temples.

TORAH (‘Law’ or ‘Teaching’) – Often refers to a Sefer Torah, in the form of a scroll, which contains the Pentateuch, or a printed version of the Pentateuch called the ‘Chumash’. Also refers to the Oral (Spoken) Torah which was originally passed on to the Jewish people by Moses at Mount Sinai and eventually written down in the Talmud.

TZITZIT – Specially knotted fringes worn by men on their four-cornered garments, such as a Tallit.

TZOM GEDALIAH – A fast commemorating the assassination of the leader Gedaliah post destruction of the first Temple.

VAYIKRA – The Book of Leviticus.

YAHARZEIT – The yearly commemoration of the passing of a deceased relative, on the date in the Jewish calendar that the bereavement took place.

YAMIM NORAIM (Days of Awe) - The holiest days of the Jewish year, comprising Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Sometimes they are called the High Holy days.

YOM HA'ATZMA'UT – Israel Independence Day, celebrating the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

YOM KIPPUR (Day of Atonement) – One of the Yamim Noraim. A Yom Tov which is also a fast, when we pray to God for forgiveness (atonement) for our sins and prepare spiritually for the year ahead.

YOM TOV – A Festival and Holy day, namely Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach, Shavuot and Succot.

YOM YERUSHALAYIM (Jerusalem Day) – Celebrating the reunification of Jerusalem during the Six Day War of 1967.
Have you ever felt uncomfortable about the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of a particular area of Jewish practice?

JOG is here to help.

The Jewish Online Guides (JOG) are designed to take the hassle out of learning or reminding yourself how to do things like say Kaddish, greet mourners, put on Tefillin, say Kaddish or bless your children on a Friday night.

www.theus.org.uk/jog
If you’d like a copy of this book…

The vision of The United Synagogue is of inspired Jews with enriched lives, passing our heritage on to future generations. This book is just one small way that The US is working towards its mission of engaging members with mainstream orthodox Jewish living, learning and caring.

If you’d like to download a compilation of the essays in this book, you can do so for free at www.theus.org.uk/shiva

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This book is not intended as a comprehensive guide to the laws of mourning. There are a number of such publications which deal sensitively with the needs of Jewish mourners. Rather, this publication has been specifically written to provide guidance and inspiration to visitors to a shiva house as they perform the mitzvah of comforting a mourner.