

The Jewish Journey Through Loss

From Death to Healing



*The Jewish Journey Through Loss:
From Death to Healing*

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In loving memory of
Rebecca Sprung z"l
רבקה חנה בת גולדה ע"ה

*who was a source of wisdom, advice, warmth,
and love to our entire family,
from her sister and family.*



*In memory of Rebecca,
she was an inspiration for so many.*

Jay & Huti Pomrenze

In loving memory of our beloved David Schwartz

דוד בן שרה ויאיר ז"ל

כ"ז טבת תשפ"ד

*Killed in battle
defending the Jewish people and the State
of Israel at the young age of 26.*

*May the wisdom in this book guide and comfort
those going through the loss of a loved one.*

Gitler and Schwartz Families



Dedicated to the memory of our dear mother

Seyma Lederman ע"ה

who loved Gina Junger's weekly parsha

shiurim at Protea Village

*and passed her love of Torah to her children,
grandchildren, and great grandchildren.*

יהי זכרה ברוך

In loving memory of
נחמה מידל בת יצחק אריה ושרה רבקה



In loving memory of my sister
Marilyn Field z"l
who died too soon and too young.
Forever missed by her sister,
Adele Hunter



This gift to helping others cope with loss
is in memory of my dear grandparents and uncle
who were instrumental in guiding me as a
child and shaping who I am today.

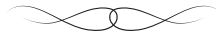
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Author's Dedications

*This book is lovingly dedicated
to my wonderful family
who bring me great joy,
infuse my life with tremendous meaning,
encourage me to grow,
and each in their own special way,
make my journey in life complete.*

Batya



*Dedicated to my parents who taught me by
example Ahavat Am Yisrael,
Ahavat Torat Yisrael, and Ahavat Eretz Yisrael.*

Gina

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Acknowledgments

I began this journey into the world of death many years ago, as I sought to better understand my own feelings and those of my clients as they attempted to make meaning out of their loss. I realized that while the psychological and halakhic literature each had much to offer, they were typically presented as two very distinct entities. The idea of this book was born out of the belief that Judaism has so much to contribute to our psychological (emotional, physical and spiritual) healing.

As I began to write, I was so fortunate to begin discussions with my beloved teacher and mentor, Gina Junger. What was always an amazing *havruta* became the basis for us writing together. We dovetailed perfectly. With my psychological background and her perfect blend of Jewish understanding (education), working with her has been a truly great privilege. As our husbands marveled at how we could “talk death” for hours, with the deepest respect, we seemed to complete each other’s ideas as well as sentences and make the sum of one and one so much greater than two. While writing a book about death seemed like such an enormous project, the topic indeed felt finite and (no pun intended), we saw an end in sight. Then along came COVID-19 followed by the multiple losses

experienced during and after a horrific war, and we suddenly had infinitely more we needed to say. We have already started talking about the next edition!

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Batya L. Ludman, Psy.D. F.T.

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Gina Junger

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Introduction

The final moments of life draw to a close with death inevitable, and yet no matter how prepared you may think you are, whether death was long anticipated or has happened suddenly, you are never truly ready. How can you be? The final moments, as in all else, are in Hashem's hands, and your focus, as it should be, has been on living and on life. You never quite know just what to expect with respect to what lies ahead in the next moment, let alone the days, weeks, and months that follow.

As you exit the room of your beloved, you begin on your own path of grieving. For some, this journey may have been long anticipated, and your grieving felt – and perhaps even acknowledged – even before the actual death itself. For others, the death is sudden, and the grieving process has not yet started. Many of you, when confronted with the inevitable, may speak with a rabbi or consult books on halakha to gain a greater understanding of just what has to be done around and after a death. Procedural guidelines notwithstanding, few of these books tell you what to really expect at each stage, and as such, how you might feel.

Just as each pregnancy and entry into the world is unique, so, too, does each person exit the world in their own way. With no

two deaths being the same, and each differing in the set of issues it presents, your response also will vary. Each loss is different. No two people grieve in the same way – even for the same loss – and no one person grieves the same way for different individuals. Your thoughts and feelings that accompany each stage of grief are dependent on a multitude of factors, and each of these variables alone could fill a book. As such, no one can truly prepare for the emotional roller-coaster ride that lies ahead. In part, no matter how prepared you think you are, no one can fully anticipate the emotional ups and downs that will ensue over the coming year. What you think will upset you may not, and what you don't really think about may catch you off guard and feel devastating. It may be as simple as a trip to the grocery store, a sight, or a smell.

As is true in birth and beyond, so too are you surprised and unprepared for what follows after death. Yet the physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual feelings that surface at two very different ends of the life cycle have many similarities. Grief, and the mourning period, can be a time of growth. Just as you may have no idea what to expect when expecting a baby, this book was written on the premise that you may have no idea what to expect in your grieving process. If you can be at all prepared psychologically for the myriad of feelings you may face, or at least understand their origin, you may weather the storm that lies ahead just a bit differently.

Some of you think about death, some fear death, some run from death – yet in the end, death is inevitable, and in its wake it may leave behind a beloved partner, immediate family members, other loved ones, an entire social circle, and a community all with no roadmap to navigate in the months ahead. One of the most beautiful aspects of Judaism's approach to death is its focus on ritual. This prescribed structure, filled with incredible wisdom, lovingly embraces the mourner, moving you forward, step by step, through your pain. As you transition through the process of shiva, *sheloshim*, the first year and *yahrzeit*, this book provides

a framework to guide and enable you to grieve, all at a pace that parallels and promotes your own psychological healing. Judaism's beautiful traditions give you a much-needed sense of balance and bring honor to your loved one's memory, while offering consolation and a meaningful path forward to those left behind.

Knowledge is empowering. The intent of this book is to help you attain a better understanding of what to expect during this potentially tumultuous period. Through achieving greater insight and clarity of your own thoughts and feelings, it is hoped that you can begin your own personal journey of healing in a way that best meets your needs at each stage of the grieving process.

The need for this book was driven by the authors' own stories, both in the recent past and with previous experiences of loss, as well as by the stories of others – clients and friends. This book began with a difficult year, individually and within our own little community, here in Israel. Both authors lost close family members, one more suddenly, and the other anticipated. Shortly thereafter, our beloved rabbi became very unwell, and after what felt to many people like a short illness, passed away, leaving close family, friends, and a community bereft and alone to mourn both individually and collectively, pick up the pieces, and move forward. Loss is cumulative, and the sudden shock of such a serious illness, when the community was already shaken by horrific events such as terrorist stabbings, lengthy power outages, destructive hail, and horrific floods, made coping all the more tenuous in the early days, as some remarked that they felt rocked by plagues. While the first chapters of the book had been written, so intense and all-consuming was the topic that, as in life itself, it was put aside for other life events – both wonderful and painful. These events, including COVID-19, a real-life plague that shockingly caught all of us off guard and had a devastating impact on the Jewish community, became our impetus for returning to the book and the subject matter we thought was so very important.

Just prior to going to press, the unthinkable happened. War broke out in Israel. This has been a traumatic event of epic proportion that has impacted not just Israel, but also the entire Jewish world and beyond. We felt that above all, we owed it to our readers to stop, begin to examine its impact, and try as best as we could to share what we have seen and what we anticipate in the coming months and years.

Some day we will write a revision to this chapter, but for now, as we attempt to look at what is almost unimaginable in this Jewish journey from death through healing, we pray that all who have been impacted by this tragedy will be comforted.

In order to best examine the grieving process, we felt it essential to first look at the very foundation on which the loss itself occurred. So, to move forward more easily, you may find it helpful to briefly take a peek into the recent past. This book therefore takes you, the reader, through the year of mourning that officially starts when death is declared, but unofficially begins with the anticipatory grieving you might feel if you are in a situation when you first hear that a loved one has become unwell.

The authors, a clinical psychologist/thanatologist and a Jewish educator, hope that you will find the support you need through reading this book to help you on your own personal path of healing. We recognize that there is much you don't anticipate or think about until you are actually in the situation and are confronted by so many unknowns. This, too, often comes at a time when you may already be feeling quite fragile and confused. We know through experience that there is definitely more than one way to feel. We have learned that there is no one "right" way to feel, just your way, and that this is very much okay. It may differ from how other family members feel, or from your friends' experiences, or even from what you have read. Your feelings are yours and whatever they are, they hold personal meaning for you.

While at times we may raise more questions than we answer, we hope that in doing so, we give you food for thought – and that this in turn helps both direct and comfort you as you begin this challenging and unfamiliar journey. Our goal is to make your thoughts and feelings during this difficult period and the various transitions throughout the year of mourning easier to comprehend.

We have attempted to do this through our own personal experiences, as well as illustrative vignettes and stories that were shared by others. Some have chosen to remain anonymous, while others have given permission to use their names. We have tried, when we thought it was appropriate, to offer helpful tips and biblical sources as well as other Jewish references to highlight our text.

This book is not a halakhic guide per se but is very much guided by our understanding of the halakhot. We felt that books on the halakhic guidelines of mourning address the laws, but not necessarily the thoughts and feelings you might experience, and that this understanding is indeed an important aspect of the grieving process. As such, this is a book about feeling and not simply about doing. Should you have halakhic questions, we urge you to discuss them with a rabbi. We ask for your forgiveness if we don't always anticipate correctly just how you may be feeling. We also recognize that your feelings may change quickly, at times with little or no warning, and that this, too, may temporarily increase your level of discomfort and emotional pain.

While we are unable to take away your pain, we sincerely hope that through this book we will “walk” alongside you as you take your journey forward into the land of healing.

Sincerely yours,
Batya and Gina



Chapter 1

From Illness Until Death

We have chosen to delineate the period of time from illness until death into two time periods – the first, from when your loved one felt unwell up until a diagnosis was made; and the second, from diagnosis until death. These are in many ways arbitrary, as determining an actual diagnosis may come at just about any point along the timeline continuum, from recognition that your loved one is unwell until they ultimately die. Depending also on the situation, one may never receive an actual diagnosis, but only a tentative or working diagnosis. The time from diagnosis until death can vary greatly, being short or more protracted, given that in general people are now living much longer and with life-threatening illnesses that were once considered fatal.

HEARING THE NEWS

How you hear the news around death, and when you hear the news, will have a great impact on how you deal with the issues at hand. If you are reading this book now, it is possibly because you know of someone very ill, but it is far more likely that someone

you know has recently died. If you didn't read this book when your loved one was sick, you will not be alone. You see, we often don't think about death. We may not want, or be able, to face the realization that someone is very sick. Yet we all will face loss and we all will grieve. It is one hundred percent certain that all of us will die someday – hopefully *ad me'ah ve'esrim*. In theory, as with Moses who lived until the age of 120, we, too, would like to be blessed with a good, long life. For some, in the prime of their lives, death comes too early. Others, who have been unwell, may be more than ready for their life to end.

Perhaps we are jumping a bit ahead of ourselves with the title, “hearing the news,” because in actuality, if there is an illness, it may precede death by weeks, months, or even years. It may come with grace or as a shock, with worries, fears, anxiety, and distress. Although it is important to live in the moment, we will go back to the period of time leading up to the death and explore this in detail. This phase, as well as the nature of the death, is important in understanding and coping during the post-death period.

WHEN DEATH IS SUDDEN

It is hard to imagine, without going through it, that your whole world can change literally within a minute. Death rarely occurs at an opportune moment; there is rarely a good or right time to die. We may initially understand the time of death as the time on the clock when our loved one took their last breath, rather than try to ascribe meaning to the sudden loss because this comprehension cannot come now, during a period of initial shock.

With time, part of the healing around the “suddenness” of the death may come with a greater understanding of how the loss itself is interpreted. Coming to terms with such a dichotomy, where everything feels so “normal” before a death and so “not normal” afterwards, is a huge challenge. The unforeseen war in Israel and

our experience with COVID-19 has shown this to be the case, with so many people dying unexpectedly.

SUDDEN VERSUS ANTICIPATED DEATH

When your loved one is extremely ill over a period of weeks to months and begins to deteriorate, you may find yourself thinking about and even anticipating their final days on earth. Sometimes, that last breath will come quickly, and at other times, the end will take place over a prolonged period of time, giving both you and your loved one time to prepare. For some, even with a prolonged illness or with no apparent illness at all, death may be very sudden and unexpected.

Whether as a result of an accident, suicide, or other misfortune, when the call comes, you may be in a state of disbelief. Sudden death can feel confusing, complicated, destabilizing, and traumatic. With so much uncertainty and no time to prepare, you may feel quite helpless.

No one can compare one person's loss or pain to another's. How can one say who experiences more pain: one whose loved one died suddenly, or one whose loved one was unwell and suffered for a prolonged period before succumbing to death? Whether you expected the death of a loved one, or it was completely unexpected, all losses are painful, with each having its own very personal and profound effect. No one can compare their pain or their loss to that of anyone else. Your grief is your own, just as someone else's is theirs. While no person's grief is worse than yours, many people may try to tell you otherwise. As you will learn, if you have not already, people can and will say the darndest things.

It has been said that if one is going to die, a four-to-six-month period of illness preceding death might be the most optimal. Less time than this may feel too sudden and make it more difficult to put affairs in order. A protracted period of being unwell

or acutely sick may require a change in coping strategies at some point, as you cannot easily maintain the same degree of vigilance in caregiving that you were once able to provide when your loved one first became unwell. The longer they are unwell, the greater your stress may become; you may feel less equipped to deal with an acute illness that has now become chronic in duration.

If one is “fortunate enough” to have a window of time to put important issues in order and also achieve some form of closure, there is often a tremendous amount of physical and emotional “work” to be done. Much has been written on both sudden and anticipatory death, because how your loved one died and the circumstances around their death, along with your own life experiences, will surely have an impact on your ability to cope.

Our trip of a lifetime that we had anxiously been waiting for got canceled because my wife had a debilitating stroke. I realize I am grieving for the fact that we didn't get to go – and now probably never will. I am grieving for past losses as well as future losses, not to mention the ongoing and very painful daily losses. I am feeling totally overwhelmed. I am feeling so sad and angry now at what was taken away from me – from us.

Given that you might be first picking up this book only after your loved one has died, we hope that this chapter will help serve as an attestation to all that you may have just been through. We hope that we can provide a framework for understanding what the past weeks or months may have been like, as well as how this may have influenced your thoughts and feelings. Hopefully, it will now serve to guide you as you navigate the next stages of the grieving process.

Initially upon hearing of the sudden death of your loved one, you may feel absolutely jolted – punched in the gut with no time to prepare for the blow. Blindsided, it grabs you when and where you least expect it, sucks out your air, and leaves you shaken and

in a state of disbelief as you attempt to figure out what just happened. You are left speechless, stunned, in shock, and with little thought about what will happen next. Caught off guard and totally unprepared, feeling as if the ground has crumbled beneath you, as you attempt to gain equilibrium, you will likely be left with far more questions than answers.

In many instances, we were forced to make immediate decisions, and because we were in shock, we relied on the dear, close people who surrounded and supported us.

Smadar Shir, *Miriam's Song:
The Story of Miriam Peretz*, p. 144

An unanticipated loss may often feel very senseless and difficult to comprehend, with your capacity to cope being challenged to the core. As you attempt to put one foot in front of the other and move forward, you are left wondering how your world could change so dramatically, literally from one minute to the next. With no warning or ability to predict what has happened, there may be a strong sense of disbelief and denial, a feeling that this is not and cannot be happening now, that this is not real. You may feel totally overwhelmed.

No, it can't be, I'm not hearing it, I'm walking out. If I don't hear it, then it can't be happening. It can't be true.

A teenager's response to the death of his mother

We are here to tell you that you *will* get up and you *will* go on. You may not care, know how, or even want to move forward, but it *does* happen. You are more resilient than you ever could have imagined. You may feel that with each step forward, you take two steps back, but even with your baby steps, like others who have walked a similar walk, you will continue on your journey because life around you goes on.

When something so traumatic as an unexpected death happens, your world gets turned upside down. However, through looking to make sense out of the situation so that you can understand it, you ultimately will put order and meaning back into your life. It does not happen overnight. In fact, there is no timetable, and it takes place only gradually. It will take much longer than you and others think – and perhaps longer, too, than it took someone who had time to prepare for the loss. Your shock and disbelief will be greater, and trying to understand just what happened while simultaneously coping with the loss places an additional burden on you, leaving you exhausted, anxious, and overwhelmed. It is so difficult to be patient. So difficult to have faith. So difficult when you are in such great pain. Repetition of the details of the events doesn't necessarily provide you with logic, clarity, or insight, but it is hard not to review them, hoping that this time, finally, when you ask yourself "why and how could this have happened?" something will have changed, and answers will finally be forthcoming.

Sometimes, I look back and ask myself, how did we get to this point? ... an illusory thought crosses my mind – maybe it didn't really happen?... Imagination is deceptive and coming down to earth is painful. I put aside the question of why because there's no answer to it. Even faith and Judaism have no explanation for this, and so I have to move forward, look ahead. Until the next time my imagination overcomes me and tries to sell me an illusion.

Smadar Shir, *Miriam's Song:
The Story of Miriam Peretz*, p. 247

With a sudden death, you may feel robbed by the inability to say goodbye to your loved one, tell them how much you loved them, put their affairs in order, apologize for things left unsaid, and more.

You may not *ever* be able to make sense of what happened, but may have to learn to live with the fact that there are not always answers and that life can be very unfair. With great difficulty, you may have to acknowledge and accept that it “just is,” which may be an ultimate test of your faith and challenge your religious beliefs to the core. The deeper your faith, the easier this may be, but this, too, is not a given. It is never easy. Learning not to try and make sense of the situation, accepting that it just is, and allowing yourself to live with this uncertainty will help lessen your pain and enable you to slowly start to rebuild your world.

💡 TIP: While at times you will be exhausted, at other times, you may find yourself overthinking things. Try to give yourself a break and just “be.”

Footprints in the Sand

The story is told of a man walking along the sand. As he took stock of his life, he noticed that most of the time he was able to discern two sets of footprints. He understood this to represent the presence and support of God in his life. But then he noticed that there were times when there were only one set of footprints.

Could it be that at the lowest and saddest times of his life God had abandoned him?

He questioned God. How could You leave me when I needed you the most?

God responded: “I didn’t leave you. During those times of hardship and suffering, I was carrying you.”

Psalm 23 – “The Lord is my shepherd” expresses the feeling that even in difficult times not only is God with us, but also His presence is comforting. “Though I walk through the valley

of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” King David spoke about two different sticks – a *mishenet* (walking cane for support) and a *shevet* (rod for hitting) – “*shivtekha umishantekha hema yenaḥmuni* – they [both] comfort me.” These two sticks are a metaphor for the two different ways God relates to people. The reason that they are both able to comfort is “*ki atta imadi* – because You [God] are with me.” The awareness of one’s constant connection to God, whether that connection happens to be pleasant or difficult at the moment, is the key to being able to cope with painful difficulties and challenges.

Sometimes, our deepest spiritual experiences come when we least expect them, when we are closest to despair. It is then that the masks we wear are stripped away. We are at our point of maximum vulnerability – and it is when we are most fully open to God that God is most fully open to us. “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18).

We find God not only in holy or familiar places, but also in the midst of a journey, alone at night. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me” (Ps. 23:4). The most profound of all spiritual experiences, the base of all others, is the knowledge that we are not alone. God is holding us by the hand, sheltering us, lifting us when we fall, forgiving us when we fail, healing the wounds in our soul through the power of His love.

Though we may fall, we fall into the arms of God. Though others may lose faith in us, and though we may even lose faith in ourselves, God never loses faith in us. And though we may feel utterly alone, we are not. God is there, beside us, within us, urging us to stand and move on, for there is a task to do that we have not yet done and that we were created to fulfill. Leonard Cohen wrote, “There is a crack in

everything. That's how the light gets in." The broken heart lets in the light of God and becomes the gate of heaven.

R. Jonathan Sacks, "How the Light Gets In,"
in *Studies in Spirituality*, pp. 31–32

💡 **TIP:** Giving yourself as much guilt-free time (without self-judgment) is a gift that you may now need to learn and then practice. Perhaps a close friend can help you with this.

THE INITIAL CRISIS PERIOD

During this initial crisis period, when first informed that your loved one is unwell or perhaps very ill, you may experience a momentary sense of shock and disbelief and wonder how it could be true. This is especially so when your loved one is young, appears healthy, if details have been kept private, or if the revelation of information has come as a surprise to you.

Their illness may herald the beginning of a decline that may be short lived (under six months) or be part of a chronic debilitating condition (greater than six months). Each presents its own set of issues and timeline. The situation may deteriorate slowly with time, or may change suddenly, resulting in only hours, days, or weeks to prepare for the inevitable. You may be very aware of what is going on, or for many reasons be in denial. Your loved one, too, may be aware or unaware of just how sick they are. They may suspect something is wrong or be caught off guard. The period before death itself may therefore be fraught with tremendous uncertainty, upheaval, and change in daily routine. It may be a roller coaster ride of emotions with lots of decision-making or, if you are well prepared and very lucky, a period of relative calm as each issue is attended to.

How you and your loved one experience this period immediately after they become ill or get diagnosed will indeed have an

impact on the many challenges you'll ultimately face. Again, no two people or illnesses are alike. Your (you and your loved one's) responses and ability to cope during this initial crisis and after a death will be impacted by various factors, such as:

- your age and stage in life
- the nature of your relationship
- your proximity to each other
- your fears and level of comprehension
- your communication style
- your preparedness and readiness for death
- how well you and your loved one have worked through past hurts and issues around forgiveness
- your philosophy of life and personal worldviews
- your previous and current physical, emotional, and cognitive abilities
- the onset, timing, nature, and general understanding of the illness
- your preparedness in terms of diagnosis, course, and prognosis
- the goals of your loved one's care
- the support network of family, friends, and medical team
- your living and household arrangements
- your financial situations and work responsibilities
- your religious and spiritual beliefs
- your social issues and cultural expectations
- your ongoing stressors
- your history and management of previous losses

Each one of these factors has relevance throughout the illness, death, and post-death period, and together could be the subject

of an entire book on their own. They will impact how you grieve for both your physical and symbolic losses, as you attempt to work through and come to terms with your personal situation.

While there may be many demands at such a difficult time, you may find yourself using this opportunity to redefine your relationship in new ways. How, for example, can you now spend your time together in a more meaningful way, make different life choices, and even resolve past issues?

In recent years, you may have had the opportunity to think about your own mortality and the eventual death of those you hold dear. Simply understanding the trajectory of the aging process, however, does not mean that you are focused on death; rather, like most people, you concentrate on life and only when you are faced with the inevitable, might you allow your mind to go there. Death is frightening for many: unknown events in uncharted territory, unfamiliarity with what lurks around the corner, a frightening lack of predictability, and overwhelming fear.

No matter how prepared you think you are, you are unlikely to be as fully prepared as you would wish. Therefore, a diagnosis may feel in itself traumatic, leaving you shocked, vulnerable, and at a loss for what to do next. It is not at all uncommon to feel overwhelmed and out of control. You may feel as if you're in the midst of a bad dream. Your body is thankfully designed to attempt to make your world feel right and so, after this initial shock and immobility, the fog does begin to lift. Slowly you will begin to plan for what comes next as you respond to both the physical aspects of the crisis and take steps to cope with the illness itself, its symptoms, treatments, and side effects, as well as other ongoing demands of life that face you as you absorb the reality of the situation.

While you may be very busy taking care of both the mundane and important aspects of your loved one's care, it is important as well to spend some time addressing your own thoughts and feelings as you go through this very difficult period. You should

ask yourself what you can do to prepare for the inevitable. This may include exploration of what you may need to say or tell your loved one, and what you would find helpful to hear from them. You may, for instance, need to ask their forgiveness or have them ask this of you. You may ask yourself what stories you need to hear again, or what details you need to fill in that may be otherwise lost. You may want to ask how your loved one wants to be remembered, and what wishes you may be able to fulfill now or after they are gone. This can be an important learning opportunity: a time to share history, to fulfill wishes, to become even closer, and to reestablish what is really important as best as you are able. There might also be priorities that may or may not involve you, such as relationships in need of repair. Perhaps there are things that need to be told to your loved one or to other family members – parents, siblings, and children. Given this gift of time, how can you best use it and how would your loved one choose to use it?

Giving your loved one a sense of dignity when they are sick, enabling them to have a positive attitude, and instilling hope are all valuable gifts at this very difficult time, as are small things such as a particular food or even a picture that brings pleasure. Your role may be to interface with the medical personnel and notice how they treat your loved one. Are they attuned to their special needs – be it a sign over the bed to ask people to speak loudly in case of a hearing impairment, or particular dietary preferences? How do people talk to or with your loved one? Do they talk to them or to you if you are in the room, and is it respectful? Do they talk about your loved one as if they are not there? Do they talk loudly enough so that your loved one can hear, or do they whisper inappropriately or chat just outside the room? A sick patient may hear more than you think and may not want others to talk as if they are not there. Your loved one may be very sensitive to sound and there may be a role for music in their care. They may also be more responsive to other senses, such as touch or smell. You may

want to explore with the staff if they have addressed this as well. As you can see, your role may be quite varied, but of infinite help.

Sitting in the hospital or at your loved one's bedside for hours at a time and for many days or weeks, even with breaks, is both difficult and exhausting. In addition, any routine that you once had may feel nonexistent, with responsibilities for other family members perhaps ignored. The list of things that you feel you "must" or "should" do may feel like it has grown exponentially, with nothing crossed off the simple but ever-growing "to do" list. Knowing, too, that the situation may change at any moment only increases everyone's level of stress. It is important to take time to eat and drink, get out and go for a walk, and take care of some of the many errands that come up. As hard as it may be for you, you will need to ask others to share your "burden" or help out in order to keep your own energy level up. What you initially believe will be a short-term situation can easily become longer and more difficult than you may have anticipated. As a result, while it is easy to neglect yourself, it is very important not to do so. Your needs, too, will change over time, so be prepared to reevaluate the situation and ask for help when necessary. By enlisting others, who themselves may feel quite powerless and are just waiting to be asked to help out, you are making them feel better. Remember, too, that what is comfortable for one person may be stressful for someone else.

It will be up to you to help determine how information is relayed about your loved one and the current situation, so that when you finally leave them at night and are yourself ready to collapse, you do not have to then spend hours on the phone.

💡 **TIP:** It is often best to "designate" one family member to liaise with the medical community and another person to liaise with friends and family. In this way, calls and any updated information can go through them, and you can protect yourself from the constant bombardment of people

who mean well, but who may inadvertently exhaust you. This “spokesperson” can take responsibility for relaying information about your loved one’s health, prayer requests, food needs, and help with errands. This frees you up to “just” care for your loved one.

You may split visits with other family members, so that you each visit at separate times and report back to others while maximizing time with your loved one. This will allow you time for other things such as work and family obligations. You will have to be selective in screening visitors and visits. From one day to the next, you may not be able to anticipate whether your loved one is having a difficult day; and even when you do give permission, people may arrive unwell or overstay their time, exhausting both you and your loved one. As we have intimated previously, it is not at all selfish to take care of yourself at this very difficult time, but rather a gift that you can give to everyone involved. You have to do what is right for you, regardless of what others say. As you will discover, people will have their own opinion and ideas with respect to how to best help – much of which you do not need to hear or will not be at all helpful.

💡 **TIP:** No one ever said on their deathbed that they wished that they had spent more time at the office. If you are prioritizing time spent with your loved one, you don’t have to apologize for this precious time spent together.

DEALING WITH TERMINAL ILLNESS

Coming to terms with terminal illness and eventually the actual death is challenging on many difficult levels for both you and your loved one, emotionally, physically, and even on a spiritual level.

It is a process that takes time. Quality end-of-life care is essential for your loved one, and critical for your family. While advance knowledge of an impending death can help diminish the shock, no death is ever easy. In general, when you think about dying, you may fear being in horrible pain, being alone, or perhaps you worry that you will not be heard or understood. In reality, none of these need to be the story of your loved one. When you are given the opportunity to face death head on, you give yourselves and your loved ones some ability to plan for your future – even if that future may be death.

While you may not be able to change the outcome, you often can help your loved one prepare to move on in a way that enables everyone to experience the death in a positive way. This, in part, evolves when your loved one and you are able to see that you both can have your needs met. These needs, for example, might range from ensuring appropriate and adequate pain management to discussions about important decision-making from the onset of the illness, through treatment at each stage of the illness and ultimately through the end-of-life choices and the dying process itself. Our Jewish values can truly guide us through this uncharted territory.

We all have a lifetime to prepare for death. How that lifetime may be defined, however, often escapes us. One often describes a good life as both a long life lived, and one containing good events. A life cut short by illness or tragedy can be devastating, but how one defines a good life differs from individual to individual. One person may think that living to the age of eighty-five is enough, or more than enough. Another may feel that this is the prime of their life. So, whether your loved one was taken from you after mere hours, or after many years, one's interpretation of that loss is very personal, and one cannot compare one person's pain to another.

Even if you anticipate that death is imminent and feel that you are emotionally prepared for the loss, you won't know how you are actually going to feel until you are in that moment. How