

# Lesson Guide: Class Fifteen

## Life's Hard Times

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Miller Introduction to  
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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## Lesson Guide for Class #15: Life's Hard Times

### Class Summary:

Understanding Jewish practices toward illness and healing, particularly the mitzvah of bikkur holim. Exploration of Jewish ethics regarding end-of-life, including questions about life support, autopsy, organ donation, etc. Overview of funeral and burial practices and mourning practices, including shiva, shloshim, and yartzeit. Jewish views on the afterlife.

**Teaching Note:** *This class is, understandably, often a difficult one for students. Sometimes there is a sense of regret, anger, or frustration that they did not have ritual structures, like those described, in their lives when they were grieving. Keep an eye on your students, and be prepared to take additional breaks if you sense the class getting too heavy.*

### Objectives:

*Students will:*

- Learn and discuss the Jewish value of supporting others in times of illness and grief.
- Understand the basic concepts, vocabulary, and practices related to funerals and mourning in Jewish life.
- Reflect on issues of medical ethics at end-of-life through a Jewish framework.

### Key Vocabulary:

- Bikkur Holim
- Misheberach
- Kavod ha-Met
- Nichum Avelim
- Hevra Kadisha
- Tahara/Takhrikhin
- Sh'mira
- Kri'ah
- El Maalei Rachamim

- Kaddish
- Hespel
- Aninut
- Shiva
- Shloshim
- Yartzeit
- Yizkor
- Unveiling

### **In-Person Teaching Materials:**

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks and/or On One Foot videos

### **Online Teaching Materials:**

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup

### **Set Induction: Showing Up**

In Western culture, we are generally taught to give a person "space" when they are suffering – whether with illness or loss. In Jewish culture, we are given the exact opposite advice. We are taught to "err on the side of presence."

Break students into small groups/breakout rooms and ask them to reflect on a time either they were going through a hard time, and someone showed up for them, or when they showed up for someone else who was going through a hard time. What helped? Debrief as a class, noting common themes.

### **Text Study: Bikkur Holim**

Continuing the theme of "showing up," – study the text from Berakhot 5b together as a group. Ask: What does this text teach us about the value of visiting the sick (bikkur holim)? Does this text offer any practical suggestions about how to show up for people in a helpful way (even if we don't have magic healing powers?)

Some points to discuss from the text:

- What is the meaning of Rabbi Yohanan's question: "Do you want your suffering?" Why does he ask it this way? What does Rabbi Hiyya's response mean in this context?
- What does it mean that Rabbi Yochanan "raised Rabbi Hiyya to health?" Are there alternative ways to understand this aside from the miraculous?
- Why does the Talmud quote the proverb: "A prisoner cannot free themselves from jail?" What does that concept mean in your own life?

Conclude this portion of the class by discussing the Misheberach prayer. You may wish to play Debbie Friedman's Misheberach and discuss the difference between *refuat ha-guf* (physical healing) and *refuat ha-nefesh* (spiritual healing.). Debbie Friedman's version can be shown (linked on the Slide Deck).

### **Lecture: Jewish Ethics at the End of Life**

***This is an area that is often quite interesting to students. However, it can be cut for time - in whole or part.***

Modern medicine has raised many new ethical dilemmas about what happens at the end of life. While our ancestors may not have been able to anticipate the medical advances we see today, Jewish ethics can guide our approach to these challenging questions.

Present two guiding texts found in the coursebook/slide deck:

#### ***Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Matters of Life and Death***

**Summary:** In Judaism, we are considered leaseholders on our bodies rather than owners. That means we have a positive religious obligation to preserve life (*pikuach nefesh*) and health. Therefore, this is also an opportunity to talk about tattooing, piercing, and other body modification in Jewish law.

#### ***Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 339:2***

**Summary:** While actively causing death (euthanasia) is forbidden, we are not obligated to take extraordinary measures to prevent it when a person's time has come. May also wish to supplement this with the famous aggadah from Ketubot 104a:

*"On the day that Rabbi Judah was dying, the Rabbis declared a public fast and offered prayers for God's mercy. Rabbi Judah's maid went up to the roof and prayed: "The angels desire that Rabbi Judah come and join them, and the mortals on Earth desire that he*

*remain with them." However, when she saw how much he was suffering, she offered a second prayer: "May it be the will of God that the angels overpower the mortals. As the Rabbis continued their prayers, she took a jar and threw it off the roof. Momentarily distracted, the Rabbis ceased their prayer, and Rabbi Judah's soul was able to depart."*

Based on the values in the above texts, discuss Jewish thinking on the following:

**Life Support/Extraordinary Measures:** Most Jewish scholars are relatively permissive on allowing for the cessation of extraordinary measures when death is otherwise imminent, based on the above texts from the Shulchan Aruch and the Talmud. As expressed by Rabbi Seymour Spiegel, quoted in Elliot Dorff's 1990 paper to the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee to Jewish Law and Standards, "A Jewish Approach to End-Stage Medical Care":

*"Where death is imminent and where the procedure cannot bring a cure or even a significant amelioration of pain, what is best for the individual (especially if he expresses his opinion through a will) is to allow him to die naturally. What the Living Will makes possible is the giving of the privilege to the patient himself to stop those things "that delay the soul's leaving the body." The developments of medical technology have caused problems which our ancestors could hardly have foreseen. We must not forget, in our loyalty to tradition, the welfare of the suffering patient who, when the Giver of Life has proclaimed the end of his earthly existence, should be allowed to die despite our machines."*

**Suicide/Euthanasia:** Unequivocally forbidden, since we are leaseholders on our body, rather than owners, we are not allowed to destroy ourselves. As expressed by Rabbi Elliot Dorff in his 1997 paper to the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee to Jewish Law and Standards entitled "Assisted Suicide":

*"Even though Jewish law goes quite far in permitting terminally ill patients to die with whatever palliative care they need and without any further medical interference, it does not permit suicide or assisted suicide. The tradition bids us instead to maintain a firm line separating permissible withholding and withdrawal of medical efforts, on the one hand, and illegitimately helping a person actively to take their own life, on the other. To fail to do that would violate Jewish law and destroy creatures belonging to God."*

However, it is essential to point out that the punitive measures that Jewish law lays out regarding suicide (exclusion from Jewish burial, suspension of mourning rituals) are virtually ALWAYS bypassed. This is because suicide is prima facie presumed to result from mental illness rather than deliberate choice.

**Organ Donation:** Generally permitted because saving a life (pikuach nefesh) outweighs all ritual requirements. As expressed by Rabbi David Golinkin:

*"It is not merely permissible for a Jew to bequeath his organs for transplantation following his death; it is a mitzvah for him to do so, in order to save one life, or several lives."*

**Autopsy:** Generally forbidden, out of kavod ha-met, but permitted when required by law or when it would help to save another life (pikuach nefesh). As expressed by Rabbi Abner Weiss in *Death and Bereavement: A Halakhic Perspective*:

*"The Jewish belief in the inviolability of the human body is reflected in its attitude to postmortem examinations. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 47a) asserts that the biblical imperative of speedy burial (Deuteronomy 21:22-23) is based upon the prohibition of disgracing a corpse. The scope of this prohibition extends beyond delayed burial. Scripture proscribes the inflicting of any form of disgrace upon a corpse. In general, this includes the disfigurement of the body because of postmortem dissection (autopsy)... The prohibition against the performance of autopsies, however, is not absolute. An exception is made if the autopsy may directly contribute to saving the life of another patient who is currently awaiting treatment"*

## **Break**

### **Lecture: "Death and Mourning"**

In Jewish mourning practices, there are two fundamental principles:

- **"Kavod ha-Met"**: Honoring the body of the deceased.
- **"Nichum Avelim"**: Comforting the mourners.

From the time of death until burial, we are primarily concerned with fulfilling our obligation of kavod ha-met. Then from the burial onward, we are entirely focused on nichum avelim.

#### **Part I: Kavod ha-Met**

Values associated with meeting this obligation include:

- Leaving the body intact (no cremation or embalming)

- Proceeding speedily to the burial.
- Maintaining simplicity and dignity (shrouds, closed casket)
- Attending to the body (taharah & sh'mira) Points to discuss:

**Cremation vs. Burial:** Traditional Jewish authorities require that bodies be buried intact. This is seen as a way of honoring the body that was the vessel containing a human life (see Abner Weiss, quoted above). Additionally, since the forced cremations of the Holocaust, there has been an additional measure of Jewish rejection of cremation.

**Preparation of the Body:** Preparation for burial is traditionally handled by the Hevra Kadisha (holy society), which is a volunteer organization in every Jewish community, or by a Jewish funeral home. They will perform the traditional washing of the body (taharah), dressing the body in plain linen shrouds (takhrikhin), and sitting watch with the body (sh'mirah) until burial.

At a Jewish funeral, we observe the following traditions:

**K'riah:** The ritual of tearing a garment (now most often performed symbolically on a black ribbon attached to one's shirt over the chest) by the close mourners at the start of a funeral service to symbolize the heartbreak of loss. One tears on the left side, closest to the heart, for parents, and on the right side for all others.

**Funeral Service:** A Jewish funeral typically begins with the reading of Psalms, followed by a series of hespedim (eulogies). Today, it is common practice for friends and family members to join the rabbi in delivering eulogies at a funeral. The concluding prayer is El Maalei Rachamim, which asks that God shelter the soul of the person who has died and that their spirit is bound up in the bond of eternal life. At the graveside, the distinguishing Jewish element is the communal shoveling. All those gathered participate in filling the grave by adding a few shovelfuls of earth on the casket. This is seen as a final act of true compassion, *hesed shel emet*, that we can offer our loved ones.

## **Part II: Nichum Avelim**

Following the burial, our guiding Jewish value switches from Kavod ha-Met (honoring the deceased) to Nichum Avelim (caring for mourners).

In Jewish law, one is obligated to observe mourning traditions only after the loss of a parent, sibling, child, or spouse. One is permitted to observe most of these traditions

after losing a close relative or friend who is not in one of these categories, but it is not obligatory. In this context, it is important to emphasize that it is permissible to observe all these traditions for a parent or relative who wasn't Jewish—because the reason for the tradition is to provide for the comfort of the mourner, who is now a Jew.

Jewish tradition provides a multi-step process for grieving, which is meant to provide communal space for grieving and help the mourner gradually transition back into life following a loss.

The following are the stages of Jewish grieving:

**Aninut:** The period from the time of death to the burial. This is considered a time of shock, in which mourners are released from all ritual obligations so they can fully attend to the arrangements for burial.

**Shiva:** One week, beginning with the day of the burial. This is understood to be the period of most intense grief, in which the community is obliged to visit the mourners at home to help provide for a minyan so they can recite Kaddish. During shiva, one traditionally refrains from work or any outside activities and focuses entirely on going through the process of grief.

**Shloshim:** One month, beginning with the day of burial. After the conclusion of shiva, it is customary to go back to work; however, many signs of mourning are retained. For example, men typically refrain from shaving, people avoid attending social events or parties, and Kaddish is recited every day or at least on every Shabbat.

Following shloshim, mourners resume most typical activities; however, they may continue to say Kaddish for up to eleven months (mandatory for a parent, optional for other close relatives).

After a year, there are five occasions to publicly say Kaddish for a loved one each year—on the **yartzeit** (anniversary of death) and during the **Yizkor** service, which takes place on Yom Kippur and one each of the Shalosh Regalim. The family may also gather at the one-year mark to **unveil** the gravestone.

### **Discussion: Jewish Views of the Afterlife**

Jews put less emphasis on the afterlife than most other religious traditions. You may want to discuss with the group why they think that might be and whether that is a strength or a weakness in Judaism. Nevertheless, there are many traditions about the

afterlife in Judaism. The three texts included in the coursebook come from the Mishnah, Louis Jacobs, and Richard Rubenstein. All affirm the reality of an afterlife, though each with a distinctly different approach.

Some general approaches include:

**Resurrection:** The late-Biblical and Rabbinic idea that the dead will be physically restored to their bodies in the Messianic age. Also referenced in the Amidah prayer.

**Olam Ha-Ba:** Beginning in the Rabbinic Era, there begins to be a notion of a "Coming World", equivalent to the idea of "Heaven." While Judaism doesn't have the neo-pagan imagery of floating on clouds with harps or devils and pitchforks, we do have traditions about an afterlife that includes a reward for the righteous (not just Jews) and punishment for the wicked.

**Gilgul ha-Neshamot:** There is a robust theology of reincarnation in the mystical and Hasidic tradition. See Rabbi Elie Spitz, *Does the Soul Survive* for a fascinating study of this aspect of Jewish theology.

## Wrap Up and Reflection

**Journal Prompt:** "Something we discussed today that I appreciated was... Something that challenged me was... Something I'd like to know more about was..."

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in coursebook, the instructor may wish to do a group check for understanding using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to articulate the basic structure of a Jewish funeral as well as the process of Jewish mourning. Students should be able to define the following terms: kavod ha-met, nichum avelim, kriah, El Maalei Rachamim, shiva, shloshlim, kaddish, yartzeit.

## **At Home Work**

Students should be told to watch the "Life's Hard Times" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt.