

# Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

## Death and the Afterlife



### **Context**

*In recent years, a great deal of attention has been directed to the question of what constitutes a 'good death'. While once the focus of religious life might have been more on what (if anything) happens after death, now there is greater focus on the experience of death, dying and mourning, and how we should respond to loss and grief. What are the insights of Judaism into these questions, and does Reform Judaism have a distinctive contribution to make? In this article, **Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers**, Community Educator at Reform Judaism explores these questions.*

### **Content**

#### **A Good Death**

The experience of death is an issue that religions have dealt with throughout the ages. Jewish texts speak often of the tensions - the longing for and sanctity of life, the fear of what is to come, the wish to have achieved more, the relinquishing of control and acceptance of 'Divine Will'.

As Reform Rabbis, we consider another aspect of this conversation - quality (alongside length) of life. Reform rabbis and congregants do not all agree around assisted dying<sup>1</sup>. However, in these disagreements there is consensus on the importance of dignity in death for all, even where we interpret or understand this differently, depending on personal experience, theology and research. Importantly, Reform Judaism is a space where these conversations are had openly, without a dogmatic insistence on the 'trump card' of the sanctity of life.

A good death for the dying may, also, not be the same as a good death for the mourners. Sudden, unexpected deaths may be hardest for those left behind, but kindest to the person who has died. Reform Rabbis are committed to working with families in supporting hospice care, in discussing organ donation and in providing as much dignity as is possible through the process of a long death. Where this period is drawn out it often raises difficult and complicated emotions, and our communities serve as support to those living through death. Judaism values life, above almost all other things, however dying is an inevitable part of that life, and one of the strengths of being part of a community and a ritual system, is the support that can be offered through difficult life transitions.

#### **A Good Goodbye**

Mourning rituals are a powerful tool to honour the dead and process complicated feelings of grief. Unlike some parts of the Jewish world, where it can feel that the ritual takes priority over the needs of the mourners, Reform communities seek to support mourners in a way that feels most appropriate to them, balancing the traditional Jewish values of Kavod HaMet (respect for the deceased) and Kavod HaChayim (respect for those who are still living). This applies in the funeral where mourners may want to add readings to the powerful traditional liturgy, to ask someone that knew and loved the deceased to deliver the Hespel (the eulogy), to include (or not) traditional ritual such as k'riah (ritual tearing of garments). Reform Rabbis accompany mourners through the reality of these rituals, expressing one's inner brokenness by ripping a garment of clothing, shovelling dirt into the grave of a loved one. Experiencing these emotions in public may be an uncomfortable prospect. Yet hearing the soil hit the coffin isn't meant to be easy. It is meant to be difficult, just as the pain of loss is.

Ritual is not meant to be utterly 'bespoke' but it does need to 'work', especially when emotions are raw. As

Reform Jews, we seek to balance this tension. Sitting a full Shiva (not leaving the home for 7 days after the funeral) and receiving guests can be too tiring and painful for some. However, it also has benefits, allowing us

to receive support from our communities, and to give ourselves time to remember and heal before returning to the bustle of the real world. Reform Rabbis will always meet with mourners to explore their needs and help them to negotiate these decisions. Even though modernity has often encouraged Jews of all denominations to turn aside from some of these rituals because they are too painful, too inconvenient, or don't carry meaning any more, we encourage those who can to re-embrace these rituals where they are helpful, even if that feels like taking a risk.

Reform communities will also offer the options for the funeral: cremation, burial or woodland burial where it is available. Traditionally, cremation has not been offered in the Jewish community, rooted in the belief in physical resurrection when the Messiah comes. We recognise that there have been a variety of different forms of disposing of the corpse with dignity throughout Jewish history, from ossuaries to catacombs rather than in direct contact with the earth. As cremation has grown in popularity amongst the general population (and there is no clear cut reason to not allow it, other than custom) it is not ruled out as an option by Reform synagogues. Mourners are encouraged to engage with Jewish mourning customs around and within the cremation ceremony. Many Jews of all denomination may feel a new horror at cremation after the atrocities of the Holocaust, when crematoria were used for the mass disposal of bodies. However a significant number of survivors seem (anecdotally at least) to have chosen cremation, alongside a growing number in our communities.

## **A Good Ever-after**

Judaism and the afterlife is a rather tricky question. There have been a variety of different ideas through the ages: a shady underworld known as Sheol; a temporary purgatory (Gehinnom, which begins to appear in literature before the destruction of the second Temple); resurrection – physical and of the soul; even reincarnation gets a look in within some mystical and liturgical traditions. The strength of the concept of physical resurrection has been the source of some Jewish customs around death and mourning, yet the resurrection idea (and its attachment to a messianic age) is not a central tenet for us as Reform Jews. It remains one of many possibilities.

What does it teach us that we do not have one solid answer about life after death? In Reform Judaism, we are generally quite at home with multi vocal answers, but this one seems to me to be particularly powerful. If we do not have one, clear definition of what the life-to-come looks like, we are probably not meant to worry overly about it. That is not to say there is no kind of continuation, but as we don't know or understand what it looks like, we should therefore focus on what we do know – this life, and living it well. Let the afterlife whatever that looks like, take care of itself, it is for us to take care of this world and this life.

Which brings us back to the mourning rituals, which are designed to help us process grief, dwell with it, and thus go back into the real world; undoubtedly changed by our loss, but able to continue, bit by bit, to live again. Judaism allows us to slowly return to the world with stages of mourning through the first year, and then allows us to return to it annually, acknowledging that the loss still hurts, and still needs to be felt publicly from time to time. Living this life well means processing death well, and feeling the pain of loss is enabled by our rituals in a powerful way that can really change a person's ability to deal with their own continuing life, without the one they have lost.

## **Contemplation**

*Despite superstitions which encourage silence on issues of death, we know that having conversations - about our choices for end-of-life, for funerals and mourning - ultimately helps those who care and mourn. We know, too, that Reform Judaism's emphasis on choice, autonomy and religious creativity allows the creation of personal journeys through the experience of death. Many of our communities have started to have these open conversations. How do we encourage this throughout our movement and in our own families?*

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<sup>i</sup> For further information see "Assisted Dying" edited by Jonathan Romain, 2014, Movement for Reform Judaism