In this course we will study Jewish laws and traditions surrounding illness (particularly terminal illness), dying, death, bereavement and consolation. We will examine these stages from the perspective of (a) the individual; (b) the individual’s family (who, following a death, become mourners); and (c) members of the community (who become comforters). We will explore religious and anthropological understandings of how we, individually and collectively, move through the stages of life, death and beyond. As a “practical rabbinics” course, this course will also explore the challenges and responsibilities of rabbis who interact with the ill, the dying, mourners and comforters during these critical stages, and explore the roles played by rabbis in educating, guiding, facilitating, counseling, officiating and “pasken”ing.

General Course Outline

1. 09/08 Introduction: The Nature of Life and Death
   [09/15] No class: Rosh HaShanah, Day 2]
   [09/22] No class: Erev Yom Kippur]
   [09/29] No class: Sukkot, Day 2]
2. 10/01 (TH) Facing Mortality: Terminal Illness and the Mitzvah of Bikkur Holim
   [10/06] No class: Simchat Torah]
3. 10/13 Facing Death: The Last Moments: Prayer and Vidui
4. 10/20 Yitsiat ha-Neshamah and its Aftermath
5. 10/27 From Death to the Funeral: Aninut
6. week of 11/03 Funeral Preparations (visit to a local funeral home; meet with a representative of the local Hevra Kadishah)
7. 11/10 The Art of the Hesped and Orchestrating the Funeral
8. 11/17 The First Week (or so): Shiva
9. 11/24 Subsequent milestones: Shloshim, Shanah, Yahrzeit, Yizkor
10. 12/01 Special topics
11. 12/08 Perspectives on Life After Death
12. 12/15 Concluding Reflections
13. 12/22 In-Class Exam
In addition to reading the assigned materials and preparing for and participating in class each week, each student is required to attend one funeral during the first part of the semester (i.e., prior to mid-November) and to write a description of the funeral and an analysis of the role played by the officiating clergy. Your paper is due by November 24th.

Starred items (*) are available either on-line or in the course packet.
Books highlighted in boldface on the bibliography list (pp. 11 ff) should be purchased.

1. Introduction: The Nature of Life and Death

*Mah adam va-tei-da-eihu, u'ven enosh va-ti-khash-veihu?*

*Adam la-hevel damah, yamav k’tsel over…* (Psalm 144:3-4)

What is death? How do we understand it? How do we experience it? What messages does our society give us concerning the nature of death? What are the insights to be drawn from the Jewish tradition concerning the process of dying and what it means to die?

(Writing exercise)

Overview of the overall themes of the Jewish laws and traditions surrounding illness, dying, death, burial, bereavement and beyond.

Twin concerns:

- *Y’kara d’Shakhvei* (respect for the dead)
- *Y’kara d’Hayei* (respect, concern for the bereaved)

Are they always compatible?

If not, which gives way? When?

Assigned reading

*“Will We Ever Arrive at the Good Death?” by Robin Marantz Henig. New York Times, 08/07/05.*


Text Study
B. Sanhedrin 46a (Mishnah) through 47a: Are burial rites to honor the dead or to comfort the living? (Start studying this now; to be discussed on or around 11/10.)

2. Facing Mortality: Terminal Illness and the Mitzvah of Bikkur Holim
Laws and Traditions of bikkur holim
Rabbi v. Chaplain v. Friendly Visitor v. Hesed Committee Member … - What’s your role?
Responding to inquiries regarding an impending death: what can/may/should one talk about, or not talk about – and with whom?
Special cases: Coma, Persistent Vegetative State, Life Support (to be discussed further, possibly, on 12/01)
Who is the patient? Who are you visiting?
When and how to pray at the bedside: the MiShebeirach and the Vidui (Introduction)
Advanced Medical Directives
Ethical Wills
Reconciliation

Assigned Reading:
“The Process of Dying” (A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort, pp. 5-7)
“Visiting the Dying” (Ibid., pp. 8-10)
“Talking with the Dying” (Ibid., pp.11-13)
Klein, pp. 271-272
“What I Have Learned from Illness” (JIODAM, pp. 23-35) (poem by Rahel, essays by Harold Shulweis and Lawrence Kushner)

Text Study:
Nedarim 39b – 40a
B. Brachot 5a: Yissurin Shel Ahavah: Neither they nor their reward!
S. A., Y. D.: 335, 337, 338

3. Issues (Theological, Pastoral and Practical) Surrounding an Impending Death
When, how to broach the subject; when, how to recite vidui.
Jewish law regarding the goses: what may be done; what must not be done.
“Hastening death” v. “prolonging suffering/dying”

Quantity of Life: *Hayei Sha-ah*

The Death of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi

Euthanasia/Assisted Suicide: The Death of King Saul

Recognizing the Clinical Signs of Depression

Rabbi’s role v. Hospital Chaplain’s role

Dealing with our own fears, discomforts, etc. (continued)

The gift of presence: “Don’t just do something, stand there!”

Helping people say “Goodbye.”

**Assigned Reading:**

Klein, pp. 272 – 273

**Text Study:**

B. Ketubot 103a – 104a: The Death of R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi (see JIODAM, p. 224-225)

B. Avodah Zara 18a: May Remove Impediments to Death

B. Shabbat 12b: The *Shechina* stands at the head of the dying person.

S.A., Y.D.: 339

**Supplementary Readings on Euthanasia**

A) From JIODAM

“*I Want a Choice*” by Joseph Levine (pp. 225 – 229)

“*Final Entrance,*” by Sharon Epstein (pp. 229-232)

“*Not Through Yet,*” by Rami Shapiro (pp. 257-259)


**4. The Soul’s Departure: *Yitziat Ha-Neshamah* and Its Immediate Aftermath**

What to do if you’re there (*Kriah, Barukh Dayan Ha-emet*)

What to do if you’re *not* there.

Key terms: *k’vod ha-met, nivul ha-met*

**Laws and Customs**

**Special Concerns:** (to be discussed further, possibly, on 12/01)

- Autopsies
- Organ Donation
Miscarriage/Abortion

Neo-natal Death

Duties to the deceased, the family, the community

Assigned Readings

JIODAM: “When Death Arrives” (pp. 48-80) (selections)

B. Berachot 8a. First, read the quotation from Psalms: “Let everyone who is pious pray to you at a time of finding.” (Psalm 32:6). Then, from “R. Nachman ben Isaac said: ‘At a time of finding’ refers to [the finding of] death …” through “… Ravah bar Rav Shila said: Hence the proverb: A person should pray for mercy even to the last clod of earth.” (Question: What does this tell us about yetziat ha-neshamah?) (Frankly, this entire page is worth reading, if you have time.)

M. Berachot 9:2 (B. Berachot 54a) (“Over evil, a blessing is said similar to that over good” through “whatever treatment he metes out to you.”)

S.A.O.H. 222:2

S.A.Y.D. 340: 1, 2

5. From the Death to the Funeral: Aninut

Scheduling the funeral

Graveside v. Chapel v. Shul

Rabbi’s role in meeting with the family:
- Explaining what will happen at the funeral, at the burial, and beyond
- Explaining death to children – and helping others to do so
- Discussing the deceased, beginning the process of constructing memories of him/her
- Coaxing some to speak; others to be silent
- Writing the eulogy, planning the service
- Addressing halachic, pastoral issues as they arise

If possible, helping the family decide re: shmirah, tahara, casket, type of committal (up, down, cremation, etc.), place of burial, length and nature of shivah

Working with the community to provide comfort and support

Hevra Kadisha

Tahara

Tachrichim

Embalming
Shmirah
Obituary
Death certificate
Announcing Shivah
Pallbearers
Flowers, music
Special needs: Delayed burial, burial in Israel, suspected suicide, transporting body, etc.

Assigned Reading: A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort, Part IV (pp. 65-116), JIODAM, pp. 108-128

Text Study:
S.A.Y.D. 341: 1, 5
Moed Katan 27 a-b (The way it used to be done v. the way we (try to) do it today)

6. Funeral Preparations  NOTE: During the week of November 3rd, class will not meet during our regularly scheduled time. Instead, we will meet in the afternoon (time to be determined) at a local funeral home, where we will hear a presentation by a funeral director and also, possibly, a representative of a local Hevra Kadisha.

Assigned Reading:
JIODAM, Chapter 3 (“Hevra Kadisha: The Holy Society”) pp. 81 – 107
(By this time, you should have read and studied Sanhedrin 46a-47a. (See Unit 1.) Also, you should already have completed the assignment to attend and analyze the role of the officiant at a funeral. Papers are due by November 24th.)

7. The Funeral: The Art of the Hesped – and everything else
“Just as the dead are called to account, so too are the eulogizers and those who answer ‘Amen’ to them!”
K’shem she-nifrain min ha-metim, Kach nifrain min haspdanim, u’min ha-onin akhareihen!
(B. Brachot 62a)

Rav Sheshet said: The reward for a eulogy is commensurate with the lamentation [it produces].” (B. Berachot 6b)
Writing and revising the eulogy
Dealing with the family, the funeral directors, and the other eulogizers
Organizing, orchestrating, facilitating
   Officiating at k’riaḥ, the funeral, the procession (Ps.90), the burial
   Decisions at the graveside: proper procedures
   How much of the grave to fill, and by whom; coping with the unexpected
   Tsidduk Ha Din, Kaddish, HaMakom Yinachem, Two lines. Washing Hands
   Se’udat Havra’ah
   Deciding when to pay a shiva call – or two

Assigned Reading:
A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort, Part V: The Funeral (pp. 122-129) (not bad advice, especially #3 on p. 128)

Assigned Texts
Skim the English translation of B. Moed Katan 25b – 28b to get a flavor for traditional laments.

ALSO: MUST READ AND NEVER FORGET: S.A.,Y.D., 344:1

8. The Milestones of Mourning, Part I: Shiva

   “Rav Papa said: The reward for attending a shiva house is proportional to its silence.”
   (B. Berachot 6b)

   When 7 = 3

   Creating, sustaining proper expectations within a congregation or community

   Helping those who cannot or don’t wish to mourn

   Organizing services in the house of mourning

   Rules and regulations: what can and can’t the mourner do?

   How and when to pay a shiva call: What to say, What not to say, What to do, What not to do.

   Shabbat during the shiva week

   Yom Tov during the shiva week

Assigned Reading:
9. Subsequent Milestones: Shloshim, Shanah, Yahrzeit, Yizkor

Parents v. other losses
Diminishing intensity of grief
Yizkor during the first year
Staying in touch
Reading and journaling
Inscribing the monument
Observing the yahrzeit
Helping a family to prepare for, and officiating at an unveiling

Assigned Reading
A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort, Part 8: Shloshim to Yizkor (pp. 239 – 284)

JIODAM:
“A Year of Grieving, A Year of Growing,” by Shammai Kanter (pp. 174 – 177)
“Saying Kaddish: The Making of a “Regular”, by Marian Henriquez Neudel
(pp. 177 – 182)
“The Five Stages of Grief,” by Linda Pastor (pp. 184 – 186)

10. Special Topics

11. Life After Death: from every perspective

“Weep ye not for the dead, nor bemoan him.” (Jeremiah 22:10)
That is, “Weep not for the dead” -- in excess; “nor bemoan him” -- beyond measure.
How is this to be fulfilled? Three days for weeping (bechi); seven days for lamentation (hesped); thirty days to refrain from cutting one’s hair and wearing pressed clothing. Beyond that, the Holy One says, “You shouldn’t be more compassionate toward [the departed] than I!” (B. Moed Katan 27b)

Helping the bereaved – even after that first year.
Remembering their losses.

Conducting Yizkor services

What do we believe re: resurrection *(tehiyat ha-meitim)*, the world to come *(olam ha-bah)*, and the Messianic Era *(bi’at ha-mashiach, y’mot ha-mashiach)*?

**Assigned Reading:**

**JIODAM:**

“Diary of a Young Widow,” by Gail Katz (pp. 207 – 219)

“After the Year, What?” by Arlene Rossen Cardozo (pp. 200 – 207)

Chapter Eleven: “Do We Believe in An Afterlife?” (pp. 309 – 353)

**Assigned Text:** *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, Chapter 8.

**12. Concluding Reflections**

“*[God]* will destroy death forever

And will wipe the tears away from every face!”

Isaiah 25:8 (quoted at the end of *Yoreh Deah*)

“*God gives strength to the weary*” – “*Notein la-ya-ef koach*”

Isaiah 40: 29

**Assigned Reading:**

**JIODAM:** Chapter Twelve: “What Do We Need Death For?” by Jack Riemer (pp. 354-359)

S.A.Y.D. 394:1

(see also B. Moed Katan 27b)
Hilkhot Avelut  Bibliography
Fall 2015
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins

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Tukazinsky, Yecheil Michael, Gesher HaHayyim ("The Bridge of Life"), 3 parts, 2 volumes (Hebrew), Jerusalem, Israel (1947) (a helpful resource to own) (available on-line at www.hebrewbooks.org)


**RABBINIC SOURCES**

B. Moed Katan, Chapter Three (“Eilu M’galchin”)

B. Sanhedrin 46a – 47b

Evel Rabbati (Massekhet S’machot)

Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah: Hilchot Evel; Hilchot Teshuvah* (Chapter 8)

Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah, Simanim 335 – 403 (will be provided in class)