
Faith perspective: supporting Jewish people with life limiting conditions, and at the end of life

This short summary is intended as guidance to non-Jewish practitioners working with Jewish people. It includes information to help when planning to talk to individuals about their death, supporting them and their families, and offering care and support at the time of death and during bereavement.

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Introduction

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This is not a detailed description of Judaism, but does draw attention to factors that are important in providing person centred care and support.

If the person you are working with is not currently a synagogue member, then this may be something to talk about, as they will need to provide evidence that they are Jewish before they can be given a Jewish burial.

Culture, spirituality and the individual

The way in which an individual connects to their faith and culture varies from person to person, and can change over time. The most important thing is to talk to the person you are working with to find out about them. When working with someone who has a life limiting condition, or who is close to dying, understanding that person's interpretation of their Jewishness is important. People live complex lives, and may blend their Jewishness with more secular approaches, or they may have a spiritual understanding that incorporates other beliefs too. This can create conflict, both for the person, and for their family. With the person's permission, including family in the discussions about how they wish to manage their illness and death can help identify and resolve any conflicts before they create problems. As a worker, it may be a part of your role to help people to resolve disagreements so that there is a shared understanding of what will happen as a person reaches the final stages of their life.

If the person you are working with needs to be admitted to hospital, or a home, or is going to have support with meals, you need to ensure that they can be given kosher food, which means not only considering what they will eat, but also the way in which it is prepared. Individual traditions vary, so always ask the person what they need.

Talking about dying

In Judaism the body is regarded as a vessel, owned by G-d, which houses the soul. This means that it is in G-d's gift to decide what will happen to the body, including when death will happen. For some Jewish people, this means that death cannot be spoken of. It also has implications for treatment and intervention. As a worker, this can make talking about advance care planning a very sensitive matter. It may be that either the person or family members feel it is wrong to discuss aspects of how someone's end of life may be managed. However, this does not mean that

discussing treatment options is not possible, but it is important to be sensitive to this aspect of Jewish belief.

The last days of life

The Jewish understanding of suffering has implications for how illness, death and dying are approached. Compassion towards those who are suffering, and alleviating the suffering of others during illness and dying can override other aspects of Jewish life. For example, the Sabbath is a holy day when Jewish people focus on family life and the worship of G-d above all else, but if someone suffers a medical emergency, or is in great pain on the Sabbath, then people would still act to help them.

In the days leading up to death there are often conflicts and complexities that affect decisions about treatment or otherwise. This is not only the case when people are Jewish, but there are specific aspects of the Jewish faith that can affect people's decision making.

Only G-d can decide when a person should die

For some people this means that it is wrong to choose not to accept treatment or intervention. Even if the individual has made it clear they do not wish to be given potentially lifesaving intervention when they are close to death, if they are unable to state this at the time themselves, their relatives may insist upon treatment being given.

The sanctity of life is paramount

Because life is sacred, it should be maintained as long as possible. One of the ways this is done is by feeding the very ill. For some people using pureed food, or other ways of providing nutrition, such as peg feeding, do not count, so they may wish to continue giving solid food. It is important to talk about this with the person, and with their loved ones, including explaining how in the last stages of life the body begins to shut down, so that feeding solid food cannot help, but that other ways to provide nutrition for so long as it is needed can ease suffering and help the person as they move towards death.

Death and burial

If you are working with someone who is a member of a synagogue, the synagogue community will offer ongoing support, and will also deal with practicalities around the person's death and burial. This includes meeting the costs of burial. If the person has led a secular life, and is not formally linked to a synagogue, they will need to provide evidence of being Jewish if they want a Jewish burial. This is best done as early as possible, as gathering the evidence can take time. There are various ways this can be done, including producing parents' religious marriage contract (Ketubah), or by evidencing family lineage by locating where relatives are buried. The United Synagogue website has a search facility for locating where

relatives are buried www.theus.org.uk. However, people who are not members of a synagogue must cover the costs for their funeral (around £16-20,000, paid by the synagogue for members). There are some charitable foundations who may either contribute, or cover the whole cost.

It is important to some Jewish people to atone (Vidui) before their death. The atonement prayers can be said by the person themselves, or by those with them as they are dying (it should not be forced upon).

For Jewish people it is important that burial takes place as soon as possible. This is because in the Jewish faith it is believed that the soul cannot fully leave the body until burial has taken place, it is in limbo between the two worlds until the body is buried. There are certain exceptions to this: if a post mortem is required, some people will seek the Rabbi's permission for this, others will not.

Logistically the documentation has to be in order for a burial to take place and often immediate family wish to attend the funeral. Sometimes a MRI scan is an option to prevent a post mortem. Post mortem should be handled via the synagogue.

If a person dies on the Sabbath, their body will not be collected until the next day. However, there are approved funeral directors who can take the body to their premises until the next day. The local synagogue will know who these are.

The grieving period

In Judaism there is a defined structure to the grieving process. Depending on familial closeness to the person, this is anything between one week and a year.

Days one to seven: Shiva (sitting Shiva) First degree relatives (the immediate family including parents, spouses, siblings and children) remain in the home of the dead person, or of their immediate family. Sometimes family members may wish to sit Shiva in the residential or nursing home where their loved one lived, and may ask to use their room for this purpose.

Men do not shave, television is not watched and some people cover all mirrors during Shiva.

Visitors are received throughout the period. Visitors do not initiate conversation about the dead person, but may respond if someone sitting Shiva initiates. If food is offered, it is respectful to accept (and disrespectful to refuse). Gifts of food may be brought, but not flowers.

It is considered a sign of respect to visit the Shiva household, and anyone who provided care and support to the deceased is welcomed. Women visiting should

consider their dress, wearing simple and modest clothes; skirts or dresses rather than trousers. Visiting the Shiva house, or attending the funeral is a Mitzva (good deed).

Days one to thirty: Shloshim The mourning period that follows Shiva. This time marks the beginning of a return to everyday activities; mourners will begin to leave the Shiva house, although some mourning rituals, such as men not shaving, continue. During Shloshim the children of the person who has died pray each morning and night for the safe passage of their soul.

Glossary

HALACHA Jewish Law

KETUBAH Marriage contract

KOSHER FOOD is food prepared according to Jewish law as laid out in the Torah. These rules include:

- meat and dairy must be kept separate; they cannot be prepared or eaten together. A minimum of three hours must pass between eating meat and dairy. Kosher kitchens have separate preparation areas and utensils for this purpose
- any animals or poultry that are eaten must be slaughtered in accordance with kosher requirements. Certain animals are not kosher, eg: pig and shellfish are forbidden
- any processed foods or drinks must be kosher certified www.kosher.org.uk.

MITZVA A good deed.

THE TORAH The religious books that form the basis of the Jewish faith. Reading from the Torah is an essential element of worship.

VIDUI Confession, atonement.

Resources

The Jewish Year Book

This is a directory and guide to Jewish institutions and religious, social, educational, cultural and welfare organisations in Britain. It includes a calendar of festivals, and is updated annually.

www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/london/index.html

This website lists Jewish cemeteries in London.

www.shiva.com

This website gives a detailed explanation of Jewish mourning rituals.

www.jewishcare.org.uk

This website details the range of resources provided by Jewish Care, the majority of which are in London and the Home Counties. Jewish Care also operates a helpline, open to anyone needing information or support: **Jewish Care Direct** 020 8922 2222 or email helpline@jcare.org

www.jewishgen.org

This is the website of Jewish Communities and Records organisation. Its aim is to record details of all Jewish communities and congregations that have ever existed in the United Kingdom.