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# TO MOURN A CHILD

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Jewish Responses to Neonatal  
and Childhood Death

*Edited by*

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*and*

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*To Mourn a Child: Jewish Responses to Neonatal and Childhood Death*

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*T*hose who bury a child are forgiven all their sins.

– TALMUD BERAKHOT 5A

## Foreword

*Tzvi Hersh Weinreb*

“THIS IS A GOOD book. I wish I had it long ago, at those times when I really needed it.”

It is rare to have such a reaction to the books we read, even to those which we find interesting. But occasionally, we do come across books which we find practical and useful, and therefore wish that we had access to them at some important point in our past.

*To Mourn a Child* is such a book. As I began to peruse it chapter by chapter, I kept thinking of times in my professional careers and in my personal life when this book would have been a handy, and in some cases an absolutely essential, companion and resource.

As a pulpit rabbi and as a practicing psychologist, I have often encountered situations for which my training left me totally unprepared. The most powerful and poignant of those situations was facing parents who had lost their child. Others in my former professions are surely familiar with the temptation to avoid confronting parents in a state of grief. Yet, such confrontations are inevitable.

What does one say to a parent who is overcome by his or her emotions and feels that his or her world has come to an end? The difficulty of responding in such a situation is painfully compounded when the parent looks at the rabbi eye to eye and says, “You are the rabbi! You should have the answer! Why has this happened to me? Why has God taken my precious little treasure from me?”

Does Jewish theology have answers to such questions? Should those theological answers be provided to parents who are in the throes of grief? Which *halakhic* practices can be helpful to such parents, and which may be suspended in such tragic circumstances?

No less difficult is the position of the mental health professional who

is asked to assist parents in coping with their boundless grief. What can be done to guide a bereaved parent through the tortuous stages of grief and mourning? How can one distinguish between normal reactions to tragic loss and pathological reactions which require special intervention? How can one assist others in the family, whether young siblings or aged grandparents of the deceased? What advice can we give to others who wish to help?

But it is not only the congregational rabbi or professional counselor who faces great difficulty in the encounter with those who suffered the unspeakable loss of a child. Every good friend and neighbor, colleague and casual acquaintance, faces the same difficulties. He or she correctly wonders as to whether anything should be said at all, and often fail to realize how helpful his or her very presence can be. What resources do such people have when tragedy strikes?

I especially remember the summer when I helped lead a group of bereaved parents as they spent an intense week together struggling to gain a perspective on the tragedies which beset them. It was the summer that the Jewish world learned about the horrible murder of young Leiby Kletzky, and reacted with such great compassion to his distraught parents. How ill-prepared I was, as were the other group leaders, for the reactions of the participants. Many of them felt resentful because so many thousands were moved by the plight of Leiby's parents, while so few even knew about their losses, which received no publicity and little attention.

How instructive it was to learn how some in the group were ready to abandon their faith in God, while others found their faith reinforced by their tragic loss. How important it was to learn about the therapeutic power of hearing from others who experienced such horrible pain, and how healing it is to know that one is not alone.

Not every bereaved parent has access to such group experiences. But with the appearance of this book, bereaved parents will also learn that they are not alone and that others, too many others, have walked the same sad path. Furthermore, the book will provide them with suggestions as to where they can turn for solace and consolation.

The editors of *To Mourn a Child* deserve the gratitude of the entire Jewish community for providing an invaluable resource for those who cope with loss and for all those who join them in their sorrow. They have gathered an impressive array of essays which, without exception, are



literate, intelligent, and helpful, and which express the noblest ideals of the Jewish tradition.

The reader will find that, depending upon his or her circumstances, some of these essays will be of direct and immediate assistance, while others will be read with interest but seem less relevant. Be assured that those essays too will prove useful, perhaps indirectly, and perhaps on some future occasion. But each and every essay will be emotionally moving and spiritually edifying.

As Executive Vice President, Emeritus of the Orthodox Union, I am encouraged to see that the Orthodox Jewish community has been blessed with so many sensitive and articulate writers and thinkers of distinction.

I am proud that the Orthodox Union and its OU PRESS are making this volume available to our constituency and to the world beyond.

Together with all of humanity, I look forward to the day when “the Lord Almighty will wipe the tears off the faces of all mankind, and dispel death forever.”

## Introduction

*Jeffrey Saks*

*A* day-old child who dies . . . is to his father and mother  
and family like a full-grown bridegroom.

– MISHNAH NIDDAH 5:3

Kind people have said to me ‘She is with God.’ In one  
sense that is most certain. She is, like God, incompre-  
hensible and unimaginable.

– C.S. LEWIS, *A GRIEF OBSERVED*

**A**S THE TITLE INDICATES, this volume addresses mourning the death of a child. Some of these essays deal with miscarriage or neonatal death, while others speak to the death of older children. Parents who experience such a loss are initiated into the unenviable fellowship of the *shakhul*, the Hebrew term reserved for the special category of bereaved parents. (See, for example, Gen. 27:45, 42:36, 43:14.)

While there are a number of other books that address both the general issue of mourning in the Jewish tradition and the special needs of the *shakhul*, we saw a need to gather between two covers a collection of essays that could be of comfort to grieving parents and offer insights to their friends and family members – as well as educators, rabbis, and other counselors – who glimpse the bereaved from what is surely another world. We included some well-known pieces as well as commissioning some newer voices in order to produce this anthology of reflections by parents on the loss of children from within a Jewish frame of reference, supplemented by writings of wise counselors on the experience of suffering such tragedies.

For myself, working as co-editor of this volume invoked the experi-

ence of watching my premature daughter die at but a few days old, and then navigating blindly and in isolation the emotional needs of mourning without the framework of *halakhic* ritual. The Bosnian-American novelist Aleksandar Hemon described the days of his daughter's final illness this way: "One early morning, driving to the hospital, I saw a number of able-bodied, energetic runners progressing along toward the sunny lakefront, and I had a strong physical sensation of being in an aquarium: I could see out, the people could see me (if they chose to pay attention), *but we were living and breathing in entirely different environments.*"

Looking through the thin glass pane of my own "aquarium" while numbly sitting in *shul* on the Friday night following her death, I wanted to shout out to those on the other side: "I had a daughter, her name was Neshama Chaya, she lived and died this week, she spent her whole short life in the NICU, and none of you will ever know her!"

Kind people tried to tell us from their side of the glass, "You're young, you can have other children," and this, thank God, proved to be true, yet entirely missed *half* the point. When parents lose a child, part of the grief is really for themselves – for however many months they anticipated the arrival, or for however many years they parented and watched them grow, so much of the parents' life becomes enwrapped in the anxiety and expectation connected with the child – emotionally, mentally, spiritually and even physically. With their death, the parents mourn not only the child, but their own lost expectations, hopes, and dreams as well. The idea that one can have other children is indeed a comfort. And yet, *that* child is gone from this world forever, leaving an indelible mark, and emotional scar, on the mother and father.

The Torah tells us that when Jacob is first reunited with Joseph after twenty-two years of believing his beloved son was dead, Joseph "appeared to him, and he fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck for a long time" (Gen. 46:29). Jacob's passive behavior during the encounter with his long lost son is puzzling – only Joseph is falling and weeping; what was Jacob doing? Rashi, citing the *Midrash Aggada*, suggests that the patriarch was occupied with the recitation of *Kriyat Shema*.

But another explanation is possible. The Torah doesn't state that Jacob wept, because it would be absolutely tautological to do so. We're not told that the father is crying now, because he's been crying for over two decades! "And all his sons and all his daughters arose to console him, but he refused to be consoled, for he said, 'Because I will descend on

account of my son as a mourner to the grave,' and his father wept for him" (Gen. 37:35). When a child dies, part of the parent never stops crying, even as other parts may heal.

The *Shulhan Arukh* (*Yoreh Deah* 263:5) records that before a miscarried fetus is buried he or she should be given a Jewish name (and boys should be circumcised), and through this merit be remembered for resurrection in the World to Come. Another tradition records that giving a name will help the unconsolated parents recognize the child in the *Olam Ha-Ba*.

While my wife and I await that day, we see Neshama Chaya in our dreams and moments of quiet reflection.