

Death and Dying in the Jewish Tradition

by Rabbi Nathan Goldberg



Writing about Jewish worship confronts the author with many difficulties. Imagine trying to explain the Christian approach to this subject: one would have to include everything from the liturgical to the free church tradition—from Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism to the Pentecostal churches, from high church Episcopalianism to Unitarianism and all points in between. This author has chosen texts from the more traditional elements in Judaism. The Jewish tradition is, however, far richer than this one strand. The resources listed at the end of this section can help you fill in any gaps in your understanding.

Prayer before Dying

It is written that everyone who makes his confession before his death has a share in the world to come (San.6:2).

The following prayer is traditionally said by the dying. Its historical nucleus is the confession of sins (May my death be an atonement for all my sins that I have committed before you). It has, however, been embellished over the years to include a declaration of absolute trust in God and to end with the *Shema*—the affirmation of faith based on Deuteronomy 6:4.

I give thanks to You, Lord my G-D and G-D of my ancestors, in whose hands is my healing and death, for all the life and necessities of life you have given me. May it be your will that I receive a whole recovery, and if G-D forbid I die, may my death be an atonement for all my sins that I have committed before you. Give me my portion in the Garden of Eden, and may I merit a place in the world to come with the righteous. G-D, please heal me.

I believe wholly in the true G-D, whose name is Truth, and in the thirteen basic principles. I forgive everyone and ask that everyone forgive me.

Who is like you, G-D, forgiving and overlooking iniquity for the remnant of G-D's people; who does not remain in anger for he desires to be kind.

He will return us in compassion, conquer our sins, and cast into the sea all our iniquities.

In your hand I trust my spirit. Redeem me, O Lord, the true G-D.

May the Lord bless and guard you. May the Lord shine his countenance on you and be gracious with you. May he turn his face to you and bless you with peace.

For your salvation I long, G-D, I long for your salvation; G-D, for your salvation I long.

The Lord is the true G-D as is Moses and the Torah.

Blessed is the name of his honorable kingdom forever.

Psalms 121, 130, and 91. These psalms may be recited at choice. Each of them, but perhaps especially Psalm 91 expresses the worshiper's absolute trust in G-D even as it offers G-D's reassurance to the worshiper that all will be well. (Psalm 91 has traditionally been recited after a death by mourners carrying the corpse to the cemetery, and for the same reasons: that mourners may be reassured in the midst of sadness and rededicated in trust.)

Master of the universe who reigned before the creation. At the time when all was made according to his desire, G-D was proclaimed king. After all has ceased, he will reign alone. He was, he is, and he shall be in glory. He is one; there is no other to compare with him. Without beginning, without end, power and dominion belong to him. He is my banner and shelter, the portion of my cup on the day I call. In G-D's hands I entrust my spirit, at the time of sleeping and awakening. As long as my spirit is with me, G-D is mine and I will not be afraid.

Therefore we hope before you, Lord our G-D, to speedily experience your powerful glory when idols shall be removed from the land and false gods will be destroyed. A perfect world shall be in G-D's kingdom. All humans will call your name and all the wicked will face you. All will know that every knee must bend and every mouth must swear by you. Before you, Lord our G-D, they will bend and prostrate, and give honor to your name in grace. They will embrace the yoke of your kingdom, and you will hasten to lead them forever. For dominion is yours and you shall reign in honor for eternity. As it is written in your Torah, the Lord shall reign forever and it is said, the Lord will rule over all the land and on that day the Lord shall be one and his name one.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is G-D, the Lord is one.

Blessed is the name of G-D's honorable kingdom forever.

The Lord is G-D.

After the Time of Death

The Lord has given; the Lord has taken away. Blessed is the name of the Lord for now and forever.

The Rock, his work is pure for all his ways are just. He is a G-D of faith without blemish, righteous and fair is He.

Other Jewish prayers That May Be Used to Comfort the Dying

In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.

In the glowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember them.

In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember them.

In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer, we remember them.

In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn, we remember them.

In the beginning of the year and when it ends, we remember them.
When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember them.
When we are lost and sick at heart, we remember them.
When we have joys we yearn to share, we remember them.
So long as we live, they too shall live, for they are now a part of us, as
We remember them.

— Jewish prayer, from the *Rabbi's Manual*, 1988

Birth is a beginning and Death a destination;
From childhood to maturity and youth to age,
From innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing,
From weakness to strength or strength to weakness, and back again,
From health to sickness and back, we pray, to health again,
From offense to forgiveness, from loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion,
From grief to understanding, from fear to faith, from defeat to defeat
Until looking backward or ahead, we see that
Victory lies not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the Journey, stage by stage.

— traditional Yom Kippur prayer

Further Resources

1. Rabbi Nathan Goldberg, Jewish Community Chaplain will be glad to answer any inquiries you may have or link you to other local Jewish resources. He can be reached by phone at 913 498-7416.
2. Maurice Lamm, 1972. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishing. Rabbi Lamm's text is widely used by both liberal and Orthodox seminaries.
3. Smith Weintraub, editor. 1994. *Healing of Soul, Healing of Body*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing. This book is a compendium of essays by rabbis of all denominations dealing with the use of psalms in healing.