
TO MOURN
A CHILD

Jewish Responses to Neonatal
and Childhood Death

Edited by

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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, incomprehensible and unimaginable.

– C.S. LEWIS, *A GRIEF OBSERVED*

AS 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.