

JEWISH WAYS OF DEATH AND MOURNING



taught by

Rabbi David Edleson and Rabbi Amy Small

Sundays, 11 am

January 10, 17, 24

Want to learn more about Jewish approaches to death, burial and mourning? Wonder about your choices and options? This class will explore you both traditional and modern approaches to this important issue. The epidemic reminds us of our mortality, so use this opportunity to reflect more deeply on your choices.



Dec 30, 2020
16 Tevet 5781 ב"ט

Hello Temple Sinai,

In the Jewish world, Rosh HaShanah has become our official “New Year” from which we count our calendar, but our tradition actually has four new years, each counting different periods, much like we have ‘calendar year’, ‘fiscal year’, and ‘contract year’. The oldest of our new years was Pesach, and spring was called the ‘first season.’ That makes sense in an agricultural society, particularly one in northern Israel that has a temperate climate and spring starts the growing season.

There was also Tu Bi Sh’vat, the New Year for counting the age of Trees, to make sure the tree was old enough to start picking its fruit for consumption. There is also a new year for kings, from which a king’s reign was counted in biblical times.

As Americans we live in the years of the current calendar, one that was inherited from ancient Rome. January 1st is in many ways an arbitrary date, one not rooted in the stars, planets, equinoxes, or solstices. Still, growing up with it and seeing it celebrated in so many places each year, it has taken on a power of its own. It is part of the American winter holiday cycle, and unlike Christmas, one that is secular. There is something else that is lovely about New Years. It is hopeful, forward looking, and an affirmation that with all the years troubles, it is deeply good to be alive and to be able to think of the future. We look back at the past year in order to say goodbye to it and to turn the coming year. Much like the High Holy Days, it is a way of letting go of the past and focusing on the future. New Years resolutions, whether or not they are fulfilled, are a testament to our belief that change is possible.

COVID has claimed close to two million (reported) lives worldwide, and we are approaching 350,000 in the US. Each of us is, the Talmud teaches, a world, and so those worlds have vanished. We have been very fortunate in Vermont, particularly under the guidance of Dr. Mark Levine, but still the epidemic has taken mothers, sisters, and grandparents from our community.

So this year, even as we are hopeful about the future, about the vaccine, about the return to more normal interactions with one another, we are aware of death and the fragility of life. We make our resolutions and our toasts in the face of that. Of course, we always are in that context but this year it is particularly present of mind.

In response to that, Rabbi Amy Small and I will be offering three classes in January about Jewish Ways of Death and Mourning. The Spiritual Committee and I will also be sending out a questionnaire to help you consider making plans for your death and funeral, so that those left behind will have more guidance, and to give you a reason to talk through some of these uncomfortable matters while you

are alive. If we develop enough interest, I would like to set up a training for any Sinai members who would like to be part of a *Hevra Kadisha*, those who bathe and prepare the dead for Jewish burial.

I know that is a somber note for our secular New Year, but I think it is our mortality that makes each new year so precious, and it is the human spirit that affirms hope and joy in the face of death. As Jews, we do the same each time we recite the Mourners' Kaddish that praises the gift of life. We have always held onto hope and to doing what we can in these short lives to leave the world a little better for our having been here. Tikun Olam is, like a New Year's resolution, an affirmation in our belief that change is possible. That **we** can change. Change is indeed inevitable and so this year, let's resolve and toast to our commitment to reach just a bit higher and do good in the world. This year, let's lean in to hope. Then, let's do something to make it real.

Here's to a 2021 that rewards our hopes and the renews our connections.

We are having services this Shabbat. Here are brief descriptions:

KABBALAT SHABBAT FRIDAY NIGHT at 6:30

We'll share shabbat and New Year's resolutions, and toast at our Kiddush. It will be our usual song-filled shabbat, and a great way to start the New Year.

SATURDAY MORNING SERVICE AND TORAH STUDY

We will have our chanted **Shacharit** service at **9:30**.

TORAH STUDY begins at **10:30**. This week, we complete the Book of Genesis with our study of **Vay'chi**, Genesis 47:28-50:26 in which Jacob and the children of Israel settle with Joseph in Egypt, and both Jacob and Joseph die. Both leave very specific instructions about their burial, and the Torah describes how their bodies were cared for and mourned. We will read this text, and use it as an opportunity to think about this ourselves. Why does it matter where we are buried? What are our obligations to the dead? Why is mourning in community so important in Jewish tradition? These and other questions will be explored through our study **Vay'chi**. Click [HERE](#) to jump to the URJ page on this portion, and [HERE](#) for the text itself on Sefaria.

Blessings,

David