



A Messianic Jewish Life Cycle

Taught by Rabbi Moshe (Marty) Cohen

Birth and the First Month of Life

Learn about Jewish customs relating to birth, naming, circumcision, adoption, and redemption of the firstborn.

Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation

Learn about the Jewish coming-of-age ceremonies: Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation.

Marriage

Learn about the Jewish concept of finding your soul mate, Jewish weddings, the process of acquiring a spouse, and the marital relationship.

Divorce

Learn about the Jewish attitude toward divorce and the procedures involved in Jewish divorce.

Life, Death and Mourning

Learn about the Jewish attitude toward the preservation of life, toward death, and Jewish mourning practices.

Olam Ha-Ba: The Afterlife

Learn about Jewish beliefs regarding the afterlife, the World to Come, resurrection and reincarnation.

Birth and the First Month of Life

Birth

In Jewish law, although the human soul exists before birth, human life begins at birth, that is, at the time when the child is more than halfway emerged from the mother's body.

Most Believers subscribe to a different philosophy. Most of us believe that life begins at conception. This would make the sin of abortion abominable and bring a curse on the land because the spilling of innocent blood is such a sin.

Those of us of a certain age believe that life truly begins when your youngest child is married and lives in his or her own house!!!

Traditional Judaism completely rejects the notion of original sin. According to Judaism, a child is born pure, completely free from sin. We pray daily "Oh G-d, the soul which you gave me is pure. You created it, you fashioned it, You breathed it into me." And although I agree that the soul of a child is pure, that is his mind, will and emotions; it takes very little time before parents can see that the spirit of a child is wicked and evil. At a very young age, children choose to cry just to get attention, to touch things they have been told not to touch and to run into the street, even though they have been warned of the danger.

After a child is born, the father is usually given the honor of an aliyah (an opportunity to bless the reading of the Torah) in synagogue at the next opportunity. At that time, a blessing is recited for the health of the mother and the child. If the child is a girl, she is named at that time.

Baby Showers

Although attitudes towards this are changing, Jews traditionally did not hold baby showers before the baby was born. In fact, traditionally Jewish parents did not even purchase things for the baby or discuss baby names until the baby was born. The usual reason given for this custom is pure superstition: drawing attention to the baby also draws bad luck to the baby.

However, there are solid psychological reasons for this custom as well: the old proverb about not counting your chickens before they've hatched. There was a time when miscarriages, stillborn babies and infant mortality were quite common.

Consider the pain of a parent who has lost a potential child but is left with piles of gifts that the baby will never use, gifts that they have to return, reopening the wound each time. Although this sort of thing is less common today than it was a century ago, it still happens

In general, you should be guided by the wishes of the parents in these matters. Many Jewish couples today would not think twice about having a baby shower and might even be offended if their friends did not throw one. But some Jewish couples feel strongly about the custom not to have one until after the baby is born, and if that is what they want then you should respect their wishes and wait until after the baby is born to give the new parents presents. If you find it difficult to restrain yourself, consider: how will you feel if, G-d forbid, something should happen to the child after you throw a shower in violation of the parents' wishes?

Naming a Child

The formal Hebrew name is used in Jewish rituals, primarily in calling the person to the Torah for an aliyah, or in the ketubah (marriage contract).

A girl's name is officially given in synagogue when the father takes an aliyah after the birth, discussed above. A boy's name is given during the brit milah (ritual circumcision).

The standard form of a Hebrew name for a male is [child's name] ben [father's name]. For a female, the form is [child's name] bat [mother's name]. If the child is a kohein, the suffix ha-Kohein is added. If the child is of the tribe of Levi, the subject Ha-Levi is added.

There are no formal religious requirements for naming a child. The name has no inherent religious significance.

It is customary among Ashkenazic Jews to name a child after a recently deceased relative. This custom comes partly from a desire to honor the dead relative, and partly from superstition against naming a child after a living relative. It is almost unheard of for an Ashkenazic Jew to be named after his own father, though it does occasionally happen. Among Sephardic Jews, it is not unusual to name a child after a parent or living relative.

Brit Milah: Circumcision

Of all of the commandments in Judaism, the brit milah (literally, Covenant of Circumcision) is probably the one most universally observed. It is commonly referred to as a bris (covenant, using the Ashkenazic pronunciation). Even the most secular of Jews, who observe no other part of Judaism, almost always observe these laws. Of course, until quite recently, the majority of males in the United States were routinely circumcised, so this doesn't seem very surprising.

But keep in mind that there is more to the ritual of the brit milah than merely the process of physically removing the foreskin, and many otherwise non-observant Jews observe the entire ritual.

The commandment to circumcise is given at Gen. 17:10-14 and Lev. 12:3. The covenant was originally made with Abraham. It is the first commandment specific to the Jews.

Circumcision is performed only on males. Although some cultures have a practice of removing all or part of the woman's clitoris, often erroneously referred to as "female circumcision," that ritual has never been a part of Judaism.

Like so many Jewish commandments, the brit milah is commonly perceived to be a hygienic measure; however the biblical text states the reason for this commandment quite clearly: circumcision is an outward physical sign of the eternal covenant between G-d and the Jewish people. It is also a sign that the Jewish people will be perpetuated through the circumcised man. The health benefits of this practice are merely incidental. It is worth noting, however, that circumcised males have a lower risk of certain cancers, and the sexual partners of circumcised males also have a lower risk of certain cancers.

The commandment is binding upon both the father of the child and the child himself. If a father does not have his son circumcised, the son is obligated to have himself circumcised as soon as he becomes an adult. A person who is uncircumcised suffers the penalty of kareit, spiritual excision; in other words, regardless of how good a Jew he is in all other ways, a man has no place in the World to Come if he is uncircumcised.

Circumcision is performed on the eighth day of the child's life, during the day. The day the child is born counts as the first day, thus if the child is born on a Wednesday, he is circumcised on the following Wednesday. Keep in mind that Jewish days begin at sunset, so if the child is born on a Wednesday evening, he is circumcised the following Thursday.

Circumcisions are even performed on Shabbat, even though they involve the drawing of blood which is ordinarily forbidden on Shabbat. The Bible does not specify a reason for the choice of the eighth day; however, modern medicine has revealed that an infant's blood clotting mechanism stabilizes on the eighth day after birth. As with almost any commandment, circumcision can be postponed for health reasons.

Jewish law provides that where the child's health is at issue, circumcision must wait until seven days after a doctor declares the child healthy enough to undergo the procedure.

As with most Jewish life events, the ritual is followed by refreshments or a festive meal.

Pidyon ha-Ben: Redemption of the First Born

The first and best of all things belong to G-d. This is true even of the firstborn of children. Originally, it was intended that the firstborn would serve as the priests and Temple functionaries of Israel; however, after the incident of the Golden Calf, in which the tribe of Levi did not participate, G-d chose the tribe of Levi over the firstborn for this sacred role. This is explained in Num. 8:14-18. However, even though their place has been taken by the Levites, the firstborn still retain a certain degree of sanctity, and for this reason, they must be redeemed.

The ritual of redemption is referred to as pidyon ha-ben, literally, Redemption of the Son.

A firstborn son must be redeemed after he reaches 31 days of age. Ordinarily, the ritual is performed on the 31st day (the day of birth being the first day); however, the ritual cannot be performed on Shabbat because it involves the exchange of money. The child is redeemed by paying a small sum (five silver shekels in biblical times; today, usually five silver dollars) to a kohein (preferably a pious one familiar with the procedure) and performing a brief ritual. This procedure is commanded at Num. 18:15-16.

It is important to remember that rabbis are not necessarily koheins and koheins are not necessarily rabbis. Redemption from a rabbi is not valid unless the rabbi is also a kohein.

The ritual of pidyon ha-ben applies to a relatively small number of Jews. It applies only to the firstborn male child if it is born by natural childbirth.

Thus, if a female is the firstborn, no child in the family is subject to the ritual. If the first child is born by Caesarean section, the ritual does not apply to that child (nor, according to most sources, to any child born after that child). If the first conception ends in miscarriage after more than 40 days' term, it does not apply to any subsequent child. It does not apply to members of the tribe of Levi, or children born to a daughter of a member of the tribe of Levi.

I find it terribly interesting to note that only unclean animals and human beings are subject to commanded redemption.

Exodus 13:12-13

...you shall devote to the L-rd the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own; the males belong to the L-rd. "But every first offspring of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, but if

you do not redeem it, then you shall break its neck; and every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.

Adoption

There is no formal procedure of adoption in Jewish law. Adoption as it exists in civil law is irrelevant, because civil adoption is essentially a transfer of title from one parent to another, and in Jewish law, parents do not own their children. However, Judaism does have certain laws that are relevant in circumstances where a child is raised by someone other than the birth parents.

In most ways, the adoptive parents are to the child as any birth parent would be. The Talmud says that he who raises someone else's child is regarded as if he had actually brought him into the world physically. For those who cannot have children of their own, raising adoptive children satisfies the obligation to be fruitful and multiply.

And, according to Jewish law, although parents may disinherit their nature born children for causes of rebellion, an adopted child may never be dis-inherited.

Now, let's look at this phase of life from a Biblical perspective. When I am teaching difficult passages of Torah, some of my students always seem to ask me, "How do we apply that to our lives today?"

Being born Jewish or being adopted into a Jewish family are aspects of the traditional Jewish life cycle that have very little bearing on our lives today. We are born without any input in that decision whatsoever. But in order to become Messianic; to become a follower of Y'shua, ***we must be born again!***

So, how does the life cycle relate to this aspect of our lives? Well, I'm glad you asked. We are born Jewish -- or not -- but in order to become children of the Most High G-d, we must be born again. When we make that first step, it is unsure and a bit wobbly because we are just new born infants. We don't know how to do anything and we cannot take care of ourselves in a way that brings honor to our Father, not to the one who has led us into this new place. So, there is a great responsibility upon that spiritual mother of father who brings us into this life; just as there is on our natural parents.

But as infants, we too often want to go off and conquer the world; share our new found faith with everyone we pass; tell everyone how they too should come into this place and basically we become as obnoxious as a spoiled new born baby. But we have to mature before we can do anything worthwhile; and so there is a time, counted as eight days in the natural, but more like eight months to most new born Believers, before we can truly be considered part of the covenant people.

As far as the *Pidyon haBen*, all of us have already been bought with a price and are redeemed, not by five pieces of silver, but by the blood of the perfect Lamb of G-d.

Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah

"Bar Mitzvah" literally means "son of the commandment." "Bar" is "son" in Aramaic, which used to be the vernacular of the Jewish people. "Mitzvah" is "commandment" in both Hebrew and Aramaic. "Bat" is daughter in Hebrew and Aramaic. (The Ashkenazic pronunciation is "bas"). Technically, the term refers to the child who is coming of age, and it is strictly correct to refer to someone as "becoming a bar (or bat) mitzvah." However, the term is more commonly used to refer to the coming of age ceremony itself, and you are more likely to hear that someone is "having a bar mitzvah" or "invited to a bar mitzvah."

So what does it mean to become a bar mitzvah? Under Jewish Law, children are not obligated to observe the commandments, although they are encouraged to do so as much as possible to learn the obligations they will have as adults. At the age of 13 (12 for girls), children become obligated to observe the commandments. The bar mitzvah ceremony formally, publicly marks the assumption of that obligation, along with the corresponding right to take part in leading religious services, to count in a minyan (the minimum number of people needed to perform certain parts of religious services), to form binding contracts, to testify before religious courts and to marry.

A Jewish boy automatically becomes a bar mitzvah upon reaching the age of 13 years, and a girl upon reaching the age of 12 years. No ceremony is needed to confer these rights and obligations. The popular bar mitzvah ceremony is not required, and does not fulfill any commandment.

The bar or bat mitzvah is a relatively modern innovation, not mentioned in the Talmud, and the elaborate ceremonies and receptions that are commonplace today were unheard of as recently as a century ago.

In its earliest and most basic form, a bar mitzvah is the celebrant's first aliyah. During Shabbat services on a Saturday shortly after the child's 13th birthday, or even the Monday or Thursday weekday services immediately after the child's 13th birthday, the celebrant is called up to the Torah to recite a blessing over the weekly reading.

Today, it is common practice for the bar mitzvah celebrant to do much more than just say the blessing. It is most common for the celebrant to learn the entire haftarah portion, including its traditional chant, and recite that. In some congregations, the celebrant reads the entire weekly Torah portion, or leads part of the service, or leads the congregation in certain important prayers.

The celebrant is also generally required to make a speech, which traditionally begins with the phrase "today I am a man." The father traditionally recites a blessing thanking G-d for removing the burden of being responsible for the son's sins (because now the child is old enough to be held responsible for his own actions).

In modern times, the religious service is followed by a reception that is often as elaborate as a wedding reception.

It is important to note that a bar mitzvah is not the goal of a Jewish education, nor is it a graduation ceremony marking the end of a person's Jewish education. We are obligated to study Torah throughout our lives. To emphasize this point, some rabbis require a bar mitzvah student to sign an agreement promising to continue Jewish education after the bar mitzvah.

Sadly, an alarming number of Jewish parents today view the bar or bat mitzvah as the sole purpose of Jewish education, and treat it almost as a Jewish hazing ritual: I had to go through it, so you have to go through it, but don't worry, it will all be over soon and you'll never have to think about this stuff again.

Marriage

The Torah provides very little guidance with regard to the procedures of a marriage. The method of finding a spouse, the form of the wedding ceremony, and the nature of the marital relationship are all explained in the Talmud.

B'shert: Soul Mates

According to the Talmud, Rav Yehuda taught that 40 days before a male child is conceived, a voice from heaven announces whose daughter he is going to marry, literally a match made in heaven! In Yiddish, this perfect match is called "b'shert," a word meaning fate or destiny. The word "b'shert" can be used to refer to any kind of fortuitous good match, such as finding the perfect job or the perfect house, but it is usually used to refer to one's soul mate. There are a number of statements in the Talmud that would seem to contradict the idea of b'shert, most notably the many bits of advice on choosing a wife. Nevertheless, the idea has a strong hold within the Jewish community: look at any listing of Jewish personal ads and you're bound to find someone "Looking for my b'shert."

Finding your b'shert doesn't mean that your marriage will be trouble-free. Marriage, like everything worthwhile in life, requires dedication, effort and energy. Even when two people are meant for each other, it is possible for them to ruin their marriage. That is why Judaism allows divorce.

Although the first marriage is b'shert, it is still possible to have a good and happy marriage with a second spouse. The Talmud teaches that G-d also arranges second marriages, and a man's second wife is chosen according to his merits.

How do you know if you have found your b'shert? Should you hold off on marrying someone for fear that the person you want to marry might not be your b'shert, and there might be a better match out there waiting for you?

The traditional view is that you cannot know who your b'shert is, but once you get married, the person you married is by definition your b'shert, so you should not let concerns about finding your b'shert discourage you from marrying someone.

And while we're on the subject of G-d arranging marriages, I should share this delightful midrash: it is said that a Roman woman asked a rabbi, "if your G-d created the universe in six days, then what has he been doing with his time since then?"

The rabbi said that G-d has been arranging marriages. The Roman woman scoffed at this, saying that arranging marriages was a simple task, but the rabbi assured her that arranging marriages properly is as difficult as parting the Red Sea.

To prove the rabbi wrong, the Roman woman went home and took a thousand male slaves and a thousand female slaves and matched them up in marriages. The next day, the slaves appeared before her, one with a cracked skull, another with a broken leg, another with his eye gouged out, all asking to be released from their marriages. The woman went back to the rabbi and said, "There is no god like your G-d, and your Torah is true."

And those of us who desire to be the Bride of the Messiah should prepare ourselves well. We read in Revelation 19:7-8>>> *"Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.*"

And what are those righteous deeds? They are all spelled out in His instruction to us; in His Torah.

If we are going to be wed to the Messiah, we would do well to remember that he is a Jewish groom. He lives as an Orthodox Jewish Man. So we should be ready to become intimate with someone who eats a certain way;

worships according to certain traditions; keeps His house clean and free from distractions from Torah; and is always ready to do whatever He sees the Father doing.

Acquiring a Spouse

Mishnah Kiddushin 1:1 specifies that a woman is acquired (i.e., to be a wife) in three ways: through money, a contract, and sexual intercourse. Ordinarily, all three of these conditions are satisfied, although only one is necessary to affect a binding marriage.

Acquisition by money is normally satisfied by the wedding ring. It is important to note that although money is one way of "acquiring" a wife, the woman is not being bought and sold like a piece of property or a slave. This is obvious from the fact that the amount of money involved is nominal (according to the Mishnah, a perutah, a copper coin of the lowest denomination, was sufficient).

In addition, if the woman were being purchased like a piece of property, it would be possible for the husband to resell her, and clearly it is not. Rather, the wife's acceptance of the money is a symbolic way of demonstrating her acceptance of the husband, just like acceptance of the contract or the sexual intercourse.

To satisfy the requirements of acquisition by money, the ring must belong to the groom. It cannot be borrowed, although it can be a gift from a relative. It must be given to the wife irrevocably. In addition, the ring's value must be known to the wife, so that there can be no claim that the husband deceived her into marrying by misleading her as to its value.

In all cases, the Talmud specifies that a woman can be acquired only with her consent, and not without it. Kiddushim 2a-b.

As part of the wedding ceremony, the husband gives the wife a ketubah. The word "Ketubah" comes from the root Kaf-Tav-Beit, meaning "writing." The ketubah is also called the marriage contract.

The ketubah spells out the husband's obligations to the wife during marriage, conditions of inheritance upon his death, and obligations regarding the support of children of the marriage. It also provides for the wife's support in the event of divorce. There are standard conditions; however, additional conditions can be included by mutual agreement. Marriage agreements of this sort were commonplace in the ancient Semitic world.

The ketubah has much in common with prenuptial agreements, which are gaining popularity in the United States. In the U.S., such agreements were historically disfavored, because it was believed that planning for divorce would encourage divorce, and that people who considered the possibility of divorce shouldn't be marrying.

Although one rabbi in the Talmud expresses a similar opinion, the majority maintained that a ketubah discouraged divorce, by serving as a constant reminder of the husband's substantial financial obligations if he divorced his wife.

The ketubah is often a beautiful work of calligraphy, framed and displayed in the home.

The Process of Marriage: Kiddushin and Nisuin

The process of marriage occurs in two distinct stages: kiddushin (commonly translated as betrothal) and nisuin (full-fledged marriage). Kiddushin occurs when the woman accepts the money, contract or sexual relations offered by the prospective husband. And in this sense, “casual sex” does not exist in the Jewish life. **In fact, having sexual relations establishes the couple as wed.**

The word "kiddushin" comes from the root Qof-Dalet-Shin, meaning "sanctified." It reflects the sanctity of the marital relation. However, the root word also connotes something that is set aside for a specific (sacred) purpose, and the ritual of kiddushin sets aside the woman to be the wife of a particular man and no other.

Kiddushin is far more binding than an engagement as we understand the term in modern English; in fact, Rambam speaks of a period of engagement *before* the kiddushin. Once kiddushin is complete, the woman is legally the wife of the man. The relationship created by kiddushin can only be dissolved by death or divorce. However, the spouses do not live together at the time of the kiddushin, and the mutual obligations created by the marital relationship do not take effect until the nisuin is complete.

The nisuin (from a word meaning "elevation") completes the process of marriage. The husband brings the wife into his home and they begin their married life together.

In the past, the kiddushin and nisuin would routinely occur as much as a year apart. During that time, the husband would prepare a home for the new family. There was always a risk that during this long period of separation, the woman would discover that she wanted to marry another man, or the man would disappear, leaving the woman in the awkward state of being married but without a husband. **Today, the two ceremonies are normally performed together.**

Because marriage under Jewish law is essentially a private contractual agreement between a man and a woman, it does not require the presence of a rabbi or any other religious official. It is common, however, for rabbis to officiate, partly in imitation of the Christian practice and partly because the presence of a religious or civil official is required under United States civil law.

As you can see, it is very easy to make a marriage, so the rabbis instituted severe punishments (usually flogging and compelled divorce) where marriage was undertaken without proper planning and solemnity.

A Typical Wedding Ceremony

It is customary for the bride and groom not to see each other for a week preceding the wedding. On the Shabbat of that week, it is customary among Ashkenazic Jews for the groom to have an aliyah (the honor of reciting a blessing over the Torah reading). There are exuberant celebrations in the synagogue at this time. Throwing candy at the bride and groom to symbolize the sweetness of the event is common (Soft candy, of course! Usually Sunkist Fruit Gems, which are kosher).

Traditionally, the day before the wedding, both the bride and the groom fast.

Before the ceremony, the bride is veiled, in remembrance of the fact that Rebecca veiled her face when she was first brought to Isaac to be his wife.

The ceremony itself lasts 20-30 minutes, and consists of the kiddushin and the nisuin. For the kiddushin, the bride approaches and circles the groom. Two blessings are recited over wine: one the standard blessing over wine and the other regarding the commandments related to marriage. The man then places the ring on woman's

finger and says "Be sanctified (mekudeshet) to me with this ring in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel."

After the kiddushin is complete, the ketubah is read aloud.

The nisuin then proceeds. The bride and groom stand beneath the chuppah, a canopy held up by four poles, symbolic of their dwelling together and of the husband's bringing the wife into his home. The importance of the chuppah is so great that the wedding ceremony is sometimes referred to as the chuppah. The bride and groom recite seven blessings (sheva brakhos) in the presence of a minyan (prayer quorum of 10 adult Jewish men).

The essence of each of the seven blessings is:

1. ... who has created everything for his glory
2. ... who fashioned the Man
3. ... who fashioned the Man in His image ...
4. ... who gladdens Zion through her children
5. ... who gladdens groom and bride
6. ... who created joy and gladness ... who gladdens the groom with the bride
7. ... and the standard prayer over wine.

The couple then drinks the wine.

The groom smashes a glass (or a small symbolic piece of glass) with his right foot. In traditional Jewish circles, this is to symbolize the destruction of the Temple. To usit simply demonstrates that no one will ever drink of the cup with which the bride and groom were sanctified unto one another.

The couple then retires briefly to a completely private room, symbolic of the groom bringing the wife into his home.

This is followed by a festive meal, which is followed by a repetition of the sheva brakhos. Exuberant music and dancing traditionally accompany the ceremony and the reception.

You will rarely hear the traditional "Here Comes the Bride" wedding march at a Jewish wedding. This song, more accurately known as the Bridal Chorus from *Lohengrin*, was written by anti-semitic composer Richard Wagner. He was Hitler's favorite composer, and it is said that the Nazis used to broadcast Wagner's songs over the concentration camps.

For this reason, Jews have been understandably reluctant to play his music at our weddings. Awareness of this historical tidbit is fading, though, as is that reluctance.

The Marital Relationship

Marriage is vitally important in Judaism. Refraining from marriage is not considered holy, as it is in some other religions. On the contrary, it is considered unnatural. The Talmud says that an unmarried man is constantly thinking of sin. The Talmud tells of a rabbi who was introduced to a young unmarried rabbi. The older rabbi told the younger one not to come into his presence again until he was married.

Marriage is not solely, or even primarily, for the purpose of procreation. Traditional sources recognize that companionship, love and intimacy are the primary purposes of marriage, noting that woman was created in Gen. 2:18 because "it is not good for man to be alone," rather than because she was necessary for procreation.

A husband is responsible for providing his wife with food, clothing and sexual relations (Ex. 21:10), as well as anything else specified in the ketubah. **Marital sexual relations are the woman's right, not the man's.** A man cannot force his wife to engage in sexual relations with him, nor is he permitted to abuse his wife in any way (a practice routinely permitted in Western countries until quite recently).

A married woman retains ownership of any property she brought to the marriage, but the husband has the right to manage the property and to enjoy profits from the property.

Divorce

Jewish Attitude Toward Divorce

Judaism recognized the concept of "no-fault" divorce thousands of years ago. Judaism has always accepted divorce as a fact of life, albeit an unfortunate one. Judaism generally maintains that it is better for a couple to divorce than to remain together in a state of constant bitterness and strife.

Under Jewish law, a man can divorce a woman for any reason or no reason. The Talmud specifically says that a man can divorce a woman because she spoiled his dinner or simply because he finds another woman more attractive, and the woman's consent to the divorce is not required. In fact, Jewish law requires divorce in some circumstances: when the wife commits a sexual transgression, a man must divorce her, even if he is inclined to forgive her.

This does not mean that Judaism takes divorce lightly. Many aspects of Jewish law discourage divorce. The procedural details involved in arranging a divorce are complex and exacting. Except in certain cases of misconduct by the wife, a man who divorces his wife is required to pay her substantial sums of money, as specified in the ketubah (marriage contract). In addition, Jewish law prohibits a man from remarrying his ex-wife after she has married another man. Kohanim cannot marry divorcees at all.

Y'shua gave His divine opinion of divorce in his answer to the Pharisees who asked him another tricky question... Matthew 19:3-9

"Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, " Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'? "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Basically, we must remember that G-d hates divorce; but that He loves divorced people; and so must we. Divorce is an epidemic in America, and it is no better among Believers than those who are not; so we will face this situation more times than we wish, but face it we must. How do we deal with divorce? With the love of the L-rd; showing mercy to both parties and without judgment.

Life, Death and Mourning

Life

In Judaism, life is valued above almost all else. The Talmud notes that all people are descended from a single person, thus taking a single life is like destroying an entire world, and saving a single life is like saving an entire world.

Of the 613 commandments, only the prohibitions against murder, idolatry, incest and adultery are so important that they cannot be violated to save a life. Judaism not only permits, but often *requires* a person to violate the commandments if necessary to save a life. A person who is extremely ill, for example, or a woman in labor, is not permitted to fast on Yom Kippur, because fasting at such a time would endanger the person's life. Doctors are permitted to answer emergency calls on Shabbat, even though this may violate many Shabbat prohibitions. Abortions where necessary to save the life of a mother are mandatory (the unborn are not considered human life in Jewish law, thus the mother's human life overrides).

Because life is so valuable, we are not permitted to do anything that may hasten death, not even to prevent suffering. Euthanasia, suicide and assisted suicide are strictly forbidden by Jewish law. The Talmud states that you may not even move a dying person's arms if that would shorten his life.

However, where death is imminent and certain, and the patient is suffering, Jewish law does permit one to cease artificially prolonging life. Thus, in certain circumstances, Jewish law permits "pulling the plug" or refusing extraordinary means of prolonging life.

Death

In Judaism, death is not a tragedy, even when it occurs early in life or through unfortunate circumstances. Death is a natural process. Our deaths, like our lives, have meaning and are all part of G-d's plan. In addition, we have a firm belief in an afterlife, a world to come, where those who have lived a worthy life will be rewarded.

Mourning practices in Judaism are extensive, but they are not an expression of fear or distaste for death. Jewish practices relating to death and mourning have two purposes: to show respect for the dead (kavod ha-met), and to comfort the living (nihum avelim), who will miss the deceased.

Care for the Dead

After a person dies, the eyes are closed, the body is laid on the floor and covered, and candles are lit next to the body. The body is never left alone until after burial, as a sign of respect. The people who sit with the dead body are called shomerim, from the root Shin-Mem-Reish, meaning "guards" or "keepers".

Respect for the dead body is a matter of paramount importance. For example, the shomerim may not eat, drink, or perform a commandment in the presence of the dead. To do so would be considered mocking the dead, because the dead can no longer do these things.

Autopsies in general are discouraged as desecration of the body. They are permitted, however, where it may save a life or where local law requires it. When autopsies must be performed, they should be minimally intrusive.

The presence of a dead body is considered a source of ritual impurity. For this reason, a kohein may not be in the presence of a corpse. People who have been in the presence of a body wash their hands before entering a

home. This is done to symbolically remove spiritual impurity, not physical uncleanness: it applies regardless of whether you have physically touched the body.

In preparation for the burial, the body is thoroughly cleaned and wrapped in a simple, plain linen shroud. The Sages decreed that both the dress of the body and the coffin should be simple, so that a poor person would not receive less honor in death than a rich person. The body is wrapped in a tallit with its tzitzit rendered invalid. The body is not embalmed, and no organs or fluids may be removed. According to some sources, organ donation is permitted, because the subsequent burial of the donee will satisfy the requirement of burying the entire body.

The body must not be cremated. It must be buried in the earth. Coffins are not required, but if they are used, they must have holes drilled in them so the body comes in contact with the earth.

The body is never displayed at funerals; open casket ceremonies are forbidden by Jewish law. According to Jewish law, exposing a body is considered disrespectful, because it allows not only friends, but also enemies to view the dead, mocking their helpless state.

Mourning

Jewish mourning practices can be broken into several periods of decreasing intensity. These mourning periods allow the full expression of grief, while discouraging excesses of grief and allowing the mourner to gradually return to a normal life.

When a close relative (parent, sibling, spouse or child) first hears of the death of a relative, it is traditional to express the initial grief by tearing one's clothing. The tear is made over the heart if the deceased is a parent, or over the right side of the chest for other relatives.

This tearing of the clothing is referred to as *keriyah* (lit. "tearing"). The mourner recites the blessing describing G-d as "the true Judge," an acceptance of G-d's taking of the life of a relative.

From the time of death to the burial, the mourner's sole responsibility is caring for the deceased and preparing for the burial.

During this time, the mourners are exempt from all positive commandments ("thou shalt"), because the preparations take first priority. This period usually lasts a day or two; Judaism requires prompt burial.

During this period, the family should be left alone and allowed the full expression of grief. Condolence calls or visits should not be made during this time.

After the burial, a close relative, near neighbor or friend prepares the first meal for the mourners, the *se'udat havra'ah* (meal of condolence). This meal traditionally consists of eggs (a symbol of life) and bread. The meal is for the family only, not for visitors. After this time, condolence calls are permitted.

The next period of mourning is known as *shiva* (seven, because it lasts seven days). *Shiva* is observed by parents, children, spouses and siblings of the deceased, preferably all together in the deceased's home. *Shiva* begins on the day of burial and continues until the morning of the seventh day after burial. Mourners sit on low stools or the floor instead of chairs, do not wear leather shoes, do not shave or cut their hair, do not wear cosmetics, do not work, and do not do things for comfort or pleasure, such as bathe, have sex, put on fresh clothing, or study Torah (except Torah related to mourning and grief).

Mourners wear the clothes that they wore at the time of learning of the death or at the funeral. Mirrors in the house are covered. Prayer services are held where the shiva is held, with friends, neighbors and relatives making up the minyan (10 people required for certain prayers).

If a festival occurs during the mourning period, the mourning is terminated, but if the burial occurs during a festival, the mourning is delayed until after the festival. The Shabbat that occurs during the shiva period counts toward the seven days of shiva, and does not end the mourning period. Public mourning practices (such as wearing the torn clothes, not wearing shoes) are suspended during this period, but private mourning continues.

When visiting a mourner, a guest should not try to express grief with standard, shallow platitudes. The guest should allow the mourner to initiate conversations. One should not divert the conversation from talking about the deceased; to do so would limit the mourner's ability to fully express grief, which is the purpose of the mourning period. On the contrary, the caller should encourage conversation about the deceased.

When leaving a house of mourning, it is traditional for the guest to say, "May the Lord comfort you with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Kaddish

Kaddish is commonly known as a mourner's prayer, but in fact, variations on the Kaddish prayer are routinely recited at many other times, and the prayer itself has nothing to do with death or mourning. The prayer begins "May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed. May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days ..." and continues in much that vein.

Olam Ha'Ba: The Afterlife

Traditional Judaism firmly believes that death is not the end of human existence. However, because Judaism is primarily focused on life here and now rather than on the afterlife, Judaism does not have much dogma about the afterlife, and leaves a great deal of room for personal opinion. It is possible for an Orthodox Jew to believe that the souls of the righteous dead go to a place similar to the Christian heaven, or that they are reincarnated through many lifetimes, or that they simply wait until the coming of the Messiah, when they will be resurrected. Likewise, Orthodox Jews can believe that the souls of the wicked are tormented by demons of their own creation, or that wicked souls are simply destroyed at death, ceasing to exist.

Olam Ha-Ba: The World to Come

The spiritual afterlife is referred to in Hebrew as Olam Ha-Ba (oh-LAHM hah-BAH), the World to Come, although this term is also used to refer to the messianic age. The Olam Ha-Ba is another, higher state of being.

In the Mishnah, one rabbi says, "This world is like a lobby before the Olam Ha-Ba. Prepare yourself in the lobby so that you may enter the banquet hall." Similarly, the Talmud says, "This world is like the eve of Shabbat, and the Olam Ha-Ba is like Shabbat. He who prepares on the eve of Shabbat will have food to eat on Shabbat." We prepare ourselves for the Olam Ha-Ba through Torah study and good deeds.

The Talmud states that all Israel has a share in the Olam Ha-Ba. However, not all "shares" are equal. A particularly righteous person will have a greater share in the Olam Ha-Ba than the average person. In addition, a person can lose his share through wicked actions.

There are many statements in the Talmud that a particular mitzvah will guarantee a person a place in the Olam Ha-Ba, or that a particular sin will lose a person's share in the Olam Ha-Ba, but these are generally regarded as hyperbole, excessive expressions of approval or disapproval.

Some people look at these teachings and deduce that Jews try to "earn our way into Heaven" by performing the mitzvot. This is a gross mischaracterization of our religion. It is important to remember that unlike some religions, Judaism is not focused on the question of how to get into heaven. Judaism is focused on life and how to live it. Non-Jews frequently ask me, "Do you really think you're going to go to Hell if you don't do such-and-such?" It always catches me a bit off balance, because the question of where I am going after death simply doesn't enter into the equation when I think about the mitzvot.

We perform the mitzvot because it is our privilege and our sacred obligation to do so. We perform them out of a sense of love and duty, not out of a desire to get something in return. In fact, one of the first bits of ethical advice in Pirkei Avot (a book of the Mishnah) is: "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward; instead, be like servants who serve their master not for the sake of receiving a reward, and let the awe of Heaven [meaning G-d, not the afterlife] be upon you."

Nevertheless, we definitely believe that your place in the Olam Ha-Ba is determined by a merit system based on your actions, not by who you are or what religion you profess. In addition, we definitely believe that humanity is capable of being considered righteous in G-d's eyes, or at least good enough to merit paradise after a suitable period of purification.

Do non-Jews have a place in Olam Ha-Ba? Although there are a few statements to the contrary in the Talmud, the predominant view of Judaism is that the righteous of all nations have a share in the Olam Ha-Ba.

Statements to the contrary were not based on the notion that membership in Judaism was required to get into Olam Ha-Ba, but were grounded in the observation that non-Jews were not righteous people. If you consider the behavior of the surrounding peoples at the time that the Talmud was written, you can understand the rabbis' attitudes. By the time of Rambam, the belief was firmly entrenched that the righteous of all nations have a share in the Olam Ha-Ba.

Gan Eden and Gehinnom

The place of spiritual reward for the righteous is often referred to in Hebrew as Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden). This is not the same place where Adam and Eve were; it is a place of spiritual perfection. Specific descriptions of it vary widely from one source to another. One source says that the peace that one feels when one experiences Shabbat properly is merely one-sixtieth of the pleasure of the afterlife. Other sources compare the bliss of the afterlife to the joy of sex or the warmth of a sunny day. Ultimately, though, the living can no more understand the nature of this place than the blind can understand color.

According to traditional Jewish thought, only the very righteous go directly to Gan Eden. The average person descends to a place of punishment and/or purification, generally referred to as Gehinnom (guh-hee-NOHM), but sometimes as She'ol or by other names. According to one mystical view, every sin we commit creates an angel of destruction (a demon), and after we die we are punished by the very demons that we created. Some views see Gehinnom as one of severe punishment, a bit like the Christian Hell of fire and brimstone. Other sources merely see it as a time when we can see the actions of our lives objectively, see the harm that we have done and the opportunities we missed, and experience remorse for our actions. The period of time in Gehinnom does not exceed 12 months, and then ascends to take his place on Olam Ha-Ba.

Only the utterly wicked do not ascend at the end of this period; their souls are punished for the entire 12 months. Sources differ on what happens at the end of those 12 months: some say that the wicked soul is utterly destroyed and ceases to exist while others say that the soul continues to exist in a state of consciousness of remorse.

What's in it for us? Our souls do not suffer judgment because of the judgment of Y'shua in His death. He took upon Himself our sin so that we would not face it. And so, when we die, we may either, as some folks believe, go directly into heaven, or Gan Eden; or, as others believe, we enter She'ol where we are simply dead until the resurrection. I stand with the later but have no real argument with those who hold onto the promise of Paul as fact rather than as hyperbole. "To be absent from the body is to be present with Messiah."

In his telling the church of Corinth in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8... *"Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord — for we walk by faith, not by sight — we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord."*

Rather, I think that as when we sleep, we are absent from the world until we awaken; so wherever we awaken, there we presume to have been.

And with this last difficult passage, I will close.

Leheitra'ot.