

Saying Goodbye

By Neal C. Goldberg, PhD,
and Miriam Liebermann, CSW

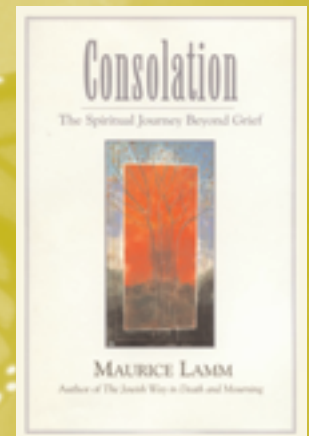
Targum Press
Michigan, 2004
237 pages

Reviewed by Yael Wedeck



Consolation

By Maurice Lamm
Jewish Publication Society
Philadelphia, 2004
342 pages



Josh was eight years old when his beloved grandfather died suddenly. He was not present at the funeral. Returning home from school a few days later, he asked his mother, “Is it true that they put Grandpa into a box and covered him with dirt?” His mother fumbled to find the right response to her son’s query. “Yes, it is true that people are buried in the ground after they die.” Josh looked incredulously at his mother and asked, “Then what is the point?”

After going through the grueling task of packing up her husband’s clothes and other worldly possessions, Sara looked at the collection of large black bags and wondered, “Is this all that is left of his eighty-seven years on this earth—a bunch of garbage bags?” She called her daughter and asked her to remove the bags as soon as possible.*

American culture values youth, vigor and the fulfilling of dreams,

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*Vignettes are based upon real-life situations that the reviewer encountered as a grief counselor.

encouraging all to believe that they can achieve, earn and succeed. Disease, decline and death shatter these beliefs. The suffering and bereaved are forced to face their lack of control over matters of health and life. While all of us are intellectually aware of our vulnerability, actually experiencing it is often shocking.

Jewish law and lore offer much in the way of guidance on facing tragic circumstances, and two recent books, though vastly different, outline practical and spiritual elements of Jewish death and mourning practices. The authors offer guidelines, support and encouragement to both the bereaved and those seeking to comfort.

Written by Dr. Neal Goldberg and Miriam Liebermann, psychotherapists with experience counseling adolescents, *Saying Goodbye* is billed as a “handbook for teens dealing with loss and mourning.” Starting with illness and moving through death, funeral rites and shivah laws and ending with strategies for coping with grief and developing a perspective on loss, the first section of the book offers practical explanations and suggestions for teens living through loss. The second section, entitled “Recommended Readings,” is a col-

lection of essays by rabbis, writers, psychotherapists and others who describe personal experiences of loss as well as ideas for living with loss and being a *menachem avel* (comforter to the mourner).

In an essay entitled “Helping Kids Recover,” Sherri Mandell, whose young son Koby was brutally murdered by Palestinian terrorists, questions the validity of the refrain “be strong” commonly heard after the loss of a loved one. She argues that crying, sharing the truth of one’s feelings, could actually be a sign of strength and that avoiding this is a denial of the reality of death.

The first section can be valuable as a reference for those with questions about the laws of mourning, burial and comforting a mourner; it also offers philosophical approaches to loss. The book counsels teens to face their fears and feelings about every aspect of the process through writing exercises, contemplation and prayer. Practical ideas for preserving the memory of a loved one are recommended, including creating scrapbooks, organizing memorial gatherings and starting a *yahrtzeit* or *tzedakah* project in memory of the loved one. The authors also emphasize the importance of developing a relation-

ship with God, calling out to Him and seeking His presence in everyday existence.

One valuable chapter offers advice on how to take leave, to be in the presence of someone who is dying.

Acknowledging that many are afraid of and uncertain about how to approach conversations with the dying, the authors offer suggestions for opening discussions with those who are seriously ill. Questions like “Are there things that worry you?” or statements such as “It must be hard for you” are encouraged. While very simple, these suggestions can begin conversations that would not take place if the family colluded to deny the imminent reality of death.

A friend recently lost her father after a prolonged illness. At the shivah, I noticed *Saying Goodbye* on a table close to her. She motioned to it and said, “Many books were recommended to me, and [*Saying Goodbye*] is the only one I really found useful. Even though it was written for teens, I appreciated the simplicity. I felt like the authors were speaking to me and helping me through this.”

As a sequel to his best-selling book, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Rabbi Maurice Lamm recently authored *Consolation: The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief*. In his introduction, Rabbi Lamm, a seasoned author, rabbi, professor and founder of The National Institute for Jewish Hospice, writes:

When I wrote The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning I did not fully appreciate the depth of Judaism's relationship with grief, and I assumed that the laws of mourning were self-explanatory. But now, older and I hope wiser, I understand much better the subtleties of our mourning rituals.

Leaving the familiar purple volume on the shelves of Jewish households worldwide, Rabbi Lamm moves from clarifying laws to exploring the emotional and spiritual landscape of the bereaved. He draws upon poetry, literature, psychology and philosophy, but primarily upon the meaning behind

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halachot and upon accounts of mourning in the Torah to accompany the mourner on the journey of loss. He explores the healing power of Jewish rituals of mourning, such as *keriah* and Kaddish, and devotes a full chapter to discussing the space in time that shivah creates to support the mourner through the initial shock of loss. He gives words to common experience, thereby imparting fresh meaning.

Shiva is the habitat in which we mourners confront pieces of the past. We bump into remnants of life, such as the clothes and pictures.... In doing so, we take an unconscious inventory of the life of the deceased and tally the results—opening subjects and shutting them, finding closure by setting some aside and enshrining others in memory. The healing of our angst is facilitated ... by small specific actions—the piecemeal disengaging from each association, the handling of each item that belonged to the departed. This is a powerful and beneficial aspect of mourning in Habitat Shiva.

Consolation is a poetic, beautifully written work. The author is at once empathic with the mourner's pain and demanding of him to transcend his loss. He encourages the reader to feel all the feelings that come up in the course of grief and mourning, however terrifying and unsettling they may be. Only when one has gone through the pain can one begin to heal. Rabbi Lamm suggests that at the highest level, the experience of going through the loss of a loved one can be a transformative one and can allow the survivor to emerge with a

greater consciousness of the value of life.

Sartre said that “human life begins on the far side of despair,” and Rabbi Lamm stresses the value of hitting bottom, of recognizing that life as we know it can never be the same. Through this despair, one is forced to build again, drawing on the past, yet creating a new reality. It is awesome and frightening to leave behind that which we knew so well, yet imperative for rebuilding after a loss.

I once read an essay about a tightrope walker at a circus. Audience members shuddered at the moment he was suspended on a wire stretched between two safety bars, and breathed a sigh of relief when the performer reached safety. However, it is his very maneuvering while suspended between the bars that is the essence of the act. Leaving the known and tried behind, and reaching with uncertainty for the next step is precisely where true growth begins. It is not the place we ultimately end up that defines us as individuals, but how we work to find our way. That fear of falling, of faltering, of being unable to go on, that space between bars is how we reach toward our very core and become.

After a loss, one is inclined to try and make sense of it all, to seek meaning in what seems like a lonely, empty world. Reach out toward God, toward an acceptance of His will, as painful and incomprehensible as it may be, counsels Rabbi Lamm. He suggests that people can comfort, but only God can console. This is why we end shivah visits with a hope for God's consolation. Time, work, new life can all assist in healing from a loss, but, ultimately, only God can truly help the bereaved.

“It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting, for this is the end of every man, and the living shall take heed” (Kohelet 7:2). Being with others in the experience of loss brings us closer to the reality of mortality, which can spur us to live fuller and holier lives. In its own way, each of these books helps readers face death and work to find ways to cope and grow through the pain. **JA**