LOSS AND MOURNING IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Robert Kastenbaum was a man who helped reintroduce issues related to death, dying, and bereavement to academic, clinical, and general discourse. This article, devoted to an encounter with the observance of mourning custom and ritual in the Jewish tradition, continues the dialogue in this journal that Bob founded. The article utilizes the Two-Track Model of Bereavement to address the Jewish tradition’s structuring of the loss experience. After a brief introduction, I present a schematic presentation of some of the issues operant in grief and mourning for the believer. This is followed by two responses to loss that portray the pain of loss in the tradition. The article goes on to consider the Jewish time cycle of response to loss—from preburial Aninut, to Shiva, the first week, to Shloshim, the first month, to Shanah, the first year, to the expectations for encounters across the life cycle. The Yizkor and Kaddish are also considered. In the Jewish tradition, alongside attention to what level of functioning to require of the bereaved, there are lifelong opportunities to rework and maintain connection to the memories, associations, narratives, and experiences that comprise the psychological organization of the continuing bond and relationship to the deceased.

Cultures, religions, and traditions have evolved to help societies, communities, families, and individuals live their lives in ways that facilitate both their day-to-day existence as well as the major transitions of life. Birth, sexual maturity, pairbonding and marriage, and the encounter with death are milestones and life changing experiences in the life course of the individual and his or her community.