

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

ELISSA FELDER

*From one life to  
the next life:*

THE SACRED PASSAGE AFTER DEATH



CHAI MITZVAH

The Resource Center for Jewish Engagement  
[WWW.CHAIMITZVAH.ORG](http://WWW.CHAIMITZVAH.ORG)





Dear Reader,

It took me many years to write the book, *From One Life to the Next Life, The Sacred Passage after Death*. When my baby died, I was so grief-stricken that it took a very long time to function again and to find some semblance of peace. Through my journey I came to understand so much more about what the Jewish tradition teaches about the meaning of life and death and what happens after we die. The teachings I came to embrace were a great source of comfort.

I wrote my book to share some of what I learned. My hope is that you will gain a greater awareness of the deep wisdom in the Jewish tradition so that you, as our people have for thousands of years, can be sustained and comforted by it. My book and the accompanying discussion guide so expertly crafted by Chai Mitzvah is an attempt to present the information in an accessible way and for there to be more conversations about this topic.

We live in a world where everything dies – people, animals, time – we live constantly with losses, dashed hopes and unmet expectations. How do we find the strength to not only survive but to thrive? From where do we find the compassion and love needed to enter into healthy and intimate relationships with others? Can we be brave enough to love, to be open to connections with others that are filled with closeness and vulnerability, knowing that we may well lose those we love?

What helps us feel less alone and by whom are we known and comforted? We are created with an inherent desire for intimate relationships with others which involve both giving and receiving. Our tradition teaches that we are made in the image of God. One understanding of this is that, like God, we are also capable of giving and loving, and giving and loving some more.

The Jewish tradition teaches that we never actually die. Death is merely akin to a birthing into the next world. Our soul sheds its garment that is the body and continues to exist in a different, more spiritual realm.

*Invite you to have this conversation not because it's depressing and sad;  
quite the opposite; because it's empowering and filled with hope.*

To know about death is to know about life. By understanding a little more about death we may find ourselves living with more passion and purpose. Death becomes something less to be feared.

The world we are born in to is beautiful and complicated and so beyond our capacity to understand. I encourage us all to keep learning – keep searching – keep grappling with the things we struggle with. Maybe this book and the Jewish wisdom and practices I share will help you live life with eyes a little wider open and with a greater sense of a much bigger picture. My book was written to show my journey and how I came to find comfort from the Jewish teachings. I hope you find in it enriching conversation and information that will help you feel at peace whilst on your journey.

Feel free to be in touch, I would love to hear from you.

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## *The Grieving Process...*

“ I am, and continue to be, a grieving mother who searched for her 4-month-old baby son, Sam, after he died.

*There was no bouncing back, no return to normal, and no moving on.*

*And so, I started searching for answers to deeply existential questions about the meaning of life and the meaning of death.*

*Over the years, one step at a time, and with much help, I learned how to live fully again. I learned how to integrate the trauma of his death into my being. I have learned how to carry him with me always.*

*Grief is not a linear process of healing. There are times when we feel stronger than at others. Grief is a process that fluctuates and never ends.”*

- **Grief is like a snowflake, no two snowflakes are alike. We all experience grief at various times in our lives. What has been helpful to you?**
- **What does it mean to heal?**





## Identity Formation: A Jewish Journey

“One thing I recognized many years later is just how important it is for people to help carry others through their anguish. Strong friendships are made when sharing pain with others.

One of the most significant and life-changing relationships that I developed [during High School] was with a Chabad Rebbetzin named Henny Sufirin. She was everything I wanted to be. She was a great role model who encouraged me to keep learning, keep doing, keep growing, and keep trying to improve myself.

Having someone like that believe in me was highly motivational.

[When I met my future husband Michael] Our Jewish journeys were different, but at the point that we met, we were pretty much in the same place religiously. We ... both wanted to be more observant than our families of origin. We were both thirsty to learn and grow. We both wanted to ... raise future children ... with a firm grounding in our Jewish faith.”

- Who and what were the major influences in your life and how have they impacted on your Jewish journey?
- Reflect on your significant relationships today. Do you feel that they support and encourage your growth?



# Making the Impossible Possible: Facing Challenges



## **INFERTILITY**

*The whole process of medical intervention to aid fertility was grueling and taxing on our emotions and on the relationship we were forming with each other.*

## **HAVING A SICK CHILD**

*Deep down, I screamed for everything to be normal and for our baby to be 'perfect.' I wanted so badly for him to be just a regular baby.*

## **HER MOTHERS SICKNESS AND DEATH**

*She needed me to support her, but I was too broken to be there for her, too consumed with trying to get through each day, working hard to literally 'breathe' and not drown in my own sorrow.*

## **A NEW PERSPECTIVE**

*How can we learn to grow and look at the positives when life has dragged us down or thrown us into a dark and terrifying pit? How does one replenish the cup of positivity and love when it feels empty and there is nothing left to give? How do we continue to live and move forward? How does one cope?*

## **WOULD I EVER LIVE AGAIN?**

*Many years later, I learned that we do have some control over how we choose to respond to death and how we choose to live.*

*It is not easy.*”



# Making the Impossible Possible: Facing Challenges

We all are faced with challenges and losses that feel insurmountable. From where does our courage and hope for the future come?



“Grief is a process that never ends, but we do have some control over how we choose to respond to death and how we choose to live.”

- How do we be kind to ourselves and others as we travel along our grief journey?
- What do we need from other people?
- Presuming that our journey involves support and love from others, how separate are we in our togetherness?
- What does “it’s OK to not be OK” mean to you?



## Traditions of Comfort

“When asked who you are, you may point to your body. We may well identify ourselves as a body with a soul, but that isn't really who we are. The traditional Jewish answer to that question is that we are a soul which is clothed by our body. The physical body is merely a 'garment' or a vehicle that carries the soul in this world. The essence of who we are is our soul (*Nefesh HaChaim Gate I, Chapter 4:23*).

I learned that the work of the *Chevra Kadisha* provides so much compassion to the dead. The members of the *Chevra Kadisha*, with divine help, assist the deceased in immeasurable ways on their postmortem journey. They are tasked with the great privilege of washing their dear fellow Jews as their preparations provide cleansing and purification of the soul. Through their care, the soul of the deceased is 'elevated' to 'higher' levels in the spiritual world.”

- *The following customs are predicated on the traditional Jewish belief that the soul ascends into the spiritual world.*

**CHEVRA KADISHA:** The *Chevra Kadisha* is a group of people who prepare the deceased for burial. They help both the body and the soul move on from this world.

- **Elevating the Soul** In the mystical teachings the soul has different levels. The lowest level is the *Nefesh* (the life force, the blood), then there is the *Ruach* (wind or spirit which ascends and descends), then the *Neshama* (breath). There are 2 higher levels above the *Neshama* called *Chayah* and *Yechidah*, which are beyond the scope of the book (*Bereshit Rabba 14:9*). The *Chevra Kadisha* helps to purify the lower aspects of the soul as it ascends into the spiritual world.




- **Taharah:** This phase of preparation involves immersion of the deceased in a natural body of water known as a *mikveh*. Before the *taharah* there is an initial washing phase which removes all the superficial, physical dirt. This is analogous to removing all the negative spiritual forces, allowing the soul to start to detach from the body.

The *taharah* is carried out by the *Chevra* who are living and therefore able to pour the pure waters over the deceased to cleanse, to bring knowledge of God, to unify, and to achieve repentance. The *taharah* is primarily not about the body, but about the soul, which is connected to its body until burial. The actions of washing and pouring of water, with all the relevant intentions and prayers, help the deceased enter the spiritual world in a state of God-given purity.

- **Shrouds:** Each body receives a washing, a ritual *taharah*, and is dressed in plain, white linen shrouds. The white linen shrouds are called *tachrichim*. In Hebrew, *tachrich* means to “wrap” or to “bind.” Jewish shrouds have no pockets, indicating we take nothing with us. It reminds us that after death, we have no need nor care for money, jewels, or anything material.
- **Aron/Casket:** Traditionally, the coffin is a plain pine box. A kosher casket has no metal nails or liners. It is made entirely of organic materials, like pine, which will easily decay. It also has holes in the bottom to ensure the body is in contact with the earth, fulfilling the requirement to return to the earth. The coffin is referred to as an *Aron* (like the holy ark which houses the *Sefer Torah* in a synagogue). Just like the *Sefer Torah* has become holy by its connection to word of God, so too the body has acquired holiness by its intimate contact with the God-given soul.

**SHEMIRA:** The word *shemira* comes from the Hebrew word “guarding.” Traditionally, the deceased is not left alone from the moment of death until after burial. The *shomer* (male) or *shomeret* (female) keeps the deceased company during this time. Traditionally, they read from the Book of Psalms.





**BURIAL:** Until burial, the soul, which has formed an attachment to its body over a lifetime of togetherness, (however long or short), stays present and watches over it (*Zohar 1;217*).

Burial acts to release the soul, allowing it the freedom to ascend into the spiritual realms (*Yerushalmi Moed Katan Chapter 3*).

**SHIVA:** Shiva is provided as a time to publicly grieve and receive support from friends and family. Traditionally, we sit on low chairs for seven days (*Moed Katan 20a:10*) as people visit, allowing us the space to mourn.

**KADDISH:** Another well-known practice is the recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish, traditionally said by primary mourners (parents, spouses, siblings, and children). Traditionally, children recite the Mourner's Kaddish for 11 months after a parent dies. *Kaddish* is said for thirty days for relatives other than a parent. It is also said on *Yahrzeits* (yearly anniversary of the death). The Mourner's Kaddish does not mention death nor make any reference to the deceased. It is a prayer filled with praise of God. Kaddish concludes with a petition for God to bless us with peace.

- *How do you relate to these customs and beliefs?*

## Journey of the Soul

“What we know is that the soul, untethered from the body that housed it, is now able to joyously ascend into the spiritual realms, connect to, and be bound up with its Source.

The Kabbalists and the Maavar Yabok also teach that when we die, our souls will be met by the original 600,000 root souls. These souls come to welcome this soul-spark back. Therefore, the Jewish tradition speaks of postmortem encounters with not only the Divine, our predeceased relatives, and loved ones but also with the 600,000 root souls of the Jewish people. This means no one dies alone; we are always accompanied into the next world.

These are very comforting beliefs to know when we think about the journey of our own soul or of that of our loved ones. They can help to mitigate one's own fear of death. ”

Perhaps my mother was welcomed  
by her sweet grandson Sam.  
Perhaps Danielle was being accompanied  
by her relatives and by God.  
Perhaps when they died they experienced the bright  
warm loving light of the Divine Shekhinah (Presence).

- *Elissa's memoir explores the grieving process and the specific ways that Jewish tradition illuminates and guides us in caring for those who have died. The journey of the soul may be difficult for us to conceptualize and discuss given the nature of contemporary society. What about contemporary society makes this discussion difficult?*
- *Do you envision a journey of the soul?*





*What do you take away from the conversations inspired by this memoir?*

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**Chai Mitzvah** was honored to work with Elissa Felder in crafting this discussion guide around her memoir. We hope that it sparks meaningful conversation.

Chai Mitzvah was created as a way to engage adults, teens, and families in their Jewish journey and to strengthen Jewish communities. We create meaningful conversation around Jewish texts and support social action and ritual/spiritual growth. Chai Mitzvah offers many topics for small group discussions. We are always seeking opportunities to strengthen communities and organizations, and to create new conversation guides. For more information: [www.chaimitzvah.org](http://www.chaimitzvah.org).



## Elissa Felder

Elissa started and actively manages the only international community of practice for women engaged with traditional *Chevra Kadisha* (Burial Society). The community mission is to share experiences, give encouragement, network, learn together and help to develop and support each other. She is responsible for building the community and providing ongoing professional development. The knowledge she has acquired motivated her to write a personal memoir of loss and grief weaving in Jewish teachings about life, death and afterlife. Her book, *From One Life to the Next Life: The Sacred Passage After Death*, was published by Mosaica Press. She is also the head of the women's division of the Rhode Island Chevra Kadisha and is a sought after speaker on this topic.

In addition, Elissa is the Coordinator for all of Core's Communities of Practice ([www.CoreTorah.org](http://www.CoreTorah.org)). These communities offer training, resources and support for those who want to strengthen their communities on an intentional and ongoing basis. In her role, Elissa helps each of these many international communities grow and thrive.

Locally, Elissa is Founder and Director of Core Connects RI, a non-profit organization that aims to deepen women's connections to one another; to Jewish wisdom and Jewish values, to empower each other to find greater meaning, purpose and possibility in life and to cultivate unity without uniformity. As director she is passionate about providing others with opportunities to grow and become. She runs programming both online and in person.

Elissa works tirelessly to bring Jews together and celebrates the commonalities rather than the differences. Through all of these experiences Elissa mentors and encourages others on their journeys and even finds time to teach a weekly Parsha class.

