

the ruling principle in the universe. Some good people die too early, and some bad people live too long. Why our loved ones died is an irrelevant question. Nobody can answer it, and even if they could, what answer would be acceptable? The question is: Now that this horrible thing has happened, how do we continue to hope, express compassion and appreciate the beauty of life? How do we open ourselves to God's presence? Each of us answers these questions differently, and it takes us a long while to do so. Sometimes everything seems clear; other times we are lost in doubt and pain.

## PRAYER

We think of our spouses every day. Yet there are special times in the Jewish calendar when we think of them in community and with a prayer. On the *yahrzeit* (the Jewish anniversary of death) we stand, in the middle of our community, while a special prayer is chanted. We also recite *Kaddish* on that day. Then, on the major holidays—*Yom Kippur*, *Passover*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*—we join the whole congregation in the ceremony of *Yizkor* (memorial prayers). We remember those special people in our lives who have died. We stand in silence as we recite our individual prayers. Sobs and sniffles permeate the room. Then we say *Kaddish* together. It helps us to integrate our losses into our lives. Our memories come forth to enrich our present.

Each time we read that prayer, we remember our spouse and affirm the love we gave each other and the value of love in our lives. We transform what was a physical and

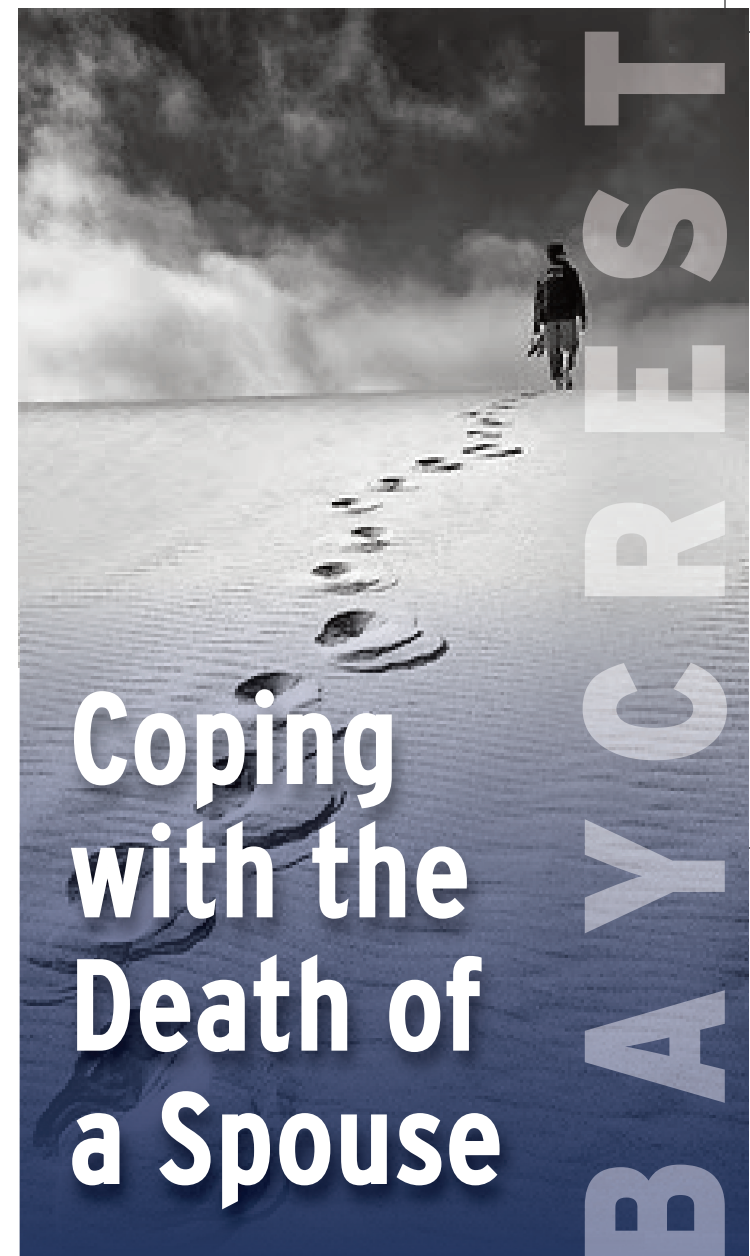
interactive relationship into a spiritual one. And we affirm the possibility of an eternal life. During *Yizkor*, we can find comfort giving and receiving hugs from our friends and knowing that we are all acknowledging that death is a part of life. We find strength by integrating that truth into our lives, not by denying it. We learn once again that we can transform our grief and anger into love and compassion.

## TZEDAKAH

The *Yizkor* prayer also speaks of *tzedakah*, or charity. It is part of our tradition's wisdom to link the giving of *tzedakah* to the grieving process. In giving to others, we focus less on ourselves, and we feel a joy that comes from giving. In helping to heal the wounds in our communities, we transform the energy of pain into the energy of hope.

## Take Heart

We learn, as we heal, that a broken vessel may be a holier vessel than one that is whole. Through the experience of brokenness, we become more sensitive to the pain of others. Through the vessel's cracks shines the light of empathy and caring.



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## Little to Help Us Prepare

Fearing a death does little to help us prepare for it. It is impossible to conceive of grief until we are suddenly plunged into it. We cannot imagine how we could survive and put the pieces of our shattered life back together. Although altered by the reality of the death of a spouse, we can climb out of our despondency by the transformation within ourselves brought on by the experience of loss and grief and by the process of recovery and self-discovery.

## Take Care of Ourselves

- *Let our family and friends know how we are feeling.* Let them help us cope. Cry with a friend. Share our memories. Make plans to eat meals with other people. Plan outings.
- *Don't make major changes within the first six months or more.* That is, don't sell your house, throw out items that remind us of our beloved, change jobs, or commit to new relationships. But at the same time, don't make our room, or study, or closet a museum in memory of our late spouse. Imagine our partner's possessions bringing pleasure to another's life. Over time, decide what we want to give away or sell and to whom. Think about changing our furniture or home decoration in some small way to reflect more fully our taste.
- *Take care of our body.* Get a massage. Exercise. Watch to see if we are eating or drinking to compensate for loss, and plan our diet accordingly. Watch out for traffic, as we may lose concentration and find ourselves unexpectedly

- *Find a support group and/or a grief counselor.* We can't burden our family or friends all the time with a detailed description of how we are feeling. It is too much for them to handle.
- *Spend at least half an hour a day thinking about the one we lost.* Don't repress those feelings. Allow sadness, loneliness, and anger to well up. But also think of the gifts we received from our spouse. Identify our loved one's positive attributes that we would like to manifest in our own life, to share with our family and our community.
- *After the initial shock has worn off, try to absorb ourselves in work or classes, or volunteer with in organization that interests us.* Very often, the experience of giving to others takes our mind off our own sadness



and opens our heart to the ongoing meaning of life.

## Explore the Healing Wisdom of Torah, Prayer, Community and Giving to Others

The practical advice that comes from counselors, friends and books can be extremely helpful. Nonetheless, we may be left with deep spiritual questions.

Judaism is rich with spiritual resources to help us cope.

## TORAH

God, speaking through Moses to the people of Israel, says (Deuteronomy 30:19): "I have put before you life and death...chose life!" Choosing life means committing to life, committing to its fullness, hanging in through the downs, and enjoying the ups. It means accepting death as a part of life. We are not alone; our future lies in relationships with others, not in cultivating the solitary bleakness in our hearts.

The book of Psalms is a treasury for those of us who seek spiritual comfort. These 150 poems convey in exquisite beauty the full range of human emotions, from abject despair to complete joy. Find psalms that reflect different phases of our healing journey, and read them often. The poetry expresses many of our emotions and introduces us to ancient spiritual companions.

## COMMUNITY

Going to the synagogue *minyan* (the prayer group) every morning can be a source of comfort, strength and camaraderie. Some days it can feel difficult to go in. Other days it can feel like we survive only because of these people's prayers and sympathy. Some days we may hate the *Kaddish* prayer. How can we praise God's greatness when our spouse's death was such an injustice? Other days, we can take great comfort from the affirmation that life goes on, with beauty and purpose, no matter what. Gradually we come to understand that fairness is not