

**RESPONDING TO A DEATH
IN THE SCHOOL FAMILY**

A HANDBOOK/CHECKLIST
FOR EDUCATORS IN JEWISH COMMUNITY
JUNIOR AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

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The Pardes Educators Program is a two-year postgraduate course of study to train teachers for North American Jewish day schools. It consists of intensive Torah learning in the Pardes Bet Midrash, together with study for an MA in Jewish Education at Hebrew University. The Program was developed in conjunction with, and is funded by, the Avi Chai Foundation.

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WHEN DEATH STRIKES

It takes no great insight to realize that the death of a parent is a crisis of momentous proportions for teenagers. Caught in the natural but often tumultuous struggle for independence, they suddenly find themselves cut off from one of their main protectors/restrainers. It's a time of fear and confusion that calls for an immediate and effective support system.

Of course, there are many support systems in place for the student: family, relatives, friends and the congregational rabbi. More often than not, these people provide all the necessary support. Nonetheless, *it is the Jewish school, which must assume responsibility for protecting and supporting its students.* Indeed, its response might leave an impact more lasting than any other Jewish educational *attempt*. If no one in the community thinks of calling the school to report the death, it is probably a symptom of the family and friends not perceiving the school to be an important resource/support system for its students.

GO TO THE STUDENT'S HOME THE NIGHT BEFORE THE FUNERAL

There is simply no way of being sure that the proper support system is in place without physically going to the student's home the night before the funeral. *It is the responsibility of the principal to make sure that some faculty member goes to the home.* It might take only ten minutes to check out that the family is "all together," that relatives and friends have gathered to lend support and organize the funeral, and that the congregational rabbi is actively involved. However, sometimes it is the Jewish educator who must step in and offer support and direction. Here are some things to check out:

Have proper arrangements been made? If the family belongs to a congregation, the rabbi should be consulted on all funeral arrangements. There are, however, situations in which the family is involved only marginally with its congregation, if at all. While the educator should defer to the congregational rabbi, it is necessary to be aware of the possibility that the family or the student will be looking to the school for support. Moreover, sometimes the rabbi is actively involved with the adults in the family and, because of pressures of time, will be unable to focus on the children. It then becomes the responsibility of Jewish educators to provide that support for their students.

It would be a mistake to think that families who are not observant or actively involved in the synagogues are not interested in traditional funeral and mourning customs. Indeed, many people removed from observance in their everyday lives turn to tradition during life-crises. The family might be either grateful if you provide guidance and suggestions or resentful for your uninvited intrusion into its personal affair. If they have no relationship with a congregational rabbi, they might need someone to accompany them to make the funeral arrangements, especially if it is an older child who must shoulder the responsibility, or to help them deal with legal authorities in releasing the body. Dealing with these issues requires sensitivity and tact; in many ways it is a test of one's skills as an educator. In any event, the primary purpose in going to the home is to

provide support for the students and to help them deal with the death.

It is necessary to explain to the students what is expected of them at the funeral and *shivah*, and here the educator must first be aware of the customs followed in the family's religious community. You should be sensitive to the fact that the student may belong to a congregation, which follows customs that differ from those of the majority of your students. For example, in some Sephardic communities, the mourners say *kaddish* at the funeral and do not attend the burial; *keriyah* is performed when the mourners return home. Many Orthodox congregations allow women to say *kaddish*, although some do not.

As adults who have gone to many funerals, we sometimes take for granted that everyone knows the whole procedure. But the student mourners may be worried about what they must do. All you have to do is ask: "Would you like me to explain to you what goes on at the funeral and burial?" Take your cue from the response. Don't force information on them, but don't leave them wondering about something about which they are fearful. Mention quickly that at the funeral they need not do anything on their own, as the rabbi will give them direction. Tell the mourners how *keriyah* is done. Reassure the mourners that you or the congregational rabbi will be there all the time to tell them what to do. Mention that someone will say *kaddish* at the burial along with the mourners if they want; there is no need to practice beforehand.

There is a growing custom in many communities for family members to speak at the funeral. If the student is mature enough, ask the mourners if they would like to speak, and check with the rabbi that there is no objection. If the students want to speak, offer to help them prepare. Show up at the funeral home when the family arrives.

If you will return home with the mourners, you can save a discussion of *shivah* until that time. Otherwise, mention some of the basic etiquette: Mourners need not stand for anyone who comes in and need not introduce one person to another. The mourners should be assured that if they feel tired, they can simply lie down in another room-even if friends are present. Reassure the mourners that there is no need to worry about schoolwork missed. Weak students will need repeated reassurance --and special help when they return after *shivah*.

Do the students have someone with whom to talk after you leave? There may be many people around, but they may be busy with the surviving spouse. Ask them, "Which friend should I call to stay with you this evening?" This gives them room to decline or accept without feeling that an unfair demand is being made on their friends.

Leave your phone number. No one should feel guilty about calling you at home in a crisis--that's what Jewish education *is* all about. Leave a copy of a book that describes coping with death from a religious, philosophical or halakhic perspective, such as Jack Reimer's *Jewish Reflections on Death* or Maurice Lamm's *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. (Remember to inscribe it: "For the ABC family, *HaMokom Yinahem Et-hem*...From the administrators and faculty of the XYZ School." This concrete reminder of your concern provides psychological support and practical direction

throughout the *shivah*.) Of course, in order to have a book to bring, *the school must have a supply of different types of books on hand!*

Have arrangements been made for the mourner's classmates to attend the funeral? Junior and senior high school students are, when properly prepared, certainly old enough to attend a funeral. Their presence is very comforting for the mourners. The classmates have to be notified, buses ordered at school expense, permission obtained, sometimes tests or school programs canceled, etc. --all on very short notice. But there is simply no overestimating the support given by classmates showing up at the funeral (even if they come on short notice and were not "properly dressed"). It's the Jewish educator's obligation to help organize this *hessed* / *hinukh* activity. (It will also be necessary to encourage one or two close friends of the mourner to go along to the burial.)

PREPARE THE CLASS

If time allows, it would be best to speak with the mourner's class *before* the funeral. Everyone is upset, there is an unmentioned fear of the same thing happening to their own parents, and in addition there is the discomfort of not knowing what is expected of them at the funeral. While it is important to convey information and encouragement to the class, the most important objective is to give the students the opportunity to talk about their feelings and thus not be trapped by them. The educator must avoid doing most of the talking in such a meeting; to lead the conversation too forcefully is to do a disservice to the students.

Some educators may seek to avoid such a class meeting, maintaining it really is not necessary. It is possible that this reluctance stems from their own unwillingness to lead such an emotion-laden discussion. Indeed, in such a case it would be better for that faculty member to sit in as a more experienced teacher or guidance counselor meets with the class. Yet in the end, this is an educational activity that really must be mastered by the true Jewish educator.

We present here an outline for a discussion with an eighth or ninth grade class. This is hardly the only direction such a discussion might take, but the educator who has not yet conducted such a "session" can use it as a backdrop against which to plan his or her own talk. There is no "right" way of talking with the class; but there are certainly unproductive avenues that are worth avoiding.

Almost everyone would have heard of the death before school begins. Ask: "How many of you have ever been to a funeral?" Most probably only two or three would have been. Establish quickly under what circumstances they attended a funeral so that you can be aware of sensitive areas while talking to the class; you might want to watch the reaction of some individual students while the discussion continues.

Say: "You may have some questions as to what goes on at a funeral, and I want to answer your questions. But I'd like to touch on a few other points first." This establishes that you're there to help and gives you a predetermined way of bringing the discussion

to a close: you need only come back to the details of a funeral.

Ask for a quick show of hands: "How many of you knew Mr./Mrs. XYZ (the deceased)? "How many of you knew that he or she was ill (if death was a result of a sickness)?" "How many of your parents knew him or her?" This gives you, once again, information regarding the group with which you're talking.

Ask: "How did you hear about the death and what was your reaction?" There will be a moment or two of silence here, as no one wants to be first. Almost always, someone will volunteer a reaction, and the factual question ("How did you hear?") makes it easier to speak out. No response should be given an immediate reaction; a nod of the head gives students the encouragement to express their feelings without fear, which is the primary objective of this session.

Hopefully, after one or two responses someone will mention "crying." If not, after a while simply say: "I'm surprised no one mentioned crying." The object is not to get confessions about crying, but to reassure the students that crying is indeed an *adult* response.

Ideally, one of the responses will be "frightened." If not, it too can be brought to the floor by saying: "Usually, people react by being frightened. What do you think they might be frightened of?" Here, again, the purpose is to show the students that they need not feel that their thoughts are in any way "crazy" or unnatural. Once expressed, these thoughts become quite controllable. You might also explore the reactions of their parents. It's valuable for students to know that adults often respond to crises with fear, emotion, etc. There is nothing grown-up about hiding feelings.

Quickly go over the details of the funeral. Ask if anyone intends to go to the burial. Generally, one or two close friends *and an administrator or teacher* should go to the cemetery with the mourners.

Answer questions simply and directly. Be aware that your words can be misunderstood and misapplied. (Saying, for example, that God loved the deceased and so took him or her to be with him in heaven can leave a child wondering as to which good person--child or parent--will be next.) Raising questions for adolescents gives an opportunity to vent festering fears; but they can create tensions. Work into the conversation a reassuring statement that "Of course, something like this hardly ever happens." Listen to what the children are saying.

Depending on the timing, you can discuss the *shivah* period at this time or after the funeral. Students have many questions as to what behavior is appropriate. It would be best to let the details flow from a discussion of the open-ended question of how should one behave during a *shivah* visit. But one way or the other, the students should be left with no doubt as to the nature of the visit: They are not there to take the mourners' minds off their sorrow; it is quite all right to talk about the deceased--such discussion is indeed a *hessed*; it is quite appropriate to sit quietly and not talk to anyone; there is a protocol which requires simply sitting down when entering without greeting the

mourner and then offering formal consolation before leaving; etc. All teachers who have taught the student Jewish or secular studies should be encouraged to pay a *shivah* call. *It is necessary to schedule for one or two classmates to be at the shivah throughout the day.* Students will have to be released from classes, tests will have to be rescheduled, etc. But there is no excuse for leaving a student alone all day, and--especially if the mourner was not particularly popular--this requires coordination from the school office. The school might also have to assume responsibility for daily *minyanim* at the *shivah* house; this too will require rescheduling classes, tests, and --most importantly--coordination with the congregational rabbi. When you yourself pay a *shivah* call, pay attention to the dynamics; you might pick up something important to discuss with the mourner.

Religious educators certainly know of the importance of dealing with feelings of doubt that an encounter with death brings forth. But, unfortunately, this can be misused, and it's important to avoid certain pitfalls. If, for example, the "Jewish answer" is announced at the outset, students get the message not to express their questions and as a result never get to work them out in a religious framework. The encouragement often stifles expressing one's feelings. Judaism has nothing to fear from troubling questions; but educators must fear a situation in which students think it wrong to express their feelings to their teachers and counselors. Hence the importance of first initiating a discussion wherein thoughts and emotions are expressed openly.

Either at this time or later in the week, discuss how to act when the mourner returns to school. Let the classmates voice their discomfort. Explain that the mourner will need some support, but that for the most part the mourner must begin to reestablish a normal and regular lifestyle. A few off-the-cuff questions to classmates as to "How is XYZ doing?" will help you be aware of potential problems that must be addressed.

SOME ADDITIONAL POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:

Be aware that some close friends of the mourners may need special private counseling. In some cases they are actually semi-mourners who are denied the formal support system available to the mourner.

Arrange for some formal group expression of condolence, such as properly inscribed books for the synagogue or library.

Remember that additional counseling will be necessary after the shivah.

A tzedakah project or a special learning project (appropriately selected *mishmayot* are especially appropriate) might be considered as a means of further involving students and identifying with the mourner.

A QUICK CHECKLIST

Do students have the feeling that at the time of crisis the school is their support system? If not, it's time to give thought how to correct this situation.

Do you have a professional relationship with the rabbis of the major congregations whose children attend your school?

Do you know whom to call to advise you if you see a psychological reaction that seems unhealthy to you, to arrange a *tahara* if the family requests one, or stop an autopsy if the family so wishes? You shouldn't wait until you need these people to find out who they are. The time to be sure of these contacts is *now*, as you're reading this.

Do you feel comfortable handling these matters? If not, figure out who will do it for you.

Do you have handy a supply of appropriate books on hand? You can't run to the bookstore every time a copy is needed; you should have 10-15 on hand. (Involved parents would also welcome a book if they suffered a loss.) Be sure that you have read any book that you give, and make sure that you have a selection of books that reflect the religious diversity of your school.

A NOTE ON COUNSELING

An unfortunate consequence of the wider religion-psychology conflict is the mistaken perception that truly committed religious people never need counseling or that the only competent counselor is a rabbi. This sometimes forces an educator to take on counseling roles for which he or she was not fully trained or inhibits referrals to a competent counselor. A Jewish community school, no less than any other school, should have a staff of trained counselors (who are themselves literate in traditional Jewish practices and concerns) fully integrated into the school staff.