Rabbi Hannah Dresner was a guest on the radio show "Death Matters Live" on CO-OP Radio Vancouver on June 6, 2018, and spoke about end-of-life-practices in Judaism. The following is an excerpt from the interview.

What is the core of what Judaism teaches about life and death?

Every morning, Jews open to the new day expressing gratitude for the gift of being alive. Sleep is considered a rehearsal for death, called "the little death," and even every exhalation and inhalation is considered a miracle – the breath leaving the body, *maybe* not to return. Judaism thinks of Creation not as a series of events at the beginning of time, but as an ongoing divine act. If the flow were to cease, we'd blink out of existence.

So every morning, we pray:

My God, the soul You have given me is fresh this morning. You created it. You formed it. You breathe it into me. You keep me breathing, but there will come a time when you will take it away from me…

For each breath still in me, I thank You my own God, Lord of spirits, Master of all that happens. Thank you for returning my soul to me upon waking. With each breath, You give me life, anew.

The daily liturgy expresses gratitude for the gift of our ephemeral bodies united with an everlasting soul at the moment of birth, for the purpose of enacting our particular soul's work in the world.

Essentially, Judaism teaches that our awareness of the eventuality of death is what should motivate us to *live* fully. The great 20th C Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel said that, "Eternity is not perpetual *future,* but perpetual *present.*" And that the "hereafter" is not only a world to come, but a world "*herenow.*" Judaism emphasizes life and a building of Heaven on earth.

If we are wise enough to come to understand that we really are here to serve, then we acquire in, in life, in order to give away, and at the end of life, to give back, reciprocity for the gift of life.

Death is a homecoming, and the very first words a Jew says, upon hearing of a death, are: "*Adonai natan v'Adonai lakach, yehi shem Adonai mevorach"* – "God give, and God takes, may the name of the Holy One be blessed."

What are the rituals and liturgy at the time of transition to death?

Before death, a Jew is offered the opportunity to create a living will and to confess. The main Biblical source for this is Jacob's request of God, near death:

"Lord of the World, please grant that a man should fall ill a few days before his death in order that he have time to put his house in order and repent of his sins." And Genesis continues: "…So it happened that Jacob fell ill a little while before his death, and gathered his children to him, and blessed them."

In the final moments of life, a rabbi might help the dying to offer last words of wisdom to closest kin.

Jews confess on their death beds, asking that they be forgiven by their spouses and loved ones and friends, and in the eyes of God, for all sins in life. The dying person also acknowledges that they forgive any wrong ever done to them in life, so that the slate is clear and all is aligned for an easy transition. We seek an un-conflicted leave-taking of the soul from her disintegrating body, and a swift and peaceful ascent of the soul.

On his and her deathbed, the final words of a Jew are *"Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad"* – "Listen, Israel, Adonai our God is the unity of all that is." Perhaps this is our one declaration of faith – belief that all is connected, all part of a great and vast whole – each man and woman connected to her fellow, human beings connected to the other animal species, animate and inanimate Creation of-a-piece, and in the moment of death, earth connected to heaven by the soul that traverses that boundary as it leaves the body and goes "home."

One sacred myth teaches that when souls return to heaven, they assemble before the Throne of Glory, and God asks: "What did you learn from human beings on earth?" In this way, God discovers how Her work has been enacted in the world and how human beings have filtered Her aspirations for the world through their humanness, to make God's commandments come alive, with color and texture and joy.

After the last breath leaves the body, what then?

Once a person does die, there are two sequential foci in Judaism: first, our honoring the body of the deceased, then, once the body is interred, support of the mourner.

Let's talk first, of focus on the deceased.

A corpse, is not left alone for even a minute. A society of the laity, called the *Chevra Kadisha* – The Holy Fellowship - solemnly prepares the body for burial, ritually washing the body and dressing in shrouds while reciting psalms. Shrouds and coffin are uniform, offering equality in death, opting for the simplest, greenest alternatives – linen shrouds, a plain wooden box or a willow basket or just a cloth sack, so there is no barrier to quick, unmediated, return of our bodies to the clay from which we were formed, according to the Creation myth of Genesis. Dust to dust.

Ranked highest amongst all the good deeds outlined for living a righteous life, are these opportunities to offer kindness to one who can no longer thank us. This includes the requirement to eulogize publicly, and to bury.

And in the act of burial, emphasis shifts from honoring the dead to caring for the mourner. The physical labor of burial by family and community both honors the dead and makes the death real in a manner considered to be healing. Because of our belief in the real transformational and healing power of ritual and action, Jews, optimally, fill the graves of their loved ones, not leaving this work to employees of a cemetery.

Once the grave is fully filled, the mourners recite the *Kaddish,* magnifying and sanctifying God's name, right there at the grave, in the moment of most acute mourning. The prayer, extolling the greatness and holiness of the Divine, serves as a kind of Zamboni clearing a path for ascent of the soul.

Then, those in attendance at the burial form two lines and the mourners pass between them as they walk away from the grave, greeted by wave after wave of consolation: "*Hamakom yenachem etchem b'toch shaar avlei Tzion v'Yerushalayim; Hamakom yenachem etchem b'toch shaar avlei Tzion v'Yerushalayim,"* each individual in those two lines offering the blessing of, "May you be comforted," "May you be comforted," "May you be comforted," as the mourners pass them by.

And what of the mourners?

At the end of life, we honor our parents by mourning them for a full year, and then enacting rituals of remembrance, thereafter, on the anniversaries of their deaths.

Visitation of the sick is not just the pastoral role of the rabbi, but is incumbent upon every Jew. At Or Shalom, we have a system that includes a coordinator of care for each person in need, and congregants who've signed on to offer assistance ranging from dog walking to food prep, to tech support, and body work.

Care for mourners traditionally includes attention to the mourner's home environment - setting out a basin of water for ritual cleansing after the burial, covering mirrors so mourners might remain in an internal state, setting out low stools so that mourners can enact the lowly condition of their hearts, and preparing of a simple meal of lentils and eggs – round, whole foods - considered symbolic of eventual return to a productive life.

Fellow community members ensure that mourners are joined in their homes for communal prayer, several times a day, for seven days, so that they can pray witnessed and embraced by community, and, at the end of the week, the community raises a mourner up from the stool and takes him or her for a walk around the block, as a tiny step toward return to the world.

At Or Shalom, we offer of a lay "listener" for the full year of mourning, someone to have tea with, who represents the community at large in companioning the grief process.

Are there any final words you have for us?

The wife of our famous late 18th century rabbi, Simcha Bunam of Peshischa, Poland, wept at her husband's deathbed, but the dying rabbi comforted her saying: "My dear, don't cry, because my whole life was simply that I might learn how to die…"

And here is a fuller quote from Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, who wrote so beautifully on the meaning of death, and the meaning of life, in the context of our awareness that we will, all die:

The deepest wisdom man can attain is to know that… we have to conquer in order to succumb; we have to acquire in order to give away; we have to triumph in order to be overwhelmed… The aspiration is to obtain; the perfection is to dispense. This is the meaning of death: …[it is] the act of giving away in reciprocity, on man's part, for God's gift of life. For the pious man it is a privilege to die.

Thank you for being with us.

Thank you for this opportunity.