



## Grieving During Holidays

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Passover is approaching. The holiday reminds us of family, traditions. We see parents with children, parents with parents, husbands with wives, sisters and brothers. We hear about – and may be included – in family gatherings that are annual events. We're urged by our tradition to reflect on how we live our lives. We observe the rituals of our heritage, and we're surrounded by the ambience of warmth and tradition. It seems as though everyone is as it has always been, and nobody is alone. And then there's you – you, the mourner, the one who grieves, and who hurts, and for whom absolutely nothing seems as it has always been. As if each ordinary day isn't painful enough, you're now immersed in other people's togetherness and plans. Happy Passover? Hag samayah??? Not for you, who can focus only on emptiness, sadness and pain. Even if your loss was long in the past, Passover encourages you to remember, and to review. This time of celebration may feel out of sync with your entire being. This time of focusing on the past, anticipating the future, and spending time with those we love feels like yet another affront to those of us with no hope, with no joy, and with endings rather than beginnings. We aren't anticipating the future. We can only mark time by how long it's been since someone important to us died. As others are overwhelmed with family and activity, we are overwhelmed with yearning and missing. We feel more alone than ever. But death, as we all know, is not only a part of our life, but of everyone's life, and, with some thought, it is possible to approach this holiday time with a different set of expectations – ones that include comfort and peace and even hope. Even mourners can find solace in the meanings and customs of our Jewish holidays and all they entail. Even with the burden of grief that we carry, this can be a Hag samayah – an uplifting, if not joyful holiday, for us, too. Perhaps the following ideas can help:

1. **Plan Ahead.** Anticipatory preparation is a coping tool that can ease the impact of the holiday itself. When you anticipate the worst, the actual event usually is not as bad as expected. No matter what, by thinking ahead, you've prepared yourself for some of the worst that could arise.
2. **Assess Traditions.** Be realistic about what you can handle. This is a time to set limits. Think about priorities and eliminate the pressures of I-have-to-do-it-this-way-because- I-always-have. If nothing else, death teaches impermanence. It pushes us to rethink all that we rely on, and allows us to redefine long held patterns. There are always new ways to approach old traditions, and whatever happens this year does not need to be an unchangeable blueprint for all future years.
3. **Balance Solitude and Sociability.** Grief is exhausting. It requires a lot of internal readjusting, and that takes a lot of energy. So intersperse 'alone' time to revitalize and to let down, with 'outside' time to be with others. Schedule your own special moments to let it all out. You may find that clears some space for comfort, even moments of pleasure.

4. **Acknowledge Memories.** Remember that grief does not let you choose between pain and pleasure. Rather, it's a state that involves learning how to manage the pain that exists, so that we can discover pleasures that also exist. Any mourner realizes that our loved ones are never forgotten. Relationships don't end with death, but instead become transformed. Memories are important tools for healing. Shared memories promote bonding between friends and family. Sorrow shared is sorrow diminished. Including your deceased loved one in your holiday plans can be creative and comforting. You can burn a special candle, read a special poem, put out a favorite picture. It does make a difference.

5. **Don't Accept Silence.** Perhaps the greatest myth of all is that if the deceased is not spoken about, the mourner will not think of him or her. All of us who have mourned know this is ridiculous. When during a holiday period do we NOT think of those we have loved? How much more comforting it is to be able to share our recollections, than to be isolated in solitary thoughts. How wonderfully heartwarming to know that someone else is thinking of our loved one, and that they care too. By breaking codes of silence, mourners find they are not alone. In these ways, the deceased live on in our lives.

6. **Think About Others.** It's never only about you, even if it feels so. It's hard to realize that when we see the outsides of others, we may misread the insides. We can never really tell who, like ourselves, is hurting. You will be amazed at how much you can gain by reaching out. The benefits far outweigh the energy it takes, and it can be so rewarding. There are many ways to volunteer in our community, and so many who will welcome a kind word, or gesture or invitation.

7. **Seek Pleasure.** With the death of your loved one, some parts of your life have died, to, but not all. There are still people and things that are special and meaningful to you. Lots make you cry, but there can be laughter too. If you can't think of anything to make you feel good, try something that used to work, or try what someone else suggests. The important thing is to try.

8. **Use Resources.** In this community, they are all around you. There are professional as well as personal resources. You need not walk alone as you walk the Mourner's Path. Today's mourners become tomorrow's comforters who become the next day's mourners who become... That is the true cycle of the seasons and the years. It's tempting to dread the Jewish holidays when one is a mourner, and yes, you will have some difficult moments. But it is possible to experience comfort and pleasure too. Try some of the above suggestions. Remember that if loss has become a part of your life, it's because you have loved and cared. These Jewish holidays may inspire us to review and remember, but they can also truly be new starts and new beginnings as well. We can come together in grief, as well as in hope as we wish for us all a "Hag samayah".