



Your Life Matters!
To Others . . . To this World . . . To God.

To further the progress of faith communities in preventing suicide, the national Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) convened an Interfaith Suicide Prevention Dialogue, which was supported by the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Participants included representatives of the five largest faith groups in the United States: Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu. The complete document can be found at http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/faith_dialogue.pdf

Representing the Jewish faith were Rabbi Gary Greenebaum, U.S. Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, and Dr. Kalman Kaplan, Professor of Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychiatry, University of Illinois in Chicago (UIC) and Director, Program in Religion Spirituality, and Mental Health, sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation at UIC.

(Quotations are from the Jewish Publication Society --JPS)

Among the major Jewish denominations—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—the predominant views regarding suicide are no different either in law or tradition. The Book of Deuteronomy makes clear what we should do when it says, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have put before you, life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, - if you and your offspring would live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19)]

Judaism teaches that how we are born and how we die are in God’s hands. Life belongs to God, not to the individual, and it is a gift to be treasured. The Biblical basis for the injunction against suicide has been derived from the Noahide laws: “For your lifeblood too, I will require a reckoning.” (Genesis 9:5) Taking a single life – even one’s own - is seen as taking the life of the entire world; saving a single life is seen as saving the entire world.

(Yorah Deah, 345) Taking your own life is viewed as a very serious violation of your responsibility to God and society if you are in your right mind, in part because it denies you the opportunity to repent. In Jewish law, there is no right to self-mutilation or suicide since you are only “renting” your body from God. People who die by suicide cannot be buried inside a Jewish cemetery; spaces for them are reserved just outside the cemetery.

It is important to note that the Jewish law against suicide is only one narrow aspect of the far wider and more important idea that God loves humans without qualification and indeed created us uniquely in the Divine image. The Torah is thus given as a guide for living rather than merely as a preparation for death. This same idea is constant throughout the Bible and Rabbinic writings.

Jewish teachings never condone suicide, but Jews tend not to blame the person who dies by suicide. Indeed, Jewish communities feel a profound sense of tragedy and loss when someone takes his own life. They try to understand the death and not be judgmental toward the victim. The suicide is condemned, but not the person.

Some commonly understood explanations for why Jewish people end their lives include severe depression or other psychological problems and major life stresses. Jews generally attribute

responsibility for a suicide to these conditions and try to help the survivors. They believe that suicide is not an act against God when the victim's psychological state prevents him or her from being in full control of their capacities.

In general, Jews believe that most suicides can be prevented. Suicides are seen as psychologically based, so Jews usually search for ways to intervene in time. It is important, for example, to take actions such as giving a person food and water, personal affirmations, and physical comfort, and to get the person the care he needs. It is also important that rabbis and seminarians have access to training and resources for suicide prevention.

Jewish Resources

Prayers:

Be with me, God. I feel so lost.

I can't seem to escape the dark cloud that is hanging over me today.

Help me, God. Give me strength to combat despair and fear.

Show me how to put my pain into perspective.

Teach me to have faith in the new day that is coming.

Thank you, God, for today's blessings, for tomorrow's hope, and for Your abiding love. Amen.

Teach me always to believe in my power to return to life, to hope, and to You, God, no matter what pains I have endured, no matter how far I have strayed from You.

Give me the strength to resurrect my weary spirit.

Revive me, God, so I can embrace life once more in joy, in passion, in peace. Amen.

~Aldan Solovy

Dear God, Please gather us into your healing embrace.

Please walk beside us and grant us the courage to accept your mercy

as you soothe our pain, quiet our terror and comfort our sorrow, so that we can finally find peace.

Please awaken our souls with your sacred and loving grace,

and bring them alive with the golden light of hope and love.

Show us how we can become our best selves, those whom you meant us to be.

Let us rise above our fear to experience compassion and love toward others so that we can better serve your will.

With your help we will heal the deep and terrible wounds in our very souls.

Please God, fill us with your gentle, loving, golden grace

and walk with us every step of our seemingly impossible journey to wholeness and health.

Let us learn your joyful and unique purpose for our lives. Fill us with joy and serenity.

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Sample Sermon Starters

Elijah (I Kings 19:1-21)

The Prophet Elijah is at the end of his rope. He's defeated the prophets of Baal but now he's on the run from the evil King Ahab and the wicked Queen Jezebel, who is after his head. Just as Hagar did, Elijah flees to the wilderness. Falling exhausted under a broom tree, Elijah asks to die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life." God offers a different answer to Elijah. God sends an angel who gives the prophet something to eat and drink (not unlike what our congregations do when someone is going

through a difficult time). When the prophet makes his way to Mt. Horeb, God listens to his anguish and exhaustion. God also raises up young Elisha to help the older prophet continue in life and ministry. Being cared for in body and soul, having someone who listens to our anguish and despair, having a friend, co-worker or partner to share the load—Elijah's story offers many ways we can help those who are feeling overwhelmed by life.

~(Based on Ephrem Epstein's *Elijah's Journey* and Dr. Kalman Kaplan's *Psychology of Hope*)

Hagar (Genesis 16:1-4; Genesis 21:8-21)

Twice the Egyptian slave of Sarah and Abraham finds herself at the point of despair and death in the wilderness. The first time is after Abraham, at Sarah's urging, has used her to conceive a son. The second time is when Sarah is jealous of Hagar's son Ishmael and tells Abraham to cast her out. In both stories, God hears her cries and an angel of the Lord responds to her. In the second story, God opens Hagar's eyes to see a spring of water that saves both her life and her child's. Both stories remind us of God's presence even in the deserts of our lives. God hears our cries and can open our eyes to the possibilities of life around us. The stories also remind us of the role of our faith communities to be such "streams in the desert" for persons in despair or grief.

Texts of Hope from the Hebrew Bible

Psalm 34: 18-19:

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.
Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the Lord rescues them from them all.

Psalm 42:5:

Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise the Lord,
my help and my God.

Psalm 119:116a:

Sustain me according to your promise, and I will live....

Psalm 139:1-12:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways . . .
Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',

even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Psalm 145:14:

The Lord upholds all those who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.

Proverbs 23:18:

Surely, there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off.

Isaiah 40:28-31:

God gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Samuel 22:29:

You are my lamp O Lord; the Lord turns my darkness into light.