

JEWISHLINK

Linking Northern and Central NJ, Bronx, Manhattan, Westchester and CT

Issue #559

December 5, 2024 | 4 Kislev, 5785

We Need to Talk About This



By Bessie Taubes

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you just didn't know what to say? You don't want to say the wrong thing, yet you feel like you should say something. Thankfully, Jewish tradition provides us with many "go-to" expressions, each with deep roots in tradition offering words for specific life cycle moments.

When we hear about the birth of a baby, a bar or bat mitzvah, a graduation, an engagement, a wedding or other joyous occasions, we appropriately respond, "**Mazel Tov!**" In just two words, we convey our happiness and share in the joy of an achieved milestone.

When people tell us they're expecting a child, we respond differently: "**Besha'a Tova**" ("At a favorable time"). Unlike "Mazel Tov," which typically celebrates a realized event, this phrase acknowledges life's unpredictability. It is a bracha, a blessing of hope, indicating that we are standing with the expectant couple and their family, wishing for a positive and healthy outcome.

When we hear that someone has died, we instinctively say, "**Baruch Dayan HaEmet**" (Blessed is the True Judge). This response expresses our shared sorrow and our acceptance of Hashem's will, even when it is challenging.

Judaism offers the beautiful practice of comforting mourners during the week of shiva, a time dedicated to being physically present with the mourners at their time of grief. For many, visiting someone in mourning feels uncomfortable. What do you say? What if you say the wrong thing? In truth, our role as visitors is simple: to listen more than speak. Once again, tradition gives us the right words. Ashkenazic Jews say: "**HaMakom yinachem etchem be-toch she'ar aveilei Tzion v'Yerushalayim**"

(May the Omnipresent comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem). This phrase connects the mourner to the collective sorrow of the Jewish people in their eternal homeland while invoking God's comfort. Sephardic Jews say: "**Min HaShamayim Tenuchamu**" (May you be comforted from Heaven), also focusing on God as the true source of comfort.

Another "go-to" expression is the one often used when someone is ill: "**Refuah Sheleima**" ("A complete healing"). With these two words, we express our wish for the sick person to experience a full recovery. Unlike the other go-to expressions, however, this one, while well-intentioned, may not always be the right thing to say. This phrase expresses heartfelt care, but it may not always be appropriate.

Years ago, a close friend of mine was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. Despite the lack of a cure, she pursued treatments to extend her time with family and embraced her community's prayers not for a miracle, but for more time. I recall her relating how a well-meaning friend wished her a "refuah sheleima" after learning about her dire situation. This response left her feeling unheard and misunderstood; she wasn't seeking a cure, but rather support for her reality. This story has stayed with me, as it highlights how uncomfortable most of us are when it comes to discussing mortality, whether our own or someone else's, and how our discomfort with mortality often hinders meaningful conversations. As a result, we lack the tools to engage in discussions about aging, illness and dying.

After reading an article in "The Times" suggesting that Thanksgiving might be an opportunity to skip controversial topics like politics and instead focus on something "easy" like death, I tried this with my large, extended family. Unsurprisingly, they weren't interested in discussing politics or death.

This hesitation to discuss death is common. As the director of community outreach

for Ematai, an organization dedicated to integrating Jewish wisdom into aging and end-of-life decisions, I've witnessed this discomfort firsthand. Ematai encourages proactive conversations about these deeply personal topics in calm and comfortable settings, rather than once a crisis has arisen.

Through workshops on halachic health-care proxies and end-of-life planning, I've seen individuals and communities embrace these discussions with gratitude. Participants appreciate the chance to explore these issues thoughtfully, finding empowerment in a compassionate, non-threatening environment.

Yet, many synagogues and communities still shy away from these conversations, viewing them as too somber or unnecessary for their constituents. This avoidance can be detrimental. Life's unpredictability ensures that these moments will come, and having the tools to navigate them effectively is invaluable.

We must be comfortable enough to confront these topics, not just for ourselves but for our family members and our community. These conversations are acts of care, foresight and love. They are opportunities to ensure that our values guide our decisions and that we have meaningful conversations with our loved ones and our rabbis, so they understand our wishes. By addressing these matters now, we lift a heavy burden from others later. The time to start these conversations is not tomorrow or next year, it's today. If not now, when?

Bessie Taubes is the director of community outreach for Ematai, an organization dedicated to integrating Jewish wisdom into healthcare decision-making. She is the owner of Wellness Motivations in Teaneck, where she works as a health coach, fitness instructor, and advocate for well-being. Additionally, Bessie serves as the rebbetzin of Congregation Zichron Mordechai in Teaneck, combining her professional expertise with her communal leadership role.