

## **Death Awareness Education - Jean Berman 2014**

**Goal, Objective, Introduction, Presentation and Outline**  
**Ceremony Handout**  
**Sample Letter**  
**Sample Promo including Bio**  
**Project Notes and next steps**

**Goal:** To become a professional resource for Jews and non-Jews to build a conscious relationship with death.

**Objective:** To create and deliver an adaptable presentation that invites people to begin to integrate the beauty, wisdom, power and peace that accompany a greater awareness of death in the midst of life.

**Introduction:** Beginning with my own story, speaking of death in the context of life transitions, considering cultural approaches to and traditions surrounding death and highlighting the Jewish approach, and through the use of ceremony, I will invite people to explore ranges of death awareness with me.

## **Presentation Title: Discovering Beauty and Power in Death**

1. Ask people their first names and a word or phrase they associate with death, or what brought them to this presentation. I will note these on a flip chart or white board and weave them into the presentation.
2. How I came to this work and my passion for it.
3. Share my experience of a heightened awareness of life immediately following a death and invite others to share their experiences. I will ask if anyone has had theirs or other's priorities become clear in the face of a serious diagnosis.
4. Ask how our culture at large views death, mourning and how we do or don't integrate death in our society. Give a brief history of how death care has changed in the US over the past 150 years.
5. Speak about the value of ceremony in providing meaning, honor and comfort. Offer examples of ceremonies in several cultures and associated beliefs: Croatia, Japan, Micronesian tribes. Finish with a description of the chevra kadisha, tahara and shmira.
6. Invite conversation:
  - Is death a moment or a process?
  - Might the essence or soul of a person continue to exist?
  - What can we do that may be of comfort or assistance if the soul is present and in transition?
7. Enact ceremony (see below)
8. Open for conversation and conclude.
9. Participants are welcome to take a copy of the ceremony along with my contact information.

## **Ceremony Honoring One Who has Died**

I have developed this ceremony, inspired by the Jewish tradition of Tahara, to encourage others to use or create their own for their loved one. This is one way to respectfully bring closure and comfort following death. The ceremony can be personalized by adding or substituting personal memories and stories, for example, "Her eyes beheld with joy her infant granddaughter, her voice delighted many as she sang old-time favorites whenever given the chance, her mouth spoke words of wisdom and encouragement, her breasts suckled three children, her hands cared for her beloved roses or baked endless cookies, her feet carried her on well-worn paths up the mountains she loved..."

Individuals may take turns doing part of the ceremony, or there can be a leader, allowing others to add in. Stories could continue after the ceremony is complete, granting a longer time of closeness and comfort. The ceremony can take place wherever the one who has died is. If the deceased is on a sheet, you may wrap her in that, or cover her with a clean sheet or blanket. Her eyes may be gently closed and her mouth closed. It may need to be propped shut. A candle may be lit, or other simple articles of beauty or memory placed close by.

Feel free to adapt and share this, and please include my name and contact information.

*Begin by expressing gratitude in being present.* I honor you, Source of life. I am grateful for all that has brought me to this moment. I am grateful to have been nourished by the wellspring of life, to be aware of Your Presence now, to feel beloved and part of the whole. I give thanks for the privilege of honoring this one before me now, in the fullness of her life and death.

Daughter of an ancient lineage, I honor you. Please forgive me if anything I do or say would not be pleasing to you.

*Gazing at her face, gently stroke her forehead and cheeks.* I honor your face, the face of the divine. You felt the heat of day, the cool of evening, wind and rain.

*Touch her eyebrows and very gently, her eyes.* I honor your eyes, which beheld the wonders of creation: blue sky and bright sunshine, clouds and rain, sunrises and sunsets. By night you saw the moon wax and wane, and the distant stars. You saw plants and people grow, blossom, fruit and die. You watched seasons change, year by year. Your eyes saw birds soaring from tree to tree, butterflies, an array of the animals of Earth. Tears shed in happiness and grief came from these eyes. You beheld both injustice and kindness.

*Touch her nose and ears.* Your nose smelled the fragrance of flowers and aromas of baked food, the air fresh and enlivened after rain. Your ears let you enjoy favorite music, birdsong and crickets, thunder, and the familiar voices of those who were close. You heard stories of others, their challenges and victories, their laughter and your own.

*Very gently, touch her lips.* Your mouth smiled with happiness, spoke words of meaning, uttered surprise at the unexpected. Perhaps you sang at times and were silent at others. You tasted flavors and felt textures of favorite foods; the pleasure of thirst-quenching water when your mouth was dry. Your lips may have kissed with love, tenderness and promise.

*Brush her hair.* Your hair, washed and styled time after time, changing with the years.

*Hold her shoulders for a moment, stroke down her arms, then take each hand in yours.* Shoulders which carried a sense of purpose and responsibility, standing tall, at times shrugging or drooped with tiredness. Arms strong in the day-to-day tasks of life. Hugging, holding, empty. Hands that spoke with meaning, wrote words, prepared food, and a thousand other things.

*Hold your hands about six inches above her body, moving slowly from her collarbone to her mid-thighs.* I honor your heart, lungs, and other organs, which worked as a whole for you to live and breathe every moment of your life. Your breasts, womb; your sacred woman-parts.

*Still holding your hands above her body, move them from mid-thigh to her feet, then gently hold her feet.* These legs propelled you down streets and over hills. Your feet carried you across the earth, taking you on purposeful travels and perhaps walking also for the pleasure of it.

*Slowly sweep your hands above her whole body three times.* May this journey into the unknown be one of peace. May you go in blessing.

*Wrap the sheet about her, starting at her feet, then sides, and finally her head. Stand facing her in stillness for as long as feels right, blow out or turn off the candle if there is one. Open your hands, closing my eyes, breathe deeply and say, Thank you.*

Reverend Jean Berman  
Life Enriching Ceremonies/  
Death Awareness Education  
Peaks Island, Maine  
[jeanbberman@gmail.com](mailto:jeanbberman@gmail.com)  
207.838.9000

## Sample Letter:

Jean Berman  
Death Awareness Education  
136 Island Ave  
Peaks Island ME 04108  
207-838-9000  
[jeanbberman@gmail.com](mailto:jeanbberman@gmail.com)

Ani Helmick, Executive Director  
Etz Chaim Synagogue & Maine Jewish Museum  
267 Congress St  
Portland, Maine 04101

June 15, 2014

Dear Ani,

You and I spoke briefly about my excitement in opening the conversation of Death Awareness with people. I would like to meet with you to speak about offering a program at Etz Chaim.

Most of us avoid talking, thinking, feeling about or planning for our certain death, and the deaths of our loved ones. It is my experience that exploration of this topic often leads to a greater sense of peace and wonder in life.

Like me, you may have had experiences that tell you there is more to death than grief. Have you ever had life and the world around suddenly become more vivid when someone you know dies? Have you known someone who discovers what really matters to them when given a serious or terminal diagnosis? Have you ever found it interesting that liturgy often speaks of a longing to return to our mysterious source?

We prepare for births, careers, weddings, trips, and many important but more minor thresholds in life. I believe that by exploring our feelings, thoughts and cultural assumptions around death, and by considering possible actions, we can make choices that bring greater meaning and peace to our own lives and those of others.

The presentation I propose is **Discovering Beauty and Power in Death**, which includes the following subtopics:

- Care of the Newly Dead – a Cross-Cultural Inquiry into Tradition and Intuition
- Honor and Comfort: the Jewish Way of Death and Mourning
- How Death Enhances Life – Heightening our Awareness.

I will include a simple ceremony with a volunteer on a massage table, designed to invite people to feel into the emotional and spiritual possibilities for meaningful closure with the body of the deceased. I am also keen to invite people who wish to share from their own experience and inner knowing.

I will be contacting you by phone in a week unless I hear from you by email. I look forward to speaking together!

Best regards

,Jean

## Sample Promo, Photo and Bio for Mixed Audiences:

### Discovering Beauty and Power in the Hours After Death with Jean Berman

Is there more to death than grief and sadness? Are we missing a portal into the mystery and wonder of life? Are there simple ways to be with a loved one immediately following death that bring meaningful closure? Reflecting on cross-cultural practices and personal experience, followed by an intimate and respectful demonstration of a ceremony, you are invited to come open your mind and heart to "discover beauty and power in the hours after death".



Jean is an Interfaith Minister anchored in Judaism and ordained by the Chaplaincy Inst. of Maine. She has experience working with the dying, and has studied customs surrounding death and dying in a variety of cultures. She develops rituals and ceremonies for life transitions including weddings, healing, and adolescent rites of passage, as well as ceremonies of closure for death, divorce, and other forms of loss. She is an active member of the Interfaith

Ministers of New England, the Funeral Consumers Association of Maine, Kavod v'Nichum (Hebrew for Honor and Comfort, an organization providing instruction and support in Jewish ways of funerals, burials and mourning), and the Portland, ME Chevra Kadisha (Jewish group which prepares the deceased for burial).

**Thursday, November 20**  
**7:00-8:30pm**  
**Maine Jewish Museum**  
**267 Congress St**  
**Portland, Maine 04101**  
**suggested donation \$10**

### Bio for Jewish Audiences:

Jean has been a member of the Chevra Kadisha in Portland, Maine for 3 years, and was part of the beginning of a community Chevra Kadisha in Fort Collins CO. Blessed to attend a number of deaths over the years, she also volunteered for Hospice in Colorado. Jean is completing a cycle of classes with the Gamliel Institute, the educational arm of Kavod v'Nichum ([jewish-funerals.org](http://jewish-funerals.org)), in order to be able to help educate others around Jewish traditions of death and mourning, and assist those who wish to organize in their community. She will be offering presentations at their next annual conference in Austin, TX. In addition to speaking about Jewish traditions, Jean also speaks on cross-cultural approaches to death care to Interfaith audiences. She is a member of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Maine (<http://www.fcmaine.net/>).

## **Project Notes:**

Several aspects of this project changed along the way. Initially I had a grand plan and timeline which was more than I was capable of doing. Part of that was wrestling with self-promotion. I also thought that I would develop three separate presentations on the topics noted in the promo letter, but found it was practical to choose one and integrate the others. In the beginning I called the presentation, "Discovering Beauty and Power in the Hours After Death", as I have a great interest in that specific time. However, after delivering my first presentation I realized that a broader topic is more useful in terms of reaching people and opening the conversation.

1½ hours proved to be a good time for me, with 40 minutes for presentation, 20 minutes for the ceremony and 30 for conversation. The group included people experienced with Taharah and also non-Jews, some of them with hospice experience. There was a lot of interest in the Jewish traditions surrounding death and mourning, and I will develop a presentation on that, for both Jews and non-Jews. There were questions, but after awhile a conversation opened up amongst those who were there, which was thrilling for me.

The use of a massage table on which to enact the ceremony puts people at ease as it is a familiar symbol related to relaxation. I used a large sheet under the volunteer which could be wrapped over her, and a candle with an electric flame at a small table by the head.

I have 2 presentations planned for the near future, one in an Interfaith setting and one in a Jewish setting. The Funeral Consumers Alliance of Maine is considering a presentation, and I am meeting with others regarding future possibilities. I am also networking locally with people in the field of home funerals and related topics.