

SECOND DRAFT VERSION

The Death of A Pet - Why Jewish Rituals are Needed

Submitted by Rabbi Rob Kvidt

For anyone deeply attached to their pet, the death of their beloved animal can be profoundly traumatic at any stage of life. A pet may be a cherished companion for someone living alone, an integral part of many family events over the years, or even a treasured childhood playmate.

When our pets die, the void they leave in our lives is immense. These beloved companions offer us unconditional love, joy, and comfort, becoming essential members of our families. Their loss is felt deeply and personally.

As veterinary medicine has advanced, so too has the lifespan of our pets. It's not uncommon for dogs and cats to live 14-plus years or more. Equines can have even longer lifespans, averaging between 30 to 40 years. After so many years together, the grief we experience when they die is very real and significant.

Pet Loss in Judaism: Historical and Modern Perspectives.

In Judaism, it's not always easy to talk about or acknowledge the death of a pet because we have no prescribed ritual for pet loss, whereas we do have rituals for what to do when a person dies. This lack of awareness can create disenfranchised grief, which is defined as grief over a loss that is not acknowledged, validated, or socially supported.

What stings even more is when we read Jewish commentary that seeks to diminish our grief. Here are several examples.

According to CCAR Responsa CARR 186-188, "we should not confuse it (feelings for a pet) with the greater love and respect for a human life. We should not use a prayer which is dear to the heart of every Jew to commemorate a dead animal...Whatever mourning for a pet which may occur should be conducted privately and outside of the purview of Judaism." **(1)**

The problem I see is that by not providing support within our faith, we are pushing Jews to seek solace elsewhere. This paper aims to change that by finding ways to honor pets within a Jewish context, underscoring the need for Jewish pet rituals.

The CCAR statement is not very different from a Chabbad interpretation that, "It is of extreme importance that we do not fall into the trap of viewing an animal's life or death as tragic as significant as a human's life and death." **(2)**

According to Yeshiva, even when an animal is sick, "it is forbidden to break Shabbat in order to save the life of an animal (See Mishna Brurah, 332,6). In fact, even to break

Rabbinic law for an animal is very limited (see Shmirat Shabbat KeHilchatah, 27, 54-57), allowing moving the animal (even though it is mukzah), moving forbidden objects for the animal (even though they are mukzah items), and giving the animal medicines etc.” (3)

But then we remember this: From the time Noah and company went into the ark and came forth from it, G-d gave people and animals to one another to dwell together. Gamliel, the grandson of Rabbi Judah haNasi, went on to proclaim: “Whosoever has compassion upon his fellow creatures, upon him will God have compassion.”

Rabbi Yochanan observed: “If the Torah had not been given, we could have learned modesty from the cat, honest labor from the ant, marital fidelity from the dove, and good manners from the rooster.” (4)

But for all the examples of kindness and respect that we find in Jewish tradition, what we don’t find is any ancient assumption that Jews will keep pets or that a human might truly be bonded to a particular animal.

The Torah never thought we would have animals as pets. The Bible only talks about animals as “wild beasts” and “livestock.” While Judaism says to be respectful of animals, it doesn’t exactly give permission to love animals or to grieve their loss.

My initial research found only several Jewish publications that wrote about pet loss. The subject first appeared as a Responsa in Moment Magazine (October 1993) when Rabbi Shohama Wiener wrote, “Should a Jewish way of grieving for animal companions be created?” and then in the CCAR Journal, Fall 1998, where a Jewish veterinarian, Dr. Ruth Chodrow, wrote, “A Jewish Response to Pet Loss.”

Rabbi Wiener said, “Despite its strong concern for animals, grieving for pets does not receive sympathetic support from mainstream Judaism.” He concludes that Judaism is not addressing a question of emotional and spiritual significance to a large number of Jews who experience pet loss. (5)

Dr. Chodrow writes, “Judaism has rituals associated with many other life changes. We should be able to provide comfort to grieving pet owners in a manner consistent with our traditions.” (6)

Animals in World Religions.

In other cultures and religions, animals are often viewed differently compared to the human-centered perspective of Judaism. In Judaism, unnecessary cruelty to animals is forbidden, recognizing the link between how a person treats animals and how they treat human beings. A person who is cruel to a defenseless animal will likely be cruel to defenseless people, whereas someone who cares for the smallest creatures will likely show compassion towards humans as well.

Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism hold nature as sacred, with humans being no more significant than any other living thing. Islam teaches that animals should be given equal consideration to humans. Christianity emphasizes respect for all of nature and

its inhabitants. Native American traditions vary widely, but a common theme is that all of nature is sacred, with both animate and inanimate objects being related to the Divine and deserving respect.

Regardless of religious teachings, once animals enter our lives, they bring with them a tsunami of unconditional love. However, as Jews, we can often feel alone and without guidance when a pet dies. Our grief is not always understood, and there are no prescribed Jewish rituals to help us navigate this loss.

The Emotional Impact the Death Of A Pet Has On Children and Adults.

I remember being in mourning when my beloved mule died and knowing that I could not have my family stand when I asked the congregation if there were any mourners present while leading services. The grief we felt could not be acknowledged.

At a Tahara training program last year in Honolulu, our group was asked to go around the room and dedicate our learning to someone. Before I was asked to speak, two people had dedicated their learning to pets that had recently died. Their grief was real, and by sharing it openly, they had the support of fellow Jews.

According to the Society for Psychotherapy, “There is an abundance of research on the physical and mental benefits of having a pet and/or utilizing an animal in therapy. However, the loss of that companion can be devastating and traumatic. Humans develop a lasting attachment with their pets, which breaks at the loss of the pet.” (7)

Another article from Scientific American concurs, stating, “It is time we gave grieving pet owners the recognition, support, and consideration they need. Yes, it is up to us to identify and address our emotional wounds when our pet dies, but the more validation we receive from those around us, the quicker and the more complete our psychological recovery will be.” (8)

When this death happens to school-aged children, it might be their first experience with death. From six years of age on, it’s important not to shield them from it. Seeing their parents cry or mourn the death can teach them how to handle their own feelings.

Older children and teens may not fully grasp the concept of suffering. Involving them in what’s happening, especially if their beloved pet is going to be euthanized, can be helpful. Many veterinarians suggest that children be present when a pet is euthanized so they see that death can be peaceful, calm, and loving.

For Chevra groups, reaching out to families experiencing pet loss can show support and acknowledge the death from a Jewish perspective. However, more rituals are needed to help individuals and families cope within the framework of their religion.

Rabbis can also join the discussion if they are willing. For example, having a Shabbat each year centered around pets, offering a blessing to them, and providing an opportunity for those who have experienced a pet loss in the past year to stand and be acknowledged.

Embracing Grief When A Pet Dies.

Your pet was both a friend and a family member. Their death is significant, and your grief is real, even if those around you may not fully understand.

Create a ritual to honor your pet's life and acknowledge their death. Some ideas in this paper are adapted from Jewish traditions. Reach out to family and friends for support; you may find others who have also experienced pet loss.

Know that it is acceptable to grieve. Allow yourself the time needed to process this loss. Look for ways to express your feelings, such as writing them down. Talking to your rabbi can also be helpful, as many rabbis understand the significance of pet loss from their own experience.

Engage with online support groups for pet loss to connect with others who share your experience. If you feel depressed or suicidal, seek out a mental health professional.

Mourning Muley: A Personal Story.

In March of 2022, my beloved mule, Muley, was euthanized due to a leg injury that couldn't be fixed. She was 35 years old and otherwise in perfect health. The night before she died, Muley made it to the front yard to be close to us. I spent that night with her outside, my arms around her as we watched the stars. The next day, she rested under her favorite tree. When the vet arrived, we held her as she died peacefully. We buried her in the same spot, covered with a handmade quilt from my great-grandmother.

At first, we were in shock. My husband, Jeff, even made lunch for the vet and friend who assisted. There was no meal of consolation. We thought about sitting Shiva, but it felt too solitary since no one would be coming. I posted about Muley's death on Facebook, which brought support from the local Chabad rabbi, who offered to bring a meal to us, and two members from his congregation who said they would sit Shiva with us online. Our Christian friends brought food, and the Chevra community on Oahu reached out. However, my Reform congregation remained silent, not acknowledging our grief. When one leader asked how we were after Muley died, and I said we were mourning, the leader's response was, "Why?" This highlighted a lack of understanding and a missed opportunity for community support.

We created rituals based on Jewish traditions to help us. I hope the next part of this paper will serve as a source of ideas on how to acknowledge your pet's loss, too, and the resources available to help.

Creating Meaningful Rituals to Honor A Pet.

Mourning for pets is a genuine and deep experience, and finding meaningful ways to say goodbye is essential for many of us.

Reform Rabbi Andrea Frank writes, “A good majority of rabbis from a halachic point of view say you are not supposed to have a burial. But ‘God created the animals before humans. Everyone seems to forget that.” (9)

In the best tradition of the Baal Shem Tov, who enjoined people to learn from everything that happens and employ it in their service of G-d, we can indeed find ways to appropriately react to a pet's death.

Suggestions include carefully inventorying what the pet did to improve life and then making an honest attempt to improve life for another human being in a similar way.

Say this instead of BDE.

It would appear that reciting “dayan ha’emet” upon the death of a pet is inconsistent with the parameters set by the Biur Halacha. It is only upon the death of a human loved one that “dayan ha’emet” is said. But here is something you could say instead:

“HaMakom yimalei l’cha chesronecha (May the Omnipresent fill your loss).”

If you are supporting a friend or family member whose pet has died, it's appropriate to say, “tell me about (name of pet). Your willingness to listen can go a long way. What is relevant is not how Judaism sees animal life but showing *gemilut hasadim* (an act of loving kindness) to comfort a person suffering.

Participate in Tzedakah through deeds and monetary gifts.

When Muley died, we decided to continue cultivating the horse grasses on our property to feed other equines on the street who are not pets and normally do not receive fresh grass. That helped us, too, because otherwise, we would be looking outside at the grass growing and Muley not there to eat it.

Sample Rituals: Saying Goodbye to Our Pets.

Rituals can be home-based with family and friends and Jewish themed with verses from the Hebrew Bible and modification to some of our prayers.

They might include a home burial, if allowed, on your property and a pet funeral. A service outline could include the following:

- Expression of gratitude for the pet that died.
- Acknowledging God's care for the pet.
- Personal reflections.
- Readings that can bring comfort and peace.

Mourner's Kaddish with a Modification.

This is said when a human being dies. Many Jews would feel uncomfortable hearing a pet's name mentioned next to a relative.

If you wish to say the Mourner's Kaddish at home, I suggest substituting, "May God's majesty be revealed in the days of our lifetime and the life of Israel (b'chayeichon uv'yomeichon uv'chayei d'chol beit Yisrael) with the following:

May God's majesty be revealed in the days of our lifetime and the life of all creatures (**b'chayeichon uv'yomeichon uv'chayei d'chol beit yoshvei tevel**).

Sample Funeral Outline #1.

Baruch merachem al ha-briot - "Blessed is the One who has compassion on creatures." (from Baruch She-amar in the traditional morning service).

(Name of Pet) has brought us love and joy. We give thanks for his/her life with us.

- Psalm 145: 8-10: "Gracious and merciful is the Lord, slow to anger, great in kindness. Good is the Lord to all, and His mercy is over all His creatures. All Your creatures, Lord, acclaim You and Your faithful ones bless you."
- Talk about your pet. Involve the entire family so each person can share their favorite memory. Offer words of comfort to each other.
- Read Psalm 23: God is My Shepherd.
- Discuss how you want to honor your pet's memory at the funeral. Turn your sorrow into a blessing for other animals and pets by donating to an animal organization, volunteering at a local animal shelter, or sharing the horse grasses as we did

Sample Funeral Outline #2.

- Take turns reading from Genesis 1:20-25. Highlights include: “Let the waters swarm with the swarm of living creatures and let fowl fly over the earth across the vault of the heavens....Let the earth bring forth living creatures of each kind.”
- In this time of sorrow, as we remember (insert name of pet), we seek comfort from the Source of Life. Blessed is God, Creator of all. **Baruch ata Adonai, borei et ha-kol.**
- Animals existed on earth before we were created, and we learned to care for them. Today, we mourn the death of (insert name of pet), our beloved family member whose death leaves us feeling sad.
- Read together Psalm 36:6-7.
- We praise you, Adonai, for your compassion towards the earth and its creatures. Source of Life, we thank you for the gift of (insert pet’s name) life that we were fortunate to share. Let us remember (insert pet name) and speak of the joy that (insert pet’s name) brought to us.
- Talk about your pet and what they meant to you. Then have a moment of silence.
- For as long as we live, the memory of (insert pet’s name) will live, for he/she is a part of us forever as we remember him/her.
- Let our remembrance of (insert pet name) inspire all to help God’s creatures. Source of Life, you have given us the life of (insert pet name) to be part of ours. Be with us as we mourn his/her death.
- Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has mercy upon your creatures. **Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, ha-merahem ‘al b’ritotav.**
- May (insert name of pet) come to his/her eternal home in peace.

.Alternative Shiva Practice.

Instead of sitting Shiva, plan a time for the next seven days to come together as a family and share photos and stories of the pet that has died. Light a yahrzeit candle for each of the next 7 days after burial. Consider joining a pet loss group online to sit with others who are experiencing the same loss.

During Sheloshim - 30 Days After Burial.

Carry out your intention to volunteer for an animal group or make a donation in memory of your pet. Begin to take action and do a mitzvah. If you are unable to, this might be a good time to reach out to a mental health professional.

You might want to plant a tree in Israel in memory of your pet. The Jewish National Fund has a pet certificate they will send you at <https://shop.jnf.org/products/pet-trees>

Thank God every day for the happiness your pet's relationship brought you. Thank God for His enormous mercy, which gave you a heart to love all creatures.

Online Resources to Help.

Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement <https://www.aplb.org/> - They host a free video support group twice monthly that's led by a pet loss grief specialist. Unfortunately, it's only on Saturday nights. You can also join their chat room on most days of the week for help.

College of Veterinary Medicine -

<https://www.vet.cornell.edu/impact/community-impact/pet-loss-resources-and-support>

Reach out to your nearest school like the one above at Cornell. Many have pet loss hotlines staffed by veterinary students who have undergone training with professional grief counselors.

Facebook - Search "pet loss" on Facebook, and you'll find groups and online support.

Hoofbeats in Heaven <https://hoofbeats-in-heaven.com/group/> - I found this after Muley died. It's an email support group for those who are dealing with the death of their horse. The group is not monitored by a grief specialist.

Jewish Pet Loss - I purchased the domain and will be creating a website from this paper in the weeks to come. The link will be <https://jewishpetloss.com>.

Lap of Love <https://www.lapoflove.com/our-services/pet-loss-support> - Their pet loss support team has online support groups daily, and I attended one of their sessions. It was helpful. You can also sign up for a paid class or private counseling.

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