

WHAT DOES JUDAISM SAY ABOUT SUICIDE?

There is no explicit biblical prohibition on suicide. However, the rabbinic authorities prohibit suicide in their interpretation of the verse ***“But for your own life-blood, I will require a reckoning,”*** (*Bereshit/Genesis 9:5*) which is couched between a law forbidding humans from eating meat from an animal that is still alive and a law forbidding taking another human’s life. These laws speak to the sacred nature of life and the ways Judaism prioritizes the human responsibility to care for ourselves, for each other, and for all living beings. As our understanding of mental illness, addiction, and suicidal ideation has evolved, so have the ways the Jewish community treats those who are struggling with mental health and responds to suicide deaths.

Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of [the Shulhan Arukh, a 16th century collection and explanation of rabbinical laws](#), includes a discussion of the ritual appropriate when a community member dies by suicide:

We do not mourn for him, or eulogize for him, or tear our clothing for him, or remove shoes for him. We only stand for him on a line and say the blessing of mourners for him and any other thing that is respectful for the living. (Yoreh De'ah 345:1)

המאבד עצמו לדעת אין מתעסקים
עמו לכל דבר ואין מתאבלין עליו
ואין מספידין אותו ולא קורעין ולא
חולצין אבל עומדין עליו בשורה
ואומרים עליו ברכת אבלים וכל דבר
שהוא כבוד לחיים.

In general, a Jewish person who died by suicide back then would not be buried in a Jewish cemetery. But the Shulhan Arukh provides exceptions to this ruling:

One who was of age, and committed suicide wilfully, [being under pressure, as [in the case of] King Saul,¹³ – [the law is that] they withhold not from him a thing. (Yoreh De'ah 345:3)

כן גדול המאבד עצמו לדעת
והוא אנוס כשאל המלך אין
מונעין ממנו כל דבר.

Anyone who is not of sound mind when they take their life, for minors, and for those facing significant distress is excluded from this ruling. These exceptions leave plenty of room for rabbis and community leaders to treat a death by suicide with the same compassion, dignity, and ritual procedures as any other death.

WHAT DOES JUDAISM SAY ABOUT SUICIDE?

The laws against suicide make sense in a tradition that values life above all else, as is repeated in the Torah: ***“And you shall observe My laws and My judgments, which a person shall do, in order to live by them; I am Adonai” (Vayikra/Leviticus 18:5).*** Jewish tradition teaches that our bodies, as well as our lives, are considered a gift from God, and therefore just as it is prohibited to harm another being, we are prohibited from physically harming ourselves.

Most Jewish communities today treat suicide as a tragedy rather than as a sin and allow for the full spectrum of Jewish mourning and burial practices following a death by suicide. As always, customs differ according to the Jewish denominational laws and traditions, and variations within each community of practice. Consult your local rabbi(s) for more information about the practice and traditions in your community.

There are many ways in which Jewish communities can help to “quiet the silence” and reduce stigma, shame, and isolation around mental illness, addiction, and suicide through mental health awareness education, visibility, programming, and support. Groups like [The Blue Dove Foundation](#), [Elijah’s Journey](#), and [the Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#) can provide resources, programming, and advocacy for those who have survived a loss by suicide or who are working to bring more awareness to communities.

