BEREAVEMENT & SPIRITUALITY: MOURNING LOSS OF A PARENT USING JEWISH RITUALS

by

NUTA YISRAEL SHURACK

BSW, The University of Victoria, 2010

BA, The University of Albany, 2001

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

September 2015

© Nuta Yisrael Shurack, 2015
Abstract

Coping with the loss of a loved one is one of the greatest challenges a person faces. Research shows that rituals can be beneficial during mourning, yet there is limited literature documenting the experiences of Jewish individuals and how using Jewish rituals affected their bereavement. This qualitative study explored the experiences of Jewish adults who have mourned the loss of a parent using Jewish rituals. Drawing on aspects of phenomenology, I examined the subjective experiences of individuals who had experienced the loss of a parent. In-depth interviews were used to gain understanding of which Jewish rituals individuals chose to engage in and why. By examining participants’ experiences and what meaning they attributed to their lived experiences with these rituals, I aimed to enhance understanding of how Jewish rituals were perceived and experienced. Four individuals participated in this study: three females and one male. The female participants were 37, 53, and 72 years old, and the male participant was 68 years old. The study examined how each person felt about the rituals they utilized and what meaning they made of the experience. It further sought common themes from the four participants that could inform social workers' and pastoral counselors' practice, as well as further understanding of experiences of individuals who had lost a parent. Findings were that several rituals had a positive effect on individuals mourning by making the bereavement period less stressful and smoother. This was true regardless of how religious participants were (or were at the time they engaged in them). The study also revealed that individuals recommended the use of rituals to people when mourning the loss of a parent.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Nuta Yisrael Shurack. The University of British Columbia Research Ethics Board issued Certificate of Approval H11-03268 to undergo this study.
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii
Preface ................................................................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................................ iv
List of Tables ......................................................................................................................................... v
Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................................. vi

Chapter 1: Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1
  Background ........................................................................................................................................ 1
  Purpose of Research ......................................................................................................................... 3
  Researcher’s Location ....................................................................................................................... 5
  Jewish Concepts and Ideologies ....................................................................................................... 7
  Jewish Mourning Practices ............................................................................................................... 9

Chapter 2: Conceptual Context ......................................................................................................... 13
  Literature Review ............................................................................................................................ 13
    Grief ............................................................................................................................................... 13
    Mourning and Rituals .................................................................................................................... 15
    Previous Studies ........................................................................................................................... 17
    Jewish Theory and Practice ......................................................................................................... 19
  Gaps in Literature ............................................................................................................................. 22

Chapter 3: Design and Methodology ............................................................................................... 24
  Methodological Approach ............................................................................................................... 24
  Recruitment and Sampling ............................................................................................................. 26
  The Participants ............................................................................................................................... 27
  Data Collection ................................................................................................................................ 29
  Data Analysis .................................................................................................................................... 31

Chapter 4: Findings ........................................................................................................................... 33
  Theme 1: Structured Process ............................................................................................................ 33
  Theme 2: Honouring Parents ........................................................................................................... 38
  Theme 3: Sitting Shiva ..................................................................................................................... 42
  Theme 4: Jewish Identity .................................................................................................................. 45

Chapter 5: Discussion ......................................................................................................................... 50
  Relation to Existing Literature ........................................................................................................ 55
  Implications for Social Work Practice ............................................................................................ 56
  Implications for Pastoral Counselors ............................................................................................. 59
  Further Research ............................................................................................................................... 61
  Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 62

References ............................................................................................................................................. 64

Appendices .......................................................................................................................................... 69
  Appendix A: Consent Form ............................................................................................................... 69
  Appendix B: Interview Questions ...................................................................................................... 72
List of Tables

Table 1. The Participants ............................................................... 29
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professors Brian O’Neill, PhD and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, PhD for their support and guidance throughout my MSW and particularly with this research study. Their encouragement and direction was much appreciated.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Rituals exist in all societies and span a multitude of cultural, religious, personal, familial, and communal aspects of living (Clements et al., 2003; Wouters 2002). Rituals play an integral role in navigating through different phases of life, including birth, rites of passage, marriage, and death. At the same time, they can be defined as routine and customary behaviours (Jackson, 2010). Rando (1985) defines ritual as a “specific behavior or activity that gives symbolic expression to certain feelings and thoughts of the actor(s) individual or as a group” (p. 236). Denzin (1974), on the other hand, defines ritual as, a joint act involving two or more persons that is frequently repeated in the lives of those members. It is endowed with special, often sacred meaning, and is focused around a set of clearly defined objects. When performed the ritual serves to legitimate the selves of the participants and to solidify their positions in that relationship’s division of labour. (p. 272)

Rituals may involve a habitually repetitive behavior or a one-time occurrence. They can be elaborate and involve many people or be simple and singular (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Gowensmith, 1999). Rituals are considered a critical part of life that have the potential to provide context, meaning, and connection (Puterbaugh, 2008). Rituals can be understood as one type of human practice that is strategic, with specific intentional and situational meanings, that is that they depend on, and are influenced by what the ritual is supposed to achieve, and the situation in which the ritual is going to be used (Frankiel, 2001). For example, a ritual may have a specific intention in one situation and a different intention in another situation. They can be secular, cultural, or religious, and designed for many or created for one individual (Jackson, 2010). An example of a secular greeting ritual is the
shaking of hands when two people meet. An example of a Canadian cultural ritual would be the singing of Oh Canada before sports events. Often individuals and families develop their own rituals that they practice. This can include Sunday morning pancake breakfasts, or yearly anniversary outings.

Loss is a reality that everyone faces in a variety of situations and contexts. The grief that loss produces is a multidimensional experience. It can involve the social, spiritual, emotional, behavioural, and cognitive aspects of a person’s life (Pomeroy, 2011). One type of loss is the death of a loved one. Death is an aspect of the life cycle that every person must consider, and it affects people regardless of age, financial status, sexual orientation, class, gender, religion, race, or culture. Everyone will at some point grieve the loss of a friend, family member, or parent (Miller, 2011). The grief process in mourning is not linear; however, there is a general flow of emotions that people may experience. In her book, titled *On Death and Dying* (1969), Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identifies five stages people encounter when they have lost a loved one. These five stages of grief are denial/isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and hope. Western-based research has found that though there are general emotions and stages of grief, everybody experiences grief differently (Lipsett, 2006). It is important to recognize that many cultures have their own unique grieving rituals and processes and the stages discussed above may not apply to them.

The Jewish rituals of mourning apply to the following seven first-degree relatives – son or daughter, brother or sister, spouse, and mother or father. There are several distinctions between the rituals incumbent on a person mourning a parent and other types of mourning. The main difference is that the rituals required for mourning a parent are more numerous and last for a longer period of time (Goldstein, 2006). I chose to examine Jewish rituals with
regards to the mourning of a parent because individuals would have had more rituals to participate in as well as more time to engage in them. This would provide individuals with a greater opportunity to solidify their experience in utilizing the mourning rituals.

**Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of Jewish individuals who had lost a parent and used Jewish rituals as part of their bereavement experience in order to increase understanding of Jewish mourning, and mourning in general. In this study, I focused on the rituals of mourning the death of a parent. For the purpose of this research, Jewish mourning rituals refers to practices that are performed at various stages between the time of death and the completion of twelve months from the passing of the parent (Goldstein, 2006). There are Jewish rituals that require active involvement, such as sitting shiva, tearing one’s garment, or reciting kaddish. There are also Jewish rituals that involve abstention from certain practices, such as listening to music, attending parties, and cutting one’s hair.

Brown, Nesse, House, and Utz (2004) write that having a spiritual connection with God or a supreme being in one’s life can provide comfort during a time of loss. The use of religion in mourning is considered by some mental health professionals to be a healthy method of assisting the mourner adjust to their loss. This is because religion can act as a safe haven during times of distress in that it provides meaning that transcends suffering, and is generally associated with higher subjective well-being, and improved morale. While some mourning rituals are meant to celebrate the life of the deceased or show them respect, others exist in order to help the one who has passed on transition from one stage of life to the next (Alexander, 1999).
This topic is worth researching because the death of a parent is an experience that most individuals encounter at one time or another. Coping with the loss of a loved one can be one of the greatest challenges a person faces (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Pomeroy, 2011; Shear 2012). It is a difficult and often traumatic process, one in which most people tend to experience several symptoms of clinical depression, including expressions of sadness for approximately two months (Pomeroy, 2011; Schlozman, 2003). Pomeroy (2011) writes that there has been a lack of evidence-based research on grief and loss interventions, and since ‘grief’ is considered normal, there has been a lack of funding for research on this topic. The intensity and duration of a person’s bereavement can be influenced by the circumstances of the death; such as whether the person died suddenly or violently, their age, and their relationship to the bereaved. Given the intensity of emotions that accompany grief and the prevalence of death in people’s lives, it is an important aspect of social work that requires further consideration for effective interventions.

Research specifically examining the experiences of Jewish mourners is important, as it can provide insight into the lived experience of individuals who have utilized Jewish rituals in their mourning, as well as provide insight into mourning in general. Being that rituals are an important part of life and that many individuals utilize rituals in their mourning, it is worthwhile to understand how rituals and bereavement intersect. The research can reveal what has been successful for mourners, and what has been challenging. Furthermore, the research can contribute to the development of interventions for pastoral counselors and social workers, or even friends and family, in supporting a person who is mourning a loved one.

There is research that shows that religion has the potential to decrease the effects of grief and help individuals find comfort during times of loss (Brown et al., 2004; Paloutzian et
Individuals grieving the loss of a loved one often need some form of support to cope with their loss. Both pastoral counselors and social workers can play an important role in assisting people during their immediate grieving, as well as years later. Often people are unaware how they can help or be a support to someone who has lost a loved one (Tatelbaum, 1984). Social workers often work with individuals who have suffered the loss of someone close to them.

**Researcher’s Location**

An important aspect in phenomenological research is for the researcher to be aware of his or her own experiences (Creswell, 2007). It is important to locate myself and my relationship to the research. I am a Jewish male who practices and observes the laws of Judaism known as Orthodox Judaism. More specifically, I am part of the Chassidic sect of Judaism known as Chabad-Lubavitch. I endeavour to follow all Jewish practices, both those that I comprehend and those that I do not, with the underlying thought that though some practices may be difficult and beyond my comprehension, they are part of a larger picture in terms of rituals and practices. Regarding those practices that I do not comprehend, I recognize that is my understanding that may be limited, rather than the practices themselves.

It is important to be aware of issues of power that can exist when engaging in research, especially in qualitative and phenomenological research. It was imperative I be aware of my location and viewpoints while conducting this research. I am a male who is very knowledgeable of Judaism. While I am not a practicing Rabbi of a community, I spent many years learning in Jewish seminary and received Rabbinical Ordination. I dress in traditional Jewish attire, which includes wearing tzitzis (a four-cornered fringed garment) a yarmulke (Jewish head covering), and have a beard. When people see me, they often
associate my appearance with that of a Rabbi and assume that I am a Rabbi of a synagogue. My appearance can be intimidating, and people may think that I am judging their level of observance of Jewish practices. Therefore, it was important that I recognize this in my study and address possible concerns that could arise. In the interviews, I prefaced that my research was not looking to understand Jewish rituals, but rather looked to understand each individual’s personal experience in using Jewish rituals during their mourning. At the end of the interview with Debbie she referred to the email I had sent her with the participation form attached. She noticed that the signature of my email said, "Rabbi" and commented that if she had known that I was a Rabbi she would not have explained the details of how she engaged in the rituals, as I would have known the procedures associated with them. It sounded as though she may have felt that her explanations were judged by the fact that I was a Rabbi. I responded that I was happy that she had not seen the title as the experience she shared was very important and assured her that my knowledge of the Jewish rituals, and Judaism in general, was not relevant to the interview. She seemed to accept this explanation and we continued talking.

Gender dynamics play a role in researcher participant interactions. I attempted to minimize this power dynamic in my interviews. Two of my interviews were conducted over the phone, which minimizes power differences because the participant has greater control and is more confident in exerting themselves (Holt, 2010). One of my interviews was in person with a male who was over 30 years older than me. My fourth interview was conducted in person with a woman, and her husband was present for the entire interview. I believe this helped to minimize the impact of my gender during the interview.

I acknowledged that as an ‘insider’ within the Jewish community, I have a certain
knowledge base of Judaism. At the same time, both of my parents are alive, and so I am an ‘outsider’ in this aspect of my study, as I have no personal experience with mourning a parent. I did not offer definitions or clarifications of any rituals during the interviews and attempted to bracket my personal experiences in a reflective manner to develop my curiosity (Creswell, 2007). I recognized that though I engage in practices that I do not necessarily understand and am willing to do so despite sometimes being uncomfortable, the participants may not have the same perspective. I had to recognize that participants may hesitate to share aspects of Jewish rituals that they were unhappy with or did not want to engage in.

I had assumptions before beginning the research. It was my belief that people would find some of the rituals beneficial in their mourning; however, I was unsure as to which ones people would identify with. I assumed that religious people would find comfort in the rituals because they knew that their loved one was with God and that they were doing what they were supposed to as outlined in Judaism. I also assumed that a religious person would identify more with the rituals than non-religious people would. Being aware of my assumptions and preconceived notions on this subject allowed me to focus on forming and asking questions to the participants in a more neutral manner. My questions were open ended thus allowing the participants to respond as thoroughly as they wished without being influenced by my assumptions. I did not ask questions that would elicit a 'yes' or 'no' response because I did not want to guide the participants in their answer.

**Jewish Concepts and Ideologies**

In Judaism, there are a variety of commandments, practices, customs, laws, and

---

1 Please note, while I define several Jewish concepts and ideologies, this is not an exhaustive list.
rituals. A key tenet of Judaism is the performance of both positive and negative commandments. Positive commandments are the activities that Jewish people are instructed to engage in, such as praying, eating kosher food, keeping the Sabbath, and giving charity. Negative commandments are those activities that Jewish people are instructed to refrain from, such as stealing, gossiping, killing, lying, adultery, and taking a bribe.

People are encouraged to learn, study, and contemplate both the apparent and hidden meanings behind the rituals that G-d has commanded them to perform. At the same time, action is an essential aspect in Judaism, (Koncepolski & Sones, 2005), meaning it is better to engage in the rituals without understanding them than not to do them at all. Some people find it important to actively pursue and involve themselves in all rituals, whether or not they understand them. However, other people prefer to engage in rituals that they understand or find meaning in, and they may choose not to engage in the rituals they do not understand.

Within Judaism, there are different ideologies that are used to classify the various groups of Jewish people, as well as terminologies that people use to describe their location on the religious spectrum. The predominant ideologies (classifications) are Orthodox, Conservative (also known as Traditional), and Reform (also known as Liberal or Progressive).

Orthodox Judaism: Observes practices as defined by the Torah (the Bible). Practices are based on the rulings written in the Shulchan Aruch, also known as the Code of Jewish Law. Men and women pray separately in synagogue, Hebrew is the language most prayers are recited in, only kosher food is eaten, the Sabbath is kept in its entirety, and there are practices that only apply to men and women respectively. Orthodox Judaism attempts to maintain Jewish practices in their most traditional sense.
Conservative Judaism: Encourages the practice of traditional Judaism while embracing modernity. Men and women often sit together in synagogue, and prayers are most often conducted in Hebrew. While many Conservative Jews keep kosher in their home, they may eat non-kosher when out of their home. Many practices are still clearly distinctive between men and women. Conservative Judaism attempts to blend Jewish practices with the modern era.

Reform Judaism: Applies most Jewish practices equally to men and women. Individuals do not necessarily eat kosher. Prayers are often held in English, and there is often a mixed gender choir in the synagogue, sometimes involving instruments. Equality and neutralizing practices are a large emphasis amongst Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism looks to revamp Jewish practices to fit into contemporary culture and society.

**Jewish Mourning Practices**

There are many Jewish rituals outlined in the *Code of Jewish Law* that are associated with mourning the loss of a parent. In this study, I concisely define several commonly practiced Orthodox mourning rituals.

Quick burial: Jewish law stipulates that once a person has passed away they should be buried as soon as possible. One reason is that until the body is buried, the soul is in an in-between state and is not at peace.

Mourner’s kaddish (Commemorative prayer): This is a special prayer that is said by the mourner three times a day for the first eleven months after the death of their parent.

In his explanatory book, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Lamm (1969) describes two pragmatic functions of kaddish. Firstly, kaddish is meant to fuse with the internal spirit

---

2 Please note, while I define a variety of Jewish mourning practices, this is not an exhaustive list.
of the mourner and provide consolation to help heal his/her psychological wounds.

Secondly, kaddish provides insights and lessons on life and death (Lamm, 1969). The kaddish prayer focuses on the greatness of God and how God brings peace to the entire world. The wording of kaddish is repetitious and many positive words are used to illicit encouraging thoughts in the mind of the mourner. At a time when a person’s faith may be shaken and he or she may feel rebellious against God for the death of their loved one, they recite praises, saying, “… magnified and sanctified be He who created the universe … All the laws of nature operate in accordance with His own will.” At a time when a person is surrounded by death and thoughts of burial shrouds, coffins, and mourning rituals, the kaddish prayer focuses on life and how God ultimately fills the world. The kaddish prayer can only be said in a quorum of ten; thus, during a time of potential loneliness it facilitates a fellowship with others. Kaddish also provides insights into the Jewish perspective on death. Despite the fact that we may experience pain and suffering in our lives, nevertheless God knows what is best for us. Thus, despite the emotions the mourner may experience they proclaim, in the words of the kaddish, “May His great name be blessed for ever and ever.”

Yartzheit (Anniversary date of the death): This is observed annually by lighting a candle and reciting the mourners kaddish in synagogue.

Sitting shiva (Seven-day period following the death of a parent): For seven days, family and friends come to visit the mourner in their home. When visitors come, they are not supposed to speak to the mourner unless the mourner speaks first. This is because although the mourner is obligated to have visitors, the tone of the visit is up to the mourner. This respects that the mourner may not be in the mood to talk or engage in conversation. When a person dies before a holiday, the holiday symbolizes the end of the shiva even if less than
seven days have passed.

Sitting on a low chair: The mourner sits on low chair that reminds them that they are in a state of mourning.

Covering of mirrors: The mirrors in the house are covered, as a person is not supposed to be concerned with their appearance while mourning.

Not listening to music or attending parties: For the first eleven months after the death of a parent, a mourner is not supposed to listen to live music, dance, or attend parties. This is because they are in a state of mourning their parent, where the emphasis is placed on remembering the sadness of losing a parent.

Chevra kaddisha (Jewish burial society): A group of individuals who take care of the body of a deceased person, the funeral arrangements, and burial services. This involves making sure that someone stays with the body from the moment the person passes away until they are buried, the ritual washing of the body, the dressing of the body for burial, and the actual burial. When there is no one to pay for the burial of a person who has passed away, the Chevra kaddisha utilizes communal funds to pay for the funeral (Goldstein, 2006).

Kriah (Tearing a garment): At the funeral, the mourner tears one of the articles of clothing that they are wearing, most often their shirt. The purpose here is to express ones frustration and anger with a controlled action. It represents that the person feels torn, as someone has been taken from his or her lives (Lamm, 1969; Soloveitchik, 1978).

Burial shroud: The deceased is to be buried in a white shroud made from muslin, cotton, or linen. Everyone is buried in a similar type of shroud. This represents that material wealth and possessions do not define a person; the focus is on the goods deeds a person has done and what he or she has accomplished. Another reason is that there should not be any
jealousy or shame felt by people who cannot afford to bury their deceased in an expensive garment (Lamm, 1969).

Abstention from certain commandments: Between the time that a person finds out that their parent has passed away until the burial, the mourner does not have to engage in positive commandments such as saying blessings on food before eating, and similar acts. This is because their mind is preoccupied with the fact that they have lost a parent and therefore are not expected to engage in the regular obligations of day to day life (Wolowelsky, 1984).

It is important to note that the purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of individuals who have used Jewish rituals while mourning the loss of a parent. The purpose of the research was not to evaluate the intent and effectiveness of specific rituals. The question arises: what practical assistance can a social worker or pastoral counselor provide someone who is mourning the loss of a parent? This research aimed to increase understanding of the lived experiences of Jewish adults who have mourned the loss of a parent using Jewish rituals; and to use that understanding to provide insight for social workers and pastoral counselors to support individuals in healthy mourning.
Chapter 2: Conceptual Context

My research looked to answer the question, “What has been the experience of Jewish individuals who engaged in the use of Jewish rituals while mourning the loss of a parent.” In order to understand the context of the individuals’ experience in using Jewish rituals in mourning, it was necessary that I examine the theories and concepts related to rituals and mourning in general, as well as the Jewish theology on Jewish rituals and practices. In order to understand mourning, it is necessary to recognize the role of grief.

In this chapter, I give a brief explanation of the different types of grief, its stages, and how it manifests. I look at the role of rituals in morning and present previous studies that examined grief rituals. I explore the Jewish theology behind Jewish mourning rituals, including their purpose, design, and intended result. Through identifying the role of rituals in mourning and the interconnectedness between mourning rituals and Jewish theology, I attempt to understand the phenomenon of the experience of the participants and use that knowledge to provide insight for social workers and pastoral counselors in their support of individuals.

Literature Review

Grief. The loss of a loved one is one of the most traumatic and life changing events in a person’s life (Pomeroy, 2011). Many articles have been written on bereavement from various familial relationships, i.e. children grieving parents, parents grieving children, and spouses grieving spouses among other relationships. There is research on grieving with relation to how individuals have died, i.e. cancer, suicide, accidental death, old age, or in palliative care among other scenarios. Regardless of the way the deceased died and the relationship of the mourner to the deceased, it is very common for a person to feel a
significant level of confusion as they enter a different world from the one they previously knew; one in which their life has forever changed (Lipsett, 2006). Shear (2012) states that common grief symptoms often include intense yearning or longing for the person who passed away, great sadness for their loss, frequent preoccupation with memories and thoughts of the person who died, physiological activation and discomfort, as well as disruption of daily routines and activities. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) created a strong and widely-accepted foundation for the stages of grief. Though the stages were initially developed for those with a terminal illness and their families, they have become universally synonymous with stages of grief that people experience when mourning the loss of a loved one.

There has been much research regarding how people grieve, and what constitutes healthy grieving versus unhealthy grieving, including timelines for grieving. Though it is normal to mourn the loss of a loved one, the emotions that it evokes, and the way that those emotions manifest, are very similar to symptoms seen in a person who is clinically depressed (Zisook & Kendler, 2007). The difference between clinical depression and sadness accompanying bereavement is that a person in mourning generally progresses through those feelings and shifts back to their regular disposition after a reasonable period. This is so much the case that bereavement is the only topic in the DSM-V that despite the evidence of clear indicators of depression, such a diagnosis is not given unless the symptoms persist for more than twelve months for an adult and six months for a child (Shear et al., 2013). The duration of a person’s mourning is impacted by many factors, such as age, religion, and circumstances under which the person died.

The stages of grief are not linear and people may go from one to another, return to certain stages several times before experiencing a different stage. There are three distinct
classifications of grief that people may experience in mourning. There is acute grief, integrated grief, and complicated grief. Acute grief is the initial reaction that is intense and disruptive. People experience this when they first mourn the loss of a loved one. Integrated grief is the permanent adjustment to the loss and a renewed satisfaction in the persons changed life. This takes place when a person has mourned their loss and is able to move forward. Complicated grief is a prolonged episode of acute grief in which the person’s life is deeply affected and their ability to work through the loss is significantly hindered (Shear, 2012). Most individuals work through acute grief to integrated grief naturally, albeit with varied timelines.

**Mourning and rituals.** People cope with mourning in several ways. Natural social supports play an important role in coping with loss and are a positive tool to move through mourning. Friends, family, and co-workers can provide a venue for mourners to receive encouragement and reminiscence. However, there are important guidelines that social supports should consider. It is important that people not offer answers or give gratuitous advice and instead listen a lot and speak little (Lipsett, 2006; Shear et al., 2013). Lipsett (2006) writes that it is important for a mourner to acknowledge their loss and talk about it repeatedly so that they can move through the process. Meaning making of situations such as the loss of a loved one is a central tenet of coping (Cadell, Hemsworth, & Regher, 2003).

Rituals, while an important part of many religions and cultures, are not exclusively spiritual and can be created and facilitated in multiple ways. People can create and utilize their own rituals as needed in their specific situation. People can easily feel overwhelmed or disconnected from their emotions, neither of which is productive. Rituals can provide a way for individuals to express their emotions including ones they did not even realize they were
having (Running et al., 2008). According to Romanoff and Terenzio (1998), the use of bereavement rituals in general has declined, which has led to inadequate grieving and less than desirable resolution. Balk (2006) and Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe (2007) found that many individuals do not seek professional help in dealing with their mourning. Thus, more needs to be done to understand how those seeking assistance can receive help that is beneficial and supportive, and how to support those who do not seek help. There has been an increased interest in grief rituals by both individual mourners, as well as by professionals who recognize the value in rituals as tools of healing (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998).

Grief rituals have been shown to help mourners in a variety of ways. Rituals provide important structure in the lives of the bereaved. Many individuals rely on their beliefs and rituals as a means of coping with grief and loss (Collins & Doolittle, 2006). Running, Tolle, and Girard (2008) cites three aspects of grief rituals. Firstly, the use of physical objects such as photographs or non-physical items such as music or poetry were found to be helpful in remembering the deceased. For example, writing a poem or song and reciting or singing it annually on the anniversary of the person’s death or creating a photo-collage and displaying it on important occasions. Secondly, emotional expression at a time and place where the mourner feels comfortable and safe can be an important part of mourning. Rituals can provide a context for mourners to share their feelings and thoughts, a process that is cathartic. Thirdly, having grief rituals provides mourners with a time-limited structured process. Having rituals provides a way for mourners to actively engage in mourning and can give mourners a sense of control and relief in what is otherwise an overwhelming situation.

A growing number of grief counselors recommend post-funeral rituals for a variety of reasons. Some say that they provide a sense of control, or meaning, while others say they
provide social support and a non-verbal avenue for mourners to express themselves. Still others believe that grief rituals act as a way to structure death as a rite of a passage for a group of people within the same culture (Gowensmith, 1999). According to Peelen, Venbrux, and Altena (2009), although religious and cultural rituals concerning burial in the Netherlands have waned, there has been a surge of informal individualized burial rituals being utilized. People create ceremonies of their own choice and work with a ritual counselor or ritual guide to help them design their mortuary rituals which has shown to help individuals in their mourning.

**Previous studies.** Castle and Phillips (2003) conducted a qualitative study that included 50 participants who utilized a variety of post funeral rituals in their grief process. They conducted interviews with participants and found that appropriate rituals can facilitate adjustment to bereavement, that some factors are particularly important for rituals to be successful, and that performing rituals can have significant positive outcomes. They found mourning rituals important because when done supportively and empathetically, they can facilitate many, if not all, of the following ways of coping: reminiscing about the deceased, discussing the death, carrying out religious practices, crying, focusing on the present, believing the loved one is better off, acknowledging their loss and the importance of the deceased in their life. Furthermore, they found that grief rituals can be transformative and healing. The funeral is one of first grief rituals; it is a significant ritual that helps the mourner overcome the shock and denial of the death while encouraging acceptance of the event. As important, it also provides structure during an otherwise potentially chaotic time. Overall, Castle and Phillips (2003) found the most important aspects of grief rituals to bereaved individuals were being part of an activity they found personally meaningful,
sharing their grief with others in an emotionally safe setting, being aware of the specialness or sacredness, the use of symbolic objects like photographs, prayers, poetry or music to facilitate rituals, and the time-limited and structured nature of the ritual.

Gowensmith (1999) interviewed thirteen participants regarding their combined use of 39 grief rituals. In his study based on grounded theory, Gowensmith gathered data though the use of interviews and analyzed the data using constant comparative analysis. He found that post-funeral rituals are helpful to mourners in overcoming the later stages of grief, such as experiencing the pain of loss, adjusting to the loss, and investing in new relationships. Additionally, it is after the funeral that individuals’ grieving process becomes less structured; therefore, he concluded that post funeral rituals can provide the mourner with a sense of organization and structure that they can follow later in the mourning process.

The only study I could find on Jewish mourning rituals was done by Ribner and Wolowelsky (1999). They used an ecosystems perspective, to examine the nature of mourning in Orthodox Jewish adoptive families, and the use of rituals to assist with the preservation of family homeostasis following the death of a relative. In their study, a Jewish individual’s demeanor in high school had changed to such a degree that the school guidance counselor referred him to a therapist. The therapist was able to identify the issue. The student’s father was dying of cancer; however, no one knew that the student was adopted. He was very worried that when the community realized that he was not engaging in the applicable rituals of mourning a parent, they would figure out that he was adopted. The therapist sought to include a Rabbi in the situation and it was discovered that the youth could indeed observe the rituals of mourning. According to the Code of Jewish Law, an adopted child is not obligated to engage in mourning rituals for their adopted parent; however, it is
permissible for them to do so if they wished to. Furthermore, it is encouraged in cases where the adopted child was raised as if he were a biological child. The student was relieved once he knew he would be able to engage in all of the mourning rituals. This study stressed the importance of a collaborative relationship between therapist and clergy. Ribner and Wolowelsky (1999) examined how the inability to engage in mourning rituals affected the youth’s perception of himself. The student thought he would not be acting as a true son if he didn’t mourn his father using the relevant rituals, and worried about others knowing he was adopted. Though the student was relieved knowing he would have the opportunity to engage in the mourning rituals, the study did not describe how he experienced them. It would have been interesting to speak with him after he engaged in the rituals to understand how he experienced them and the role they played in his mourning.

**Jewish theory and practice.** There is a wide variety of Jewish rituals that are applicable to mourning. A number of Rabbis have written about Jewish rituals regarding mourning; more specifically, they elucidate how to engage in the rituals and what their purported effects on individuals during bereavement is (Goldstein, 2006; Lamm, 1969; Soloveitchik, 1978; Wolowelsky, 1984; 1996). These theological works explain the importance of the rituals, the procedures, and what they were designed to accomplish. Lamm (1969) and Goldstein (2006) are both Rabbis with specific knowledge in the laws of Jewish mourning rituals. They are considered authorities on mourning rituals and respected by Rabbis across the spectrum of Orthodox, Liberal, and Conservative movements, for their knowledge. *The Jewish Mourners’ Companion: Guidance, Comfort, Liturgy* by Goldstein (2006) and *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* by Lamm (1969) explore in detail all Jewish mourning rituals and are two of the most cited guidebooks for Jewish mourning.
Both works cite various psychological benefits of the rituals and offer comforting anecdotes that may help the mourner cope. These books are for the most part ‘manuals’ which mourners can use to navigate their mourning in adherence with Jewish law. Rabbis and Jewish scholars write that the Jewish rituals of mourning are designed to give the mourner a controlled outlet to otherwise unbridled hurt and anger, to provide company during a time of feeling abandoned, and a healthy way of moving through the stages of grief (Soloveitchik, 1978; Wolowelsky, 1996). These articles and books have examined not only how a person employs the rituals, but also their relation to both the individual and the community (Goldstein, 200; Soloveitchik, 1978; Wolowelsky, 1996; Wolowelsky, 1984). According to Lamm, (2005) the extent a Rabbi is involved with the mourner in the rituals has a direct effect on how the rituals are perceived and practiced. This is because a Rabbi can act as a guide, explaining how to engage in the rituals, and what their purpose is.

Wolowelsky (1984 & 1996) points out that the rituals of bereavement purposefully require direct attention from the mourner to perform and partake in various customs and rituals, thus not permitting the mourner to run away from the situation, to permanently wallow in sadness, or enter a treacherous realm of denial. In effect, the rituals gently force individuals to acknowledge the loss while not allowing them to become overwhelmed by it. This process combines what the mourner wants with what they need.

In the essays and books written specifically on the reasons behind Jewish rituals and what they are intended to accomplish, the consensus is that the rituals create a positive way for individuals to work through their grieving (Alexander, 1999; Milton 1964; Soloveitchik, 1978; Wolowelsky, 1984; Wolowelsky, 1996). Wolowelsky (1996) states that Jewish law expects people to be able to move from one stage to the next in a healthy manner. This is
true not only of works written by Orthodox Jewish individuals, but also by Liberal Jews. In an article based on Liberal Judaism ideology, which does not follow the *Code of Jewish Law*, Milton (1964) argues that the process of mourning through the use of some of the rituals is one which reminds the mourner that though they may feel as if their world has collapsed, there is still order and direction they can count on.

Explanations for some of the Jewish rituals fit nicely with the various stages of grief and appear to address them and facilitate the mourning. When a person dies, mourners often have trouble believing that their loved one has passed away (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Miller, 2011). In Judaism, the casket is lowered into the ground at the burial and it is customary for the family to shovel dirt onto the casket. The purpose here is to express the finality of the situation, dispel any feelings of disbelief, and move the mourner towards recovery (Lamm, 1969). Anger is another common phase of mourning (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Miller, 2011; Shear et. al., 2013). Kriah is the act of ripping part of the garment that the mourner is wearing at the funeral. The ripping of the clothes is a controlled way of expressing the persons’ anger at having lost their parent (Lamm, 1969; Soloveitchik, 1978). Often mourners will isolate themselves socially because they are too overcome with emotion to be around others. At the same time, this can contribute to a feeling of loneliness and that they do not have anyone they can share their thoughts with (Miller, 2011). Shiva is designed to keep a person surrounded by a circle of support while acknowledging the mourners need for space. For seven days, friends and family comfort the person. They can focus on their mourning with the support of others, knowing that shiva is formatted so that friends and family follow the lead of the mourner, only talking when the mourner speaks first (Goldstein, 2006; Lamm, 1969). The steps of the mourning rituals have specific instructions for the mourner to follow.
so they are able to mourn in a structured way (Goldstein, 2006; Lamm, 1969; Matz, 1964; Wolowelsky, 1984; Wolowelsky, 1996).

**Gaps in Literature**

There is research on the effects of grief and loss on individuals and their mourning (Kubler Ross, 1969; Miller, 2011; Zisook & Kendler, 2007) and the importance of the role of support for mourners (Lipsett, 2006; Pomeroy, 2011; Shear, 2012). There has also been research on the positive influence and the use of rituals in grief and mourning (Brown et al., 2004; Clements et al., 2003; Collins et al., 2006; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Paloutzian et al., 2013; Peelen et al., 2009). There are many Jewish books that provide clear directions on Jewish mourning rituals and their intended results; however, there has not been any research on the lived experience of Jewish individuals utilizing Jewish mourning rituals in their mourning. Furthermore, the formulation of concrete implications for social work and pastoral counseling studies is lacking.

Much of the literature on the topic of grief and rituals is from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. It is important for there to be more current studies on this topic, as multicultural demographics have increased thus creating a fusion of cultural practices in many communities. Engagement in mourning rituals has declined in recent years with many people having a funeral and nothing else. Therefore, it is worthwhile to look at the recent experiences of individuals who have utilized rituals in their mourning and see how these experiences can inform social work practice.

Alexander (1999) indicates there has been a fair amount of very practical guidebooks written on Jewish mourning; however, they are mechanical in that they focus on how the rituals should be done, with little attention on the effect they have on people. Though there
are many theological essays on the subject, they neglect to explore the personal stories of people who have used the rituals, how they experienced those rituals, and what they meant to them.

Most studies stated the benefits but did not address concrete applied implications that could be used to support individuals through their mourning. Generally people do not specifically seek clinical support when they lose a parent or loved one (Balk, 2006; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007). However, research shows that rituals and a framework of support are beneficial in helping people successfully move through their mourning. My intent was to use existing literature and research findings to identify practice implications for social workers and pastoral counselors. It is worthwhile for social workers to have methods of engaging with individuals who are mourning a loss and ways of providing them with tools to facilitate their bereavement.
Chapter 3: Design and Methodology

Methodological Approach

I used a qualitative approach for this research study, as it allowed me to explore in detail the experiences participants have had and how they made meaning of those experiences (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, my hopes in using a qualitative approach were that the participants would feel empowered to share their experiences, thus giving voice to their stories. One advantage of utilizing a qualitative methodology is that it allows for flexibility within the research, as participants are free to explore what they find meaningful, rather than what the researcher thinks. Participants can draw attention to various aspects of their personal experiences that they feel are most significant, being that they are encouraged to speak about aspects of their experience that they want to emphasize. Thus, the participants hold the authority over what they found to be meaningful in their experience, rather than the researcher determining what those aspects were. This serves to partially de-emphasize the degree of the power imbalance between researcher and participant. Nonetheless, it is still crucial for the researcher to recognize that power imbalances exist, even in qualitative research, as the researcher is the one who decides that is used in the final research product.

Additionally, the focus of qualitative research is on the participants' perspectives, rather than those of the researcher, with an emphasis on the meanings the participants have associated with their experiences, and their own subjective views (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research allows for the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the participants, and is holistic in nature (Maxwell, 2005). A holistic account of the participants' experiences is important, given the topic's multifaceted and complex nature, involving many factors, numerous steps, and multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2007).
The design of this study drew on aspects of phenomenology. Phenomenological inquiry examines a variety of meanings that people assign to their experiences, and delves into the origin of the meaning (van Manen, 2011). Phenomenological studies explore how participants experience a specified phenomenon and the similarities that exist amongst the experiences (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology was best suited for my research because of its emphasis on understanding several individuals’ shared experiences of a phenomenon, in this instance, mourning the loss of a parent through Jewish rituals. Additionally, the most common data collection method for phenomenological studies is the use of in-depth interviews involving broad open-ended questions (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

For this research, I drew on aspects of transcendental phenomenology, which is primarily guided by the works of Edmund Husserl (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2011). In contrast to hermeneutical phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology focuses less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on the accounts, descriptions, and statements of the participants (Creswell, 2007). The emphasis of the study was the experiences of the participants as they themselves saw them and experienced them. Furthermore, in transcendental phenomenology, the researcher focuses on notions of universal structures in viewing the experience, rather than individual characteristics of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher examines the universal essences or core features that are common among everyone who has experienced the phenomenon being studied (Lopez & Willis, 2004). It is these essentialist underpinnings of transcendental phenomenology that assert that each and every phenomenon has an underlying structure. I chose to use elements of transcendental phenomenology in my study because of its emphasis on seeking to understand the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).
I endeavoured to be continuously aware of my own location, presumptions, and assumptions surrounding this topic, and to reflect on the experiences of the participants rather than compare their experience to my own thoughts and preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, the element of reflexivity was tremendously important throughout all the stages of my study. Before entering the study, I contemplated and analyzed my own assumptions and thoughts surrounding the topic, and strove to be aware of and therefore minimize their influence on my research questions, data collection, and data analysis. Rather than my research being guided by my own preconceived notions and biases, I was committed to listening and hearing the participants' stories. The idea of bracketing has been challenged by a variety of researchers (LeVasseur, 2003). As there is an impossibility of completely reducing my own preconceived notions and assumptions, and they cannot be bracketed out in their entirety, I strove to be open and curious during my interviews, and reflexive of my location through each of the steps of the research process.

**Recruitment and Sampling**

Using a phenomenological approach to develop a description of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon, I carried out in-depth interviews with four individuals. I received approval from the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) to contact local synagogues for recruitment. I contacted seven synagogues in British Columbia to seek approval to place my recruitment poster on their bulletin boards. My hope was to attract individuals from a variety of communities which may have an influence on their lives and thus provide richer data. I also asked them to include a description of my study with my contact information in their weekly newsletter. Additionally, I forwarded my recruitment poster to several community contacts, who then
sent the poster to their personal and business networks. This form of recruitment was most appropriate due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficulty of reaching a small specific community.

The selection criteria for participation in my study were: being Jewish according to Jewish law; having mourned the loss of a parent at least one year earlier but not being in the first year of mourning; being over the age of 19; being comfortable with having the interview conducted in English; being able to give informed consent to participate in this study.

Four individuals contacted me to take part in the research (Table 1). One participant saw my research poster in her synagogue's newsletter and three participants received it through their personal networks. Participants were between 35 and 72 years old. In an effort to collect rich in-depth data, the sample was kept to four adults (Creswell, 2007); three women and one man. Three participants had mourned the loss of one parent and one participant had mourned the loss of both parents. One participant was practicing Orthodox Judaism when her parent had passed away, two participants practiced traditional Judaism when their parents had passed away, and one participant had been minimally involved in Jewish practice when his parents passed away. Names of participants have been changed to protect their identity and respect confidentiality.

The Participants

At the time of the interview, Daniel was 68 years old, male, married, with several children. Both Daniel's mother and father had passed away, and he reflected that his relationship with his parents was strained. He said that he had love and respect for his father; however, he felt a degree of resentment and anger towards his mother due to the way she treated his father. Although Daniel went to a Jewish day school, he did not grow up actively
practicing Judaism in his home. He expressed having a strong sense of Jewish belonging. Several years earlier, Daniel had become more religious, and began practicing Orthodox Judaism.

Miriam was 72 years old, female, married, with several children. Miriam's mother had passed away, and she reflected on having a close relationship with her. Miriam did not grow up in a religious home, however she expressed having a strong connection with Judaism, having become religious many years ago. She had been practicing Orthodox Judaism long before her mother passed away.

Debbie was 53 years old, female, and married. Her father had passed away, and she related that she had had a good relationship with him. She reflected on growing up in a non-religious home. Debbie was traditional in her Jewish practice and expressed having a strong Jewish identity.

Sarah was 37 years old, female, married, with several children. Her father had passed away, and she said she had not been very close with him. Sarah grew up in a traditionally practicing Jewish home and was about to be married when her father passed away. She strongly identified with being Jewish and had grown in her Jewish practice over the years by engaging in more practices, customs, and traditions. Sarah considered herself traditional in her Jewish observance.

It is important to note the diversity amongst the participants in a variety of areas, including their age, gender, time elapsed since the passing of their parent, knowledge of Judaism, synagogue affiliation, relationship with parents, and level of religiosity both at the time of the parent's death and at the time of the interview.
Table 1. The Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age at Time of Interview</th>
<th>Number of Parents Mourned</th>
<th>Parent Mourned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mother &amp; Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All names have been changed to respect privacy of the participants.

Data Collection

As per the phenomenological approach, my data collection involved in-depth interviews with individuals who had experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). I audio recorded each interview and transcribed them verbatim (van Manen, 1990). I asked participants a combination of broad general questions, such as: What does the word 'ritual' mean to you? What was your experience in mourning the loss of our parent using Jewish rituals in your mourning? Can you tell me about one of the rituals that you engaged in? I also asked more specific open-ended questions based on the replies of the participants to the initial broad questions (Moustakas, 1994). The focus of each interview was on the lived experience of the participant of mourning the loss of a parent utilizing Jewish rituals, and the meanings behind their experience.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were given a consent form\(^3\), which I reviewed with them. Each interview lasted between one and a half and two hours.

Following each interview, I attempted to maintain reflexivity (Moustakas, 1994) and immediately wrote down my reflections on the interview. I then transcribed each audio file word for word shortly afterwards. The intent was to explore the individual's experience and allow the conversation to flow naturally according to the experience each person.

---

\(^3\) See Appendix A: Consent Form.
Participants had the option of selecting a location of their choice for the interview or having the interview over the telephone. I was available to meet them anywhere in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Two participants chose to have the interview take place in their home, and two participants chose to have the interview conducted over the telephone. In this study, I found that both the face-to-face interviews and the telephone interviews provided data that was rich and deep.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to conducting interviews over the telephone. One key disadvantage of telephone interviews is that the researcher is unable to see elements of informal communication, such as facial expressions and body language (Creswell, 2007). Another disadvantage is that it may be more difficult for the researcher to establish rapport with the participant (Novick, 2008). In her article on the use of telephone interviews in phenomenological research, Sweet (2002) concluded that interviews held over the telephone are a valuable data collection approach. Logistically, telephone interviews are especially convenient for many participants, as they are not restricted by location. Participants are more likely to feel comfortable rescheduling a phone interview due to unforeseen circumstances than an in person interview. Furthermore, because telephone interviews naturally have a less formal atmosphere, participants may feel more relaxed and open about sharing their experiences, particularly emotional ones (Novick, 2008).

During one of the interviews, a participant asked me if I could clarify the meaning behind a ritual. Throughout the interview, I made a great effort to keep the focus on the experience of the participant, rather than focus on the logistics of the rituals. I did not want to influence the participants' responses by explaining what the ritual was intended to accomplish. Rather, I wanted to hear from them how they experienced the ritual and what
they derived from it. Therefore, at the time of the interview questions, I politely circumvented the question by reflecting on the individuals' thoughts and asking for clarification. At the conclusion of the interview, I was available to answer the participants' specific questions or provide clarification on areas they wanted to learn more about pertaining to the Jewish mourning rituals.

The overarching question asked to each participant was "What has been your experience in using Jewish rituals while mourning the loss of your parent?" In addition, I inquired, "what has been the significance of that experience to you?" Other sub-topics were covered in an effort to facilitate dialogue. These sub-topics included; which rituals the individual used, how they experienced the use of the rituals, whether the rituals influenced their mourning process, how they felt in performing the rituals, and their understanding of the rituals.

Data Analysis

Following the interviews, I transcribed each of the audio recordings of the full interview. As part of the data analysis, I listened to each of the recordings several times, as well as read the word-for-word transcription of each interview. I did both of these steps in order to ensure accuracy, because it is easy to miss an important point. I also referred to the notes and reflections I took down during and following each interview.

I analyzed the data and highlighted key statements that the interviewees had made and developed clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2007). As I highlighted key statements, themes began to emerge, which linked the experiences of participants with each other. I looked for connections and similar sentiments shared by the participants. I noted patterns and similarities, made contrasts and comparisons between the different experiences of the

---

4 See Appendix B: Interview Questions for full set of questions.
participants, and contextualized the information with respect to the literature I had researched. It was important to be flexible while analyzing the data, as qualitative research rarely moves in a linear fashion (Creswell, 2007). I was then able to group the quotes into four specific themes and further link individual statements that supported participants’ experiences, not only individually but also as a group.

As per the transcendental phenomenological approach, I identified various levels of descriptions about each participant's experience (van Manen, 2011). I began by developing a textural description of what the participant experienced (Creswell, 2007). Then, I developed a structural description of their experience in terms of its context, setting, and background. I proceeded by combining the textural and structural descriptions to form a composite description, the essential invariant structure, or more simply, the essence of the phenomenon. This aspect of the data analysis focuses on the common experiences shared by the participants, and delves into the structure or underlying essence of the experience.

Following the data analysis, I consulted with several members within the Jewish community who had also experienced mourning a parent, as a form of informal member checking. I shared some common themes that I uncovered, and individuals I consulted with identified with many of the sentiments shared by the participants, as well as the themes and findings I discovered.
Chapter 4: Findings

Phenomenological research relies on the development of themes that give the reader an understanding of the essence of the participant's experience (Creswell, 2007). My research question was, “What has been the experience of Jewish individuals who have mourned the loss of a parent using Jewish rituals?” In this research, four significant themes regarding the use of Jewish mourning rituals were formed through an in-depth analysis of the data collected. The themes identified were: finding comfort and a reduction in stress in not having to make decisions by having a framework to follow, honouring one’s parents by committing to rituals during and after the mourning period in memory and respect to one’s parents, being surrounded instead of being alone through the observance of shiva, and engaging in rituals as part of one’s Jewish identity.

Theme 1 - Structured Process: Comfort in not having to make decisions

At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to share their experience of using Jewish rituals in their mourning, and what significance the rituals had had for them. Though I did not specifically ask about their experience of making decisions during their mourning, both Miriam and Daniel stated that following the framework outlined in Judaism left no decision for them to make. They described how not having to make decisions was very helpful and eased their pain. Miriam articulated that having the framework of Judaism to follow was helpful, as it immediately began to move her through the mourning process, rather than her becoming overtaken with sadness.

When my mother passed, I think focusing on what I was supposed to do helped me right away, because it took some of the pain out. It was a set of rules I had to follow, and I was determined to do it properly. So, it started me on a path of a deeper
understanding in what I was supposed to do, other than cry.

In her statement, Miriam expressed that she experienced a reduction in pain by knowing what to do. Knowing there was a procedure to follow made mourning easier for her. Miriam felt that having guidance eased her grief. Later in the interview, while talking about whether she felt connected to the rituals she engaged in, she stated:

... I was given a lot of books on mourning, so I read up on things I was supposed to do and certain things I wasn’t supposed to do as far as praying goes. And it was just very moving to me, just that it seemed that every moment was taken care of, you know everything you were supposed to do.

Regarding the parameters surrounding prayer, Miriam was referring to the specified passages of prayer that are to be said when mourning a parent. Miriam appreciated that there was a structure to these passages and that she did not have to search which passages to say on her own. Rather, there was a laid out framework of prayers that a mourner recites. Miriam’s statement speaks to her feeling that there was a process in place that accounted for every moment. She did not have to make plans that were unique or of her own volition, but rather there was a set timeframe for the various steps involved in the mourning process. This theme was apparent for each participant.

Miriam was quite knowledgeable on the topic of mourning and spoke about numerous rituals. She spoke about how all of the decisions were pre-made, including specifics such as what type of garments the person who passed away should be dressed in when burial takes place and what sort of casket to purchase.

Judaism is a religion filled with rituals for daily life, and yet for Miriam the most powerful element of Judaism were those rituals that relate to mourning. She said:
The most important thing a person can do is get help during that time and that’s what Judaism does, it carries a person step by step through the process of mourning and more than any other time of your life that’s when you need support and you need guidance.

Here, Miriam expressed she felt that mourning is a time that a person needs support and guidance.

Daniel reflected that he was in a very different place in his Jewish practice at the time of the interview as compared with when he mourned his parents. When his parents passed away, he was not engaging in many Jewish practices overall, and he did not want to take on many of the rituals he knew about pertaining to mourning. He wanted the mourning process to be over. The fact that Daniel had wanted the mourning to end as soon as possible makes the following statement even more powerful:

There is no decision to make in Judaism. Which funeral hall you go to? You go to the Chevra kaddisha (Jewish burial society) and they take care of you.

Daniel expressed that he felt taken care of by the structure of the Jewish mourning process. Seemingly, performing the Jewish mourning rituals helped Daniel reconcile his desire to not engage in many rituals and at the same time move through the mourning process quickly. Not having to spend time thinking about making decisions and exploring options meant he was able to move through the situation quicker. He further elaborated how helpful it was not to have to make decisions:

I knew that when the time came, the Chevra kaddisha was there for that purpose, to help those that were left behind get the parent buried in a Jewish manner, in a Jewish way, which was very important to me.
Although Daniel did not identify with being religious at the time, he felt it important that his parents be buried according to Jewish tradition. In talking about the role of the Chevra kadish, Daniel stated, “it just made it easier for us, having someone to rely on to make this go ahead.” Daniel expressed that he knew he could turn to the Chevra kadish for guidance on the process that the weight of the decisions was not solely on his shoulders.

In the beginning of Sarah’s interview, she told me about a book she was given, that helped guide her through the mourning process. The book was called The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning by Maurice Lamm (1969) and it explained the Jewish mourning rituals and how to follow them. She said:

There was a book we had and it was very good, because we didn’t even know what do you do. We were not expecting to have to go through something like this. So it was really helpful just to read about, and even for the shiva. To know, oh I’m not supposed to get up, I’m supposed to sit in the chair and people are supposed to come to me. And I didn’t know that at first. The type of person that I am, I’m organized and it’s like no, you have to just let people come to you.

Sarah’s comment speaks to the unpredictability and unexpectedness of losing a parent. She expressed feeling unprepared for this to happen, and thus she did not what to expect, the steps to take, or the procedures involved. Having a resource to read was helpful in guiding her through the process and informing of practices involved, especially as she is an organized person.

Debbie shared similar feelings towards the middle of the interview. While discussing her feelings surrounding the Jewish rituals she utilized, she shared a story to elucidate what the rituals meant for her. She explained that on a trip to London, England for her parents’
fortieth wedding anniversary, she booked a castle tour. That day, all she wanted to do was get up in the morning, arrive at the bus depot, and have the people running the tour tell her exactly how the rest of the day would go. She wanted to be guided through the process. This, she said, in many ways represented the mourning process for her. She elaborated:

So in some sense, that’s what this was like for me. I got on a plane. I went to Calgary. I stayed with family. They told me everything that I needed to do. I didn’t have a decision to make for seven days. That, that was worth it.

Towards the middle of Sarah’s interview, I asked her how having the steps she mentioned laid out for her affected her mourning. She stated:

I feel like you need to know. It’s comforting in a way to know that there is a process, because you don’t know what to do, and there’s people that, that’s what they do, and there’s people that can help you plan those kind of things. It’s like you're in such a state that you need to rely on people who will tell you, ‘okay, here’s what happens next.’ And I think the funeral home, they were very good. Obviously, they know that that’s the state you’re in. They were very helpful in terms of telling us what was next.

All four participants said that not having to make decisions and having steps to follow was an extremely important and meaningful feature of their mourning. Losing a loved one is a tumultuous occasion filled with a plethora of emotions, and having to make decisions about what to do and how to proceed can further add to an already difficult time. Each person related that it was very comforting and stress relieving having a framework to follow. This was true for Miriam, Daniel, Sarah, and Debbie, regardless of each person’s level of religious observance at the time of losing their parent. It was also true regardless of how close the
participant was with their parent and how interested they were in knowing and understanding the rituals they utilized and engaged in.

**Theme 2 - Honouring Parents: Committing to rituals during and after the mourning period in memory of and out of respect for one’s parent**

All four participants spoke of feeling the importance of engaging in activities both in memory of and to honour their parents. They each discussed the satisfaction they felt performing rituals to show their parents ongoing respect, and ultimately doing what their parents would have wanted of them. Even though they may not have personally been invested in a certain practice or ritual, they felt it to be their responsibility to perform it knowing that it is something that their parents would have appreciated.

In many cases, people do things because they believe that their loved one would have wanted them to, rather than for themselves. In fact, there may have been rituals the participant was not interested in, however, to show respect to their parent, they engaged in it. Though it was not the initial reason for engaging in the ritual, nevertheless it resulted in a positive influence on the bereavement.

Debbie became much more involved in the Jewish community as result of her father’s passing. After her father’s death, Debbie began attending Jewish classes at the local synagogue and now teaches at the Hebrew school. Because her father gave charity, she now gives charity and she enjoys doing things that she knows he valued. She said:

I think my favourite part of this, if there’s a favourite part of someone passing away, is that I do things for my father. I study for my father, I go to classes for my father, I go to Synagogue for my father. I do a lot of things in the community now in honour of my father because he would have done them.
By attending classes and giving charity, Debbie was in a sense filling in for activities her father would have engaged in or carrying out a role he had played in the Jewish community. Not only was she connecting to her father in this way, she was continuing his legacy, and filling in a blank spot in the community left by her father's death. Although the initial motivation may have been an external one, the transformative result was positive on the individual and their mourning process.

In speaking about the ritual of kaddish (commemorative prayer), Daniel shared how his thoughts and feelings had changed over time. When each of his parents had first passed away, he considered going to synagogue and saying kaddish and observing his parent's yartzheit (anniversary date of the parent's death) as cumbersome. He did not view himself as religious at the time and the idea of engaging in rituals did not interest him. Daniel expressed that he had not wanted to undertake activities or feel that he was compelled to be a part of. Rather, he wanted to do what was needed and move on with his life, not focus on the fact that his parents had passed away. He spoke about the difference between how he initially felt about saying kaddish and how he felt about this ritual at the time of the interview. Many years following the death of his parents, Daniel began considering it an honour and personal obligation to recite kaddish for his parents. He remarked:

Now my feelings about kaddish are … it is extremely important to allow the soul to get where it needs to go. I’m saying kaddish now for my uncle, my father's brother … and I think it’s a duty, but it’s a good duty to help the soul on its way. To not say kaddish, knowing it needs to be said, would be a terrible thing to do.

After Daniel learned that Jewish philosophy states that the soul of the deceased benefits from the recitation of kaddish in their memory, he said that he felt it was his responsibility to
perform this special act in memory of the deceased. Reciting kaddish assisted Daniel in his mourning because it keeps his parents' memory alive for him. Additionally, based on his learning, Daniel believed it is a ritual that continues to help them even after they are no longer here. To know that he could do something to help his parents even though they are no longer alive made him feel good.

Daniel talked about how his perspective on Judaism and mourning had changed since he had begun studying more about Judaism, taking on more Jewish practices and traditions, and becoming more religious. He commented that if his parents were to have passed away at the time of the interview, rather than many years prior, his approach to mourning would be very different. Although at the time, Daniel did not understand the rituals he engaged in, in retrospect he said he was happy he did them and wished he had done more. In talking about how his feelings had changed, he further elaborated:

I think it’s very important. I think I have to make up for lost time in any which way that I can ... It’s my job, it’s my responsibility. I’m honouring my parents making sure that kaddish is said for the anniversary of their death.

Daniel spoke to his feeling a personal responsibility towards honouring his parents, especially after learning the benefits that kaddish brings to the soul of a deceased person. While he speaks of regret of not having engaged in saying kaddish in the past, he expressed satisfaction of starting the practice once he learned of its benefits.

Miriam talked about some of the rituals that she specifically felt connected to. She shared one ritual that was particularly powerful for her:
I think one of the things that was very very helpful to me was the lighting of the candles for the whole first year. That was very important because that sort of kept the memory very very alive for me.

Miriam discussed people engaging in rituals out of respect for their parents and their desire to keep their parents' memory alive. She feels that for many people who are not observant, using the rituals is a form of respect for their parents, rather than out of a personal desire to follow Jewish tradition. As an administrative assistant in a synagogue, Miriam further shared:

I find in the position I’m in, many many people will ask me, you know, what should I do? Because, even though they don’t believe in what’s being done, they want to do the right thing by their parent so at least if you have that belief, that will help you.

Miriam touched on a point that Daniel brought up as well, that many people do not engage in the rituals for themselves, rather they do it to honour their parents. This in turn also brings consolation and satisfaction to the mourner, knowing that they are continuing to bring honour to their parents, even after their passing. When asked to elaborate on her reasoning for engaging in the rituals given that she stated she did not necessarily feel connected to them, Miriam assertively responded, "I think especially for my Dad. It’s what he would want; these were his traditions."

Whether the rituals were a way of respecting, honouring, or keeping the parents' memory alive, all four participants felt that that respecting and honouring their parents was an important aspect of the rituals. The way they viewed the specific experience was quite varied and yet they all agreed on the importance placed on bringing honour to their parents. For Daniel, it was about taking on the responsibility out of respect. While for Debbie, it was
more about continuing her father's legacy by engaging in activities that her father had enjoyed doing. For Sarah, it was doing what she believed her father would want, as they were his traditions. Miriam, on the other hand, felt the rituals kept her mother’s memory alive. For all of the participants, the rituals were not only about themselves and their own personal experience, but a significant aspect involved honouring their parents and keeping their memory alive as well.

**Theme 3 - Sitting Shiva: Being surrounded instead of being alone**

Miriam talked about her experience of sitting shiva (the seven day mourning period) and how beneficial it was for her. She felt that while instinctively someone would want to spend time alone following a parent's death, sitting shiva was beneficial in that it made sure that she was surrounded by family, friends and the community. She found that this support was very much needed. Miriam related about her experience sitting shiva:

I think it is very very important. People constantly being around you ... talking about the person and allowing you to talk about the person is very important. It’s very cathartic. It helps you because it speaks out your emotions, and it allows you to cry and it allows you to laugh, it just allows all the emotions to come out of you, which I think are very very important and without being surrounded by your loved ones I think it would be very difficult. Like if you were locked alone in a room ... the first feeling you get is you want to shun company and the ritual of shiva I think is very very important. Maybe the key to everything is the shiva period and the way you have to go through it.

Many people instinctively want to seek isolation following the death of a parent; they may be experiencing intense sadness and believe that being alone is the natural or normal state.
Shiva, on the other hand, encourages a mourner to be around other people. Yet at the same time, the practices built into shiva respect the fact that a mourner may not want to engage conversation. The tone of the visit is determined by the mourner. Whether the mourner wants to engage in conversation or sit with others in silence being surrounded by people is left up to the mourner, which can be beneficial.

Debbie discussed that sitting shiva brought her family together. She reflected, "we sat around talking about my dad and telling good stories and looking, all of us, actually looking at this book and many other books, because that’s the way my family is about rituals." Debbie talked about the wide range of observance that spans her family. She noted, "we’ve got everywhere from 99 percent, down to 5 percent observance level in my family, but we all came together!" Her family was there for each other through the experience. Regardless of their knowledge or observance of Judaism, they experienced her father’s death as a unit. Coming together and sharing the experience with family aided her in her mourning.

Debbie also talked about the differences she found between Jewish mourning practices and the non-Jewish mourning practices of her husband’s family. When her father-in-law, who was not Jewish, passed away two years after her father had passed away, she felt there was a lack of rituals for her mother-in-law to engage in. She said that while shiva brought her family together to comfort each other, she expressed feeling sad for her husband's family, as they didn't have specific rituals to engage in to bring them together. She said, “I guess on a daily basis, then really more than daily, you’ve got things to do all day long because of the shiva.” Instead of wondering how they would get through the day, shiva created a schedule or framework for them to follow.
Sarah spoke about her experience with shiva and how she appreciated people coming
to pay their respects to her father. Even though there was a very diverse group of visitors,
and many of the people who came were not knowledgeable about the practices involved in
shiva, Sarah treasured the fact that they made the effort to come. She reflected:

It was nice, it was very appreciated. I think there were also people who, like my non-
Jewish work people or people like that, they just don’t know what to do or what to
say ... Some people were preparing meals for us, others were bringing flowers, and so
some people just didn't know what to do … I’m not going to fault anyone if they
couldn't, but I definitely appreciated whoever did come, especially those who I hadn't
seen in years. Like some high school friends who were coming, even to the funeral
too, even a few friends that were helping at the cemetery with the shovel ... I
appreciated it.

For Sarah, the fact that someone made the effort to come, whether it be to the funeral or the
shiva, meant a tremendous amount to her. The specifics of their visit, or what exactly they
did or brought, were not as significant to her as their presence. She expressed that the
support meant a lot to her. She appreciated the participation of all the visitors, including
family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, or people she had not seen in a long time. She felt
cared about by people in her life which helped her in her mourning. Sarah also stated that
because her father died right before Passover, she only had the opportunity to sit shiva for
one day. Though she understood the reason why she could not sit shiva for the full period, it
still felt strange to her and she wished that she had been able to sit shiva for longer. This was
a limitation that the ritual imposed upon her.
Three of the four participants, Miriam, Debbie, and Sarah, discussed that the ritual of shiva was extremely important to them, as it facilitated being surrounded by others. Whether it was close family members or friends one has not seen in several years, just knowing that they cared enough to come was appreciated. Being surrounded by others and having a support network provided them with an opportunity to share memories and a safe venue to express their feelings. This process encouraged them to experience their feelings and tune into their thoughts, rather than ignoring them or putting them aside. Moreover, it created a schedule to follow, where there time was filled structured when they could have easily become overwhelmed and withdraw. This also relates to the idea of having structure.

Daniel had not expected shiva would play a significant role for him in mourning his parents. He had not thought that it was an important ritual to participate in and wanted to move on with his life rather than engage in a ritual that he did not believe would serve to benefit him in any way. He had believed that sitting shiva was unnecessary and would prolong a period in his life that he would rather move on from. However, in retrospect he stated on more than one occasion during the interview that he wished he had engaged in more rituals and that if he could do it over again, he would do shiva more completely.

Theme 4 - Jewish Identity: It’s who I am, I’m Jewish

Both Debbie and Daniel emphasized a key reason for engaging in the Jewish mourning rituals was that it was an expression of their Jewish identity. They confidently expressed their identification as Jews and the important role that Judaism played in their identity. Daniel, especially, spoke with conviction when he discussed being Jewish. This was evident with other participants as well. Each of the participants expressed that Judaism
runs deeper than belief and understanding; that it is part of a person’s essence, regardless of how many rituals, traditions, laws, or customs they practice.

Daniel chose to approach the Chevra kaddisha during his mourning and stated that he did so because he felt that doing so was part of being Jewish. He said:

Jews didn’t go someplace else, you know a funeral home, a non-Jewish funeral home, to bury a parent or bury anybody Jewish. You do it the Jewish way, through the Chevra kaddisha … And so there was no question whether I would go to the Chevra kaddisha or not.

Subsequently, over the years, Daniel had increased his knowledge on Judaism by attending Jewish classes and synagogue. He had increased the practices he engages in, and came to identify as Orthodox. He spoke at great length regarding his feelings towards Judaism when he was younger compared with his current outlook. Considering that he had stated that many of the rituals did not appeal to him at the time, and he considered them to be cumbersome, I asked him why he had felt that going to the Chevra kaddisha for the burial was so important. He answered:

Because, I mean, we knew we were Jewish and there was no walking away from it. We didn’t want to say we weren’t Jewish and that’s the one thing I knew, is that if there is a death you go to the Chevra kaddisha, it was there for everybody… There must have been something going on in my psyche, that said, we have to, this is the right thing to do.

Daniel shared insight into his parents and their outlook. Though his parents were not religious, they knew they were Jewish and very much identified with this. They did not keep
central Jewish principles such as kosher or Shabbat, yet Daniel's parents enrolled him in a private Jewish Day School, and he had a Bar Mitzvah, as did his brother.

All of the participants in this study emphasized the role of Judaism in their mourning and in their self-identity. Although three of the participants were not religious at the time of the mourning of their parent, they considered Judaism to be a large of their bereavement and wanted to engage in rituals they connected with because of the Jewish aspect of their identity. Regarding the burial, Daniel said, “There was no question we were Jewish, so you do things as would be done in Judaism.” Daniel continued:

I think our phoning the Chevra kaddishah and dealing, I think that was part we’re Jewish and this is the way it’s done.

In this statement, Daniel connected both the first theme of not having to make decisions on his own and the fourth theme of Jewish identity. He got in touch with the Chevra kaddishah because "we're Jewish and this is the way it's done," and at the same time appreciated their role and contribution in planning the burial services, "someone else can think about it, handle it."

After Debbie had shared some of her experiences mourning her father using Jewish rituals, I asked her what had interested her in engaging in the Jewish rituals. She firmly answered, “I wasn’t interested. It’s the way I’ve been brought up!” Debbie’s statement is a powerful one laden with multiple meanings. Debbie was expressing that she did not engage in rituals because she was interested in them, which would mean she was doing them from a personal motivation. In fact, on the contrary, she was not particularly interested in the rituals. Rather she engaged in them because it was the Jewish way of mourning, the way she was raised.
Later in the interview, Debbie commented that there were rituals and practices she chose not to engage in, but as far as the whole process went and the rituals she did engage in, she was very much content with the overall framework involved in Jewish mourning. Debbie said that she engaged in the rituals that she identified with and if there was a ritual she did not feel was applicable to her situation, she did not do it. For example, in the year her father died, she had tickets to the symphony. Although the *Code of Jewish Law* instructs a mourner to abstain from listening to live music during the first year of the parents’ death, Debbie attended the symphony. She said that she felt she was honouring her father by attending because he would have wanted her to go and that he would have thought it would be ridiculous to give up the tickets. She echoed the sentiments surrounding Jewish identity, and stated:

I can tell you that I did this because I am Jewish and there has been many years where I haven’t done anything at all, but when it comes to my family, whatever my family wants to do, I’m pretty much doing it.

Here, Debbie’s statement links the theme of Jewish identity, as well as the theme of honouring her family and doing what she felt they would want to be done.

Sarah talked about her strong cultural identity with Judaism and the importance of this identify in her life. There were rituals that she felt comfortable engaging in and others that she chose not to include in her mourning. For example, she loved music and dancing, and decided that she would follow the ritual of not dancing during the year of her father’s death. However, she did listen to live music. When she attended a friend’s wedding, she enjoyed the music but refrained from dancing as a way of honouring her father. Regarding her engagement in the rituals overall she said:
I do also feel that in some ways this is what the Jewish religion believes and I’m Jewish and it’s what God says so that’s what I should do but to your comfort level.

For all of the participants, the concept of Jewish identity was a powerful factor that influenced their engaging in the Jewish mourning rituals. All four participants talked about connecting with Judaism and the strong role it plays in their identity. They all mentioned in various ways that Judaism influenced their mourning.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The study's overarching research question was what have been the experiences of Jewish individuals who have mourned a parent using Jewish rituals. Through my analysis of the data, I found that the use of rituals in mourning is helpful regardless of how religious an individual is. Thus, using rituals was found to have benefits both for those who self-identified as religious (practicing) and non-religious (non-practicing). Regardless of one's affiliation within Judaism, whether one was involved in Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Judaism, the use of rituals was a significant aspect in the experience of mourning. The findings of this study are relevant and applied to individuals who identified strongly with being Jewish.

The Jewish mourning rituals allowed Jewish individuals to feel supported by tapping into a unique aspect of their identity. Connecting to one's culture, background, roots, and ancestral practices was found to be beneficial. There was a resurgence of this aspect of one's identity for some of the participants who may not have expected it. Additionally, having a sense of structure, thus not being overwhelmed with decision making before, during, and after the burial, was of great assistance. Furthermore, the social aspect of the Jewish mourning rituals helped individuals not feel isolated, but rather supported and connected. Moreover, the Jewish mourning rituals provided an opportunity for individuals to partake in actions in memory of their parents, as a final respect and tribute to them, as well as continuously in the years following their parent's death.

Phenomenological analysis requires the researcher to understand several individuals’ common experiences in order to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The researcher is charged with interpreting the data and detailing a
description presenting the essence of the phenomenon being studied. In this case, the essence of the shared experiences of mourning the loss of a parent using Jewish rituals was explored.

As humans, we experience loss in a variety of ways, including the loss of a job, a sentimental item, a friend, or a parent. Loss of any kind can be traumatic and having a way, a method, to work through the loss without being stuck is extremely important (Lipsett, 2006). Rituals can provide people with stability. They are a process that provides direction in an otherwise confusing time (Paloutzian, 2013; Peelen et. al. 2009). This can be true regardless of how religious a person is, as has been shown in this study. Consideration of these findings in relation to the research and literature suggests practice implications for social workers, counselors, and Rabbis in working with individuals who are mourning a parent.

Schlozman (2003) points out that many cultures have designated rituals intended to foster community support and that it is worthwhile for us to understand those culturally driven responses. As our society continues to become increasingly culturally diversified, people may respond to their loss in what appears to others in unfamiliar ways. Understanding a variety of culturally driven responses increases our ability to support and encourage people in their mourning. Each culture has its own unique components involved in the mourning process, and recognizing and understanding them may help people in an individual way.

Rituals play a valuable part in people’s lives and in mourning a parent (Goldstein, 2006) and have the potential to provide meaning and connection (Puterbaugh, 2008). Regardless of how observant one is, rituals can be an effective tool in the bereavement period (Brown et al., 2004; Wouters, 2002). Despite the four participants coming from diverse
lifestyles, having different backgrounds, varying levels of religiosity, and a wide range of relationships with their parents, and engaging in a variety of rituals, they all shared similar feelings of the rituals being helpful during the mourning period. This was true whether individuals knew the reasoning behind the rituals or not, whether they did them for themselves personally because they wanted to or to honour their deceased parent, or whether they did them because they felt that it was part of their Jewish identity. Regardless of the reason, individuals found the rituals to be comforting and beneficial in their mourning process. Though their circumstances were different and the ways in which the rituals were found to be beneficial varied, the overall experience was a positive one, with several participants wishing that they had engaged in more.

It is important to recognize that there were rituals that participants chose not to engage in because they did not appeal to them, or they felt that they would be contrary to honouring their parent. The participants stated that they felt they had the freedom to choose which rituals they were going to engage in and if they did not want participate in a ritual, then they did not do it. The one instance where a participant would have liked to engage in a ritual, but was not given the opportunity to do so, was with the ritual of shiva. Because Sarah’s father died right before Passover, she was only given the opportunity to sit shiva for one day. This was a difficult experience because she would have liked to sit shiva for the regular amount of time. Moreover, having only one day of shiva and celebrating Passover seemed like an abrupt end to a ritual which is otherwise supposed to be a time to celebrate a person's life with family and friends. Not having the opportunity to participate in a ritual that one wants to engage in can be stressful and hurtful.
The most common rituals that the four participants identified engaging in were sitting shiva, reciting kaddish, burying the deceased in a timely manner, using a simple casket and burial shroud, lighting a yahrzeit candle, using the Chevra kaddisha, tearing their clothing, and not dancing for the first year after the death. Participants expressed a sense of satisfaction and relief of stress and pressure through the use of Jewish rituals. Having structure can be a comforting element in the mourning process (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Gowensmith, 1999). The participants in this study each selected the rituals they preferred to engage in. They felt that having rituals to choose from and specific guidelines to follow provided support in their mourning as they did not have to create a process of their own.

All of the participants emphatically expressed how much they enjoyed having the opportunity to share the story of how their parent died and what their mourning entailed. Lipsett (2006) writes that sharing one’s story of mourning is especially important and that it should be done over and over again to facilitate the mourning process. An unforeseen benefit of this research was that participants stated that having a venue to share their story was in and of itself therapeutic (Castle & Phillips, 2003). It is not often that a person has the opportunity to share their experience of mourning a parent, and for many it was the first time they have ever had the opportunity to do so.

When undertaking this study, I did not expect to find strong themes that would be the same for both religious and non-religious individual. I thought there might be themes applicable to those who identified as religious and other themes for those who identified as non-religious. However, I found common themes across the spectrum, regardless of participants' Jewish affiliation. Furthermore, I did not anticipate that people would engage in rituals specifically because they believed that it was the right thing to do as a ‘Jew’ and I did
not think that people would practice certain rituals because they thought it would bring happiness to their parents. Jewish identity played a much larger role in people’s decision to engage in rituals than I had assumed.

The four participants represented a spectrum of Jewish individuals, ranging from non-practicing to highly religious. This allowed for a greater depth of understanding of the underpinnings of mourning as it relates to Jewish rituals on a whole and how people experience them. Despite differences in religious observance or relationship with and feelings towards their parents, each of the participants felt that the rituals they engaged in were helpful in their mourning. Though Daniel mentioned that his relationship with his mother was strained and he felt a degree of resentment towards her, still the rituals were helpful and he was content that he had engaged in them. Despite the fact that Sarah stated that she was not very close with her father, she valued the rituals she performed and said that she found them to be beneficial in her mourning.

The essential phenomenon that all four participants expressed that they experienced was one of connecting to and reestablishing their Jewish identity. The strong connection that each participant felt to their Jewish identity was the driving force, which propelled them to take part in the rituals that they engaged in. All participants felt that their Jewish identity was an innate part of their being that they found comfort in actively engaging and strengthening. Identity is a powerful tool that can help centre a person during a difficult and emotional time. The collaborative exploration of a person’s identity can prove to be a catalyst to the engagement of rituals and practices that could provide comfort in times of mourning.
Relation to Existing Literature

Utilizing aspects of a phenomenological approach to this research serves as a means of exploring the experience of Jewish individuals who have mourned a parent using Jewish rituals. The findings of the study fit well with previous research (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Gowensmith, 1999), building on and supporting the importance of mourning rituals and adds to the literature by interpreting actual individual experiences of Jewish individuals who have experienced this phenomenon. Furthermore, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the significance of mourning rituals that social workers and pastoral counselors could utilize when working with someone who is mourning a loved one.

Having a sense of structure in one’s mourning is an important element of the ability to move through the mourning process (Matz, 1964; Miller, 2011; Running et. al., 2008). This supports the idea of having a structured process. All of the participants said that not having to make decisions and knowing that there was a framework to follow alleviated stress and made the situation less overwhelming. Participants expressed that they appreciated knowing the rituals that Judaism requires, and then had the option to engage in the ones that resonated with them, or that they felt identified with.

Another finding of this study, that mourning rituals are experienced as a way to celebrate the life of the deceased and show them respect, is consistent with that of Alexander (1999). All of the participants shared that they felt that the rituals gave them an opportunity to show respect for their parents and to honour them. For Miriam, keeping a candle lit for the entire first year was a way of respecting her mother and keeping the memory of her mother alive. Daniel felt a great sense of responsibility to honour both his parents by saying the annual mourners kaddish prayer on the anniversary of their death, and Debbie began
regularly engaging in several Jewish practices to honour her father. Many people find comfort in honouring their loved one, whether immediately following their death, on the anniversary of their death, or when they feel it is appropriate (Gowensmith, 1999; Lipsett, 2006; Miller, 2011).

The idea of being surrounded rather than being alone corresponds with what Wolowelsky (1984, 1996) stated in his articles. He suggested that the rituals of mourning purposefully require direct attention from the mourner to engage in traditions such as shiva, thus not allowing the mourner time to be consumed in sadness, to deny the experience, or distance from it. Having a network of support, especially initially after the death and immediately after the funeral, is very important, as it gives the mourner a safe place to reflect, reminisce, and contemplate (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Gowensmith, 1999; Lipsett, 2006; Miller, 2011; Puterbaugh, 2008; Stroebe et al., 2007).

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

Social workers have an important role in working with clients on multiple issues, including bereavement. Social workers can begin by exploring the client’s situation with them and gain an understanding of the client’s values and history. This would include finding out what the client has done in terms of grieving and whether there has been a funeral. It would also mean understanding what the client has been involved in, how they feel about the death of their loved one, and what issues they would want to address.

Spirituality can be a vital and powerful aspect involved in mourning that social workers can examine with their clients, as long as they do so ethically and appropriately (Hodge, 2011; Pomeroy, 2011). Spiritual practices are an important part of incorporating individuals’ religious beliefs and values, which can positively influence their coping (Canda
et al., 2010; Paloutzian, 2013). Social workers could explore the meaning of spirituality and religion to the client. Social workers could use a short assessment to gauge individual’s interest in engaging in religious and spiritual practices. If the client expresses an interest in religion and/or spirituality there are several interventions that social workers could use. The social worker, with appropriate consent, could connect the client with individuals within their cultural or religious community who could guide them with the rituals and practices, i.e. an Elder, Priest, Rabbi, etc. Referrals can be made for leaders within different communities who have undergone training in bereavement counseling or are involved in the practices pertaining to the mourning process. Social workers can suggest that the client explore a ritual that they find meaningful as an exercise or homework prior to their next appointment (Canda et. al, 2010).

An important aspect of social work practice is using information from assessments to assist clients to maximize their self-determination and empower them to make informed decisions (Bosma et al., 2008). Individuals mourning the loss of a parent find comfort in structure, thus it is important that social workers guide and support clients to make decisions regarding both pre- and post-funeral rituals. A dialogue regarding mourning rituals and bereavement can occur before a loved one dies. This is particularly relevant to social workers working in hospitals and palliative care, where social workers can be proactive in working with the patient and family to ensure that mourning rituals have been discussed and considered. Information sharing is another important element of social work. Social workers should have a variety of in-depth information on mourning rituals that they can share with clients. The information should include types of rituals that one can engage in, general procedures for the rituals, who to contact to learn more, and individuals and/or groups that
clients can contact for further assistance. The social worker can also work with the mourner to develop a schedule that will allow them to grieve in a structured environment.

Support from friends and family is an important part of mourning, particularly in the initial phase (Lipsett, 2006; Miller, 2011). Social workers should speak with the client to see if they have a support network and how they plan on involving their loved ones in the mourning process. This can be of particular use for social workers supporting marginalized clients who may not have a support network or family structure to support them. Connecting clients to groups where they can find support is can be extremely influential in their mourning.

Funeral rituals are an important aspect of mourning and can be a powerful initial step in moving through the mourning process (Lipsett, 2006; Miller, 2011; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Post-funeral rituals are also very important and can facilitate healthy mourning. If the client does not have a specific funeral or post-funeral ritual planned, and is not interested in a specific religion or spiritual practice or tradition, the social worker can explore the idea of the client creating and utilizing his or her own personal rituals (Peelen et al., 2009). Creativity is an important tool in social work. Social workers can work with clients and through the exploration of existing mourning rituals can assist clients to develop and engage in their own personalized mourning rituals.

Given the expressed benefits of talking about one's experiences of mourning, social workers could consider organizing a group that would meet to share their experiences of mourning. Talking with others and sharing what one is going through can be a very positive element in ones mourning (Gowensmith, 1999; Lipsett, 2006). This could be a one-time group or it could develop into weekly or monthly meetings. It does not have to be facilitated
as a therapy group, but rather an opportunity for individuals to share their experiences and talk about what worked for them. This, in and of itself, could be helpful for people who have mourned a parent. Holding such a group would be beneficial to those who have recently lost a parent, as well as those who have lost a parent many years ago. For those individuals whom do not have a readily available support system or cultural/religious process to follow, meeting others and connecting could be very positive and beneficial.

Given how influential spirituality and religion can be in a person's life, it is important that social workers have an understanding of how it can be integrated into social work practice. Yet, training as pertaining to spirituality, religious practices, and cultural traditions, is lacking in social work education and training (Hodge, 2011; Sheridan, 2009). The benefits of connecting with one's culture or religion could be discussed in a workshop on person-centered practice. Social workers could connect with representatives of different cultures and religions to gain a basic level of understanding of the practices and rituals of cultures and religions of the populations, groups, or demographics that they often work with.

**Implications for Pastor Counselors**

Spirituality and its connection to bereavement, both in terms of Judaism, as well as overall religious practices and rituals, were explored in this study. There are several practical ideas that can be derived from the study's findings. These implications can be applied specifically for Jewish individuals seeking to utilize Jewish rituals in their mourning. Additionally, there are implications for individuals who are not Jewish, but seek to utilize aspects pertaining to spirituality and religious practices. Furthermore, following an analysis of the interviews, I was able to develop ideas on potential roles that social workers, pastoral counselors, and Rabbis could have in supporting individuals who are mourning a parent.
The Rabbi plays an important role in the Jewish community. The Rabbi has a variety of responsibilities and tasks, including ceremonial officiator, spiritual leader, mentor, comforter, counsellor, and friend. More specifically, in terms of bereavement and mourning, the Rabbi, in his position as leader, counselor, and comforter, has a variety of roles associated with the Jewish mourning rituals themselves, as well as guiding the mourner. Thus, it is imperative that Rabbis are aware of the intricacies associated with grief and loss (Lamm & Lamm, 2005).

It would be worthwhile for Rabbis to read this study so they can gain a greater understanding not only of the philosophical and theoretical reasoning behind the rituals of mourning, but also to also read how individuals themselves experience mourning rituals. Having an understanding of individuals’ experiences could give great insight to Rabbi’s as to how to provide assistance and supportive direction to Jewish individuals who approach them.

Two participants said that having the involvement of a Rabbi was helpful in their mourning. The other two participants were not connected to specific synagogue at the time their parent passed away, and therefore felt that they did not have a specific Rabbi to connect with. Generally, Jewish people do not learn about the rituals involved in mourning until they experience a loss in their family, at which point it can become overwhelming, as an array of rituals are thrust upon them (Goldstein, 2006; Lamm, 1969). Several of the participants also said that having a guidebook was very helpful as it provided them with direction.

This study can inform the way that Rabbis teach the Jewish rituals and mourning. More specifically, they can emphasize the benefits of the structured process, present options as a jumping off point, explain the therapeutic relevance of certain rituals, and answer often asked questions. I believe that it would be worthwhile for Rabbis to offer an introductory
class in their synagogue on Jewish mourning practices (a practice that, in my personal experience, I have not witnessed). Another venue for such a class would be in hospitals and/or nursing homes. A valuable application would be to have an audio class on Jewish mourning uploaded to Jewish websites so that it would be accessible to a multitude of people. Learning about the mourning rituals before one actually needs to utilize them would prepare people mentally and give them a greater understanding of why the rituals are done.

**Further Research**

One limitation of this research study was that there was a limited amount of participants interviewed. Those participants that were interviewed, generally reported positive experiences of their engagement with the Jewish mourning rituals. It would be worthwhile to engage in a study that examined the negative experiences of individuals who had utilized Jewish rituals in their mourning. For this the recruitment would specifically ask for participants who had had a negative experience. It would be interesting to see if there were themes regarding specific rituals that were found to be frustrating, or difficult.

The interviews I conducted were one to one interviews. It would be beneficial to hold a group interview where individuals could share their stories with others who have lost a parent. One could look at how individuals react to each other’s experiences, what was similar and different across the experiences, and whether sharing experiences together would be beneficial in and of itself. This could provide rich information with respect to the similarities and differences in individuals experience of mourning rituals.

My study looked at Jewish individuals who had mourned the loss of a parent but there were no criteria regarding how the parent had passed away. A further study could examine if the manner in which a parent passes away affects the mourners’ experience.
One theme that could be further explored is the concept of Jewish identity. It is interesting to note that Daniel and Debbie who were not religious at the time of their parents passing both stated being Jewish as one of the reasons they engaged in the rituals. They also cited doing what they were brought up to do. Miriam, on the other hand, brought up the idea of having faith, and how believing in G-d played an integral part in her mourning process. More research can be done with regards to Jewish identity and how it influences Jewish people’s engagement in rituals related to mourning and whether this applies to other rites of passage as well, such as birth or marriage.

Concerning social work education and practice, a further study could explore how social workers have used spiritual interventions with individuals and how individuals experienced those interventions in their mourning. It would also be worthwhile to examine whether social workers feel they are given the skills, knowledge, and tools to incorporate spirituality in their practice with clients, and if not, what could be done to help facilitate this process.

Summary

This research delved into the experiences of four Jewish individuals with mourning the loss of a parent using Jewish rituals. I had initially thought that religious people would value engaging in rituals, while non-religious people would not. However, I found that rituals were identified as important for both those who identified themselves as religious and those who identified as non-religious. I was surprised to find how influential and important having structure in the mourning process was for all four participants. I had initially thought that I would be able to locate recent literature on rituals and mourning; however, this proved to be difficult, as recent literature on rituals and mourning was sparse, and most of the existing literature dated back several decades. Additionally, I was unable to locate studies
that had explored the actual experiences of individuals’ mourning, rather than the theories behind the involvement of rituals in mourning.

The findings of this study support the themes found in previous literature. Additionally, the findings of this study contextualize the themes within individual's experiences, rather than solely within a Jewish theological framework. The experiences of the participants brought a vivid dimension to the existing literature and theoretical framework. Individuals reported benefiting from the rituals they used. Despite this being a sensitive topic of discussion, individuals were open to dialogue and expressed personal gain from recollecting how they have grown following their experience of mourning and in general from having the opportunity to share their story.
References


in a Kentucky African American family. *Death Studies, 30*(10), 957-969.


Lamm, M., & Lamm, D. (2005). Counseling the Bereaved, in *A practical guide to rabbinic*


doi:10.1017/S00332917009865
Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

BEREAVEMENT AND SPIRITUALITY: EXPLORING MOURNING
THE LOSS OF A PARENT USING JEWISH LAW AND RITUALS

STUDY TEAM
Principal Investigator:
Dr. Pilar Riaño-Alcala, School of Social Work, 2080 West Mall, Vancouver,
Telephone: xxx-xxx-xxxx, Email: priano@interchange.ubc.ca

Co-Investigator:
Dr. Brian O’Neil, School of Social Work, 2080 West Mall, Vancouver,
Telephone: xxx-xxx-xxxx, Email: Brian.Oneill@ubc.ca

Co-Investigator and Primary Contact:
Nuta Yisrael Shurack, School of Social Work, Graduate Student, 2080 West Mall,
Vancouver, Telephone: xxx-xxx-xxxx, Email: yshurack@gmail.com

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference,
is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what
the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more
detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel
free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any
accompanying information.

INVITATION, PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND
This research is for a Masters in Social Work graduate degree and is part of a thesis. You
are being invited to take part in this research study because you are Jewish and have
mourned the loss of a parent in accordance with all or some Jewish laws and customs.

We want to learn more about the experience of Jewish people who have mourned the loss
of a parent using Jewish law and rituals and explore whether these laws and rituals were
found to be therapeutic. We would like to learn about and identify the possible
connection between spirituality and bereavement and whether it can help facilitate healthy
grieving during the period of mourning.
We have done research on the reasons behind Jewish laws and rituals of mourning. We have asked people to participate so that we can learn firsthand from individuals who have mourned the loss of a parent how the laws and rituals affected their process of bereavement. You are invited to participate in this face to face interview. The participation is strictly voluntary. You will be invited to participate in the interview, share your experience, and answer the questions presented to you only if you agree to participate.

**PROCEDURES**
If you agree to participate in this research study, you will attend a face-to-face interview, which will last approximately one to three hours depending on your availability and preference. There is the potential for a second interview if you agree. The interview will be arranged at a mutually agreeable location. The meeting will be audio-taped. We are asking you a number of questions which focus on:

1). Your experience in using all or some of the Jewish laws and rituals associated with mourning the loss of a parent.
2). Which Jewish laws and rituals you used..
3). Your understanding of these Jewish laws and rituals.
4). Which Jewish laws and customs you did not use
5) How the use or non-use of Jewish laws and rituals affected your mourning.

**STUDY RESULTS**
The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in a journal article and books.

**RISKS**
The anticipated risk for participating in this research is the discussing of this sensitive topic. However, you may choose not to answer any questions or may leave the study at any time.

Confidentiality is assured and will be secured in a variety of ways:
- Your name and contact information will only exist on the signed informed consent materials and stored in a locked cabinet separate from other materials.
- Your name will not be recorded in the interview transcriptions.
- Any identifying information will be removed from transcriptions.
- Your identifying information will not be reported during any presentation or report.
- Data will be kept in the researcher’s office in a secure file cabinet.
- Only the researcher, primary contact and faculty advisor will have access to the audio-data.
- Data is destroyed within five years of completion of this project

**DIRECT BENEFITS**
Though there are no direct benefits for participating in this study, indirectly sharing one’s story can be and empowering experience. In the future this research study may help others who are mourning the loss of a parent in using Jewish laws rituals.
COSTS
There will be no cost to you for participating in this research.

QUESTIONS
Please contact Nuta Yisrael Shurack with any questions you may have about the project. You can contact Nuta Yisrael Shurack at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research subject and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

CONSENT
PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS STRICTLY VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to participate in this research study, or to withdraw your participation at any point, without penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this research study will have no consequences to you.

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this research project as stated above and the possible risks from it. I hereby agree to participate in the above study and to allow the researcher to audiotape the interview and use my information for publications that are related to this study. No personal information will be disclosed. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement.

___________________________  ____________________________  ___________________
Participant’s Signature                                           Date

___________________________  ____________________________  ___________________
Researcher’s Signature                                              Date

Supplementary information:

I am interested in obtaining a summary of the findings from this research project:

No (  )
Yes (  )

If yes, Please provide email address: _________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

1) What made you want to be a part of this research?

2) What does the word ritual mean to you?

3) What was your experience of using the rituals while mourning your parent?

4) Are there rituals that you felt were difficult or cumbersome? If so, how come?

5) At any point did you get in touch with your Rabbi? Was this helpful?

6) Was there a Rabbi or someone who was available to explain the rituals and be there to guide you through the process?

7) Were you aware of the various rituals and laws involved in mourning before your parent passed away?

8) Do you wish you had known more about the rituals?
   - Did having an understanding of the rituals help you?
   - Did not knowing create a barrier?

9) Looking back are you happy with the laws and rituals you used or do you wish you did more or less?

10) Did faith play a role in the mourning process?

11) Do you have any siblings and was your mourning process in any way connected with theirs?

12) Are there recommendations you would make to people in the future who are mourning the loss of a parent?