

## **Culture Counts: Caring for Jewish Patients & Families**

By Rabbi Gary S. Fink, D.Min., MAHL  
Montgomery Hospice Chaplain

At Montgomery Hospice, we are passionate about our mission to “gentle the journey.” It is complicated, though, because there is no one way to do this. Although all people experience an end-of-life journey, each person’s path is individual and unique.

Why is this road so different for everyone? Because every patient and family member has an individual personality like no other. And because we are influenced by our families, ethnic and racial groups, communities and spiritual traditions. These cultural influences affect how we see ourselves, how we understand and make sense of our world, and how we respond to our circumstances.

That is why the mission statement is accompanied by Montgomery Hospice’s *vision*—to bring comfort and care to “our community’s multicultural residents.”

Understanding and respecting the culture of county residents is essential to our work. In a previous article, Dr. Robert Washington wrote about serving the African-American community. In this article, we focus on aspects of Jewish culture and end-of-life care. Montgomery Hospice serves a large number of Jewish patients and families, reflecting the sizeable and active Jewish community in Montgomery County.

### **Religion, Culture, Civilization**

Judaism contains a broad range of spiritual beliefs and practices. Yet Judaism is more than a faith; it also encompasses a complex culture and a 4,000-year history. So in its broadest sense, Judaism is an evolving civilization.

For some, Judaism is about belief in God and observance of Divine commandments. For others, Judaism is about seeking God and creating “godliness” in the world. For many, being Jewish means identifying with family tradition, noble values or the heritage of Jewish culture. Since Judaism is more than a creed or set of beliefs, it is possible for Jews to be secular, religious, cultural or even atheist—and still strongly identify as Jewish.

This diversity within the Jewish community emerges in many areas of the hospice experience, for example, in decision-making. Orthodox Jews look to their rabbis as authorities regarding issues that arise at the end of life. Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform and Renewal Jews are more likely to use a rabbi as a guide but not as an ultimate decision-maker. Cultural, humanistic or secular Jews may simply look to Jewish values as they grapple with difficult end-of-life decisions. In all cases, Montgomery Hospice staff members support the right of patients and families to make decisions as they see fit, and we encourage our clients to consult with anyone who will be helpful.

### **Jewish View of Hospice Care**

As far back as the Bible, Judaism affirms the importance and sanctity of life. At the same time, the Biblical author of Ecclesiastes recognizes that “to everything there is a season...a time for being born, and a time for dying.” The end of life is seen as part of the natural cycle of life. Although preservation of life and health is a primary *mitzvah* (commandment) in Jewish law, we are *also* obligated to prevent or diminish suffering.



Jewish tradition recognizes that there may come a time when death is inevitable, and the goal of care changes from aggressively fighting disease to battling suffering caused by disease. *When* that time comes, however, may not be clear.

Montgomery Hospice admissions counselors know and respect that every person or family decides to enter hospice—or not—according to their own time and readiness. Our obligation is to provide good information and to trust a family’s loving concerns.

### **Cultural and Religious Integrity**

Some Jewish patients and families may be highly sensitive to the presence of non-Jewish clergy or to conversations about religion. The Jewish community tends to be wary of evangelical efforts because of its historical experience. Throughout centuries of European history, Jewish communities often experienced religious persecution, violence and the pressure of forced conversions.

Fortunately, most Jewish families appreciate the presence of Montgomery Hospice chaplains. Their role is to support relationships with local congregations and rabbis, not to compete. For people who are not affiliated, our chaplains provide support according to the orientations of each patient and family. Sometimes this entails “heart to heart” friendly visits, not religious at all. Sometimes families request a visit from a Montgomery Hospice rabbi. In every case, our chaplains—who come from a variety of backgrounds—take their cues from patients and families whose varied needs we work hard to serve.

### **Jewish Views of Afterlife**

Do Jews believe in heaven? It depends on whom you ask. But the simplest answer is yes—in many ways. Ancient Biblical tradition views heaven in the sacred burial places of the ancestors, similar to some Native American beliefs.

Later tradition relocated heaven to the sky, as a Paradise or Garden of Eden. The soul either ascended to its heavenly reward immediately or after a period of repentance (up to a year).

In medieval times, mystical Kabbalistic tradition affirmed reincarnation of souls and past lives. So we see that regarding heaven, Judaism is pragmatic—there is no one universally accepted dogma, since no one knows for sure what comes next. There is, however, a general faith that a compassionate God will surely reward a person who lives a good life.

### **Eternal Life Beyond Heaven**

Many modern Jews do not believe in a supernatural heavenly place. But along with more traditional Jews, they do affirm eternal life in two other ways—in memory and legacy. Whenever we remember someone or invoke their memory, our loved one attains a kind of immortality. Remembrance of loved ones is an important value in Jewish family life. Jewish tradition prescribes a prayer of remembrance (*Kaddish*) to be recited every year.

Legacy is also seen as a kind of eternal life. Jewish tradition holds that the influence of loved ones during their lifetime leaves an indelible mark in our universe. Through legacy their presence endures.

The Montgomery Hospice counseling staff respects the importance of memory in healthy bereavement. Also, our counselors recognize the comforting power of life review. Reflecting on life and legacy provides “this-worldly” possibilities that life can transcend death.

These are just a few of the many ways that Montgomery Hospice works to be responsive to the unique cultural needs of the Jewish community. We view our county’s cultural diversity not as a challenge to overcome, but as a blessing to embrace.