

A Jewish Response to Pet Loss

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A person reading the title of this article may ask the legitimate questions, “Why is it necessary for a rabbi (or anyone else, for that matter) to concern himself/herself with the subject of pet loss, and why does there need to be a uniquely Jewish response to it?” As a practicing veterinarian, I serve literally at the front lines - telling people that their pet has a serious illness and will die soon, performing euthanasia of pets, and counseling clients both before and after they have lost their pet. For people who are sincerely attached to their pets, the loss of a beloved animal is a traumatic and difficult event. It is made more difficult by the fact that our culture has no generally accepted rituals for dealing with pet loss. Judaism especially has well-defined rituals and traditions for what to do when a person dies, but when a pet dies - nothing.

Pets fill a variety of needs in people’s lives. The older couple whose children have grown up and left home may delight in a pet that is always dependent on them. The teenager, subject to peer pressure and parental strictures, may find that a pet is the only nonjudgmental companion who doesn’t care about his/her haircut, lifestyle, or academic performance. For an elderly man or woman living alone, a pet may truly act as a surrogate family member, providing companionship and diversion. Children enjoy pets as playmates and friends. Often the death of a pet is a child’s first experience with loss; how the loss is handled and what solace religion offers can affect the child’s future outlook. In some cases, a pet is a living link to a deceased spouse, parent, or child. When a pet dies, a relationship is terminated, and the person grieves. The extent and nature of the grief is closely related to the role that the pet has played in that person’s life¹.

But this grief is not always well understood. In our culture, there is a highly ambiguous attitude towards animals. There are approximately 58.2 million pet-owning households in this country, as of a 1996 survey.² For indulgent pet owners exist the “pet boutiques” whose aisles are filled with premium pet foods and expensive pet toys. On the other hand are the 10 million dogs and cats who are euthanized each year for lack of homes. Pets can be pampered family members or throwaways; when the two attitudes clash, misunderstandings may arise. The person who is sincerely grieving a lost animal companion will not be comforted by the rabbi who tells him, “Oh, you can always get another dog.”

There is unquestionably a need for rituals to help people through their grief when a pet dies. In the fall of 1997 *Reform Judaism* magazine published a short letter in which I mentioned I had composed a pet loss ritual written from a Jewish perspective. I received dozens of inquiries and requests from all over the country, for copies of the ritual. A number of people who wrote me explained that “My rabbi just didn’t understand why I felt so bad,” or “I felt that my religion had nothing to offer me.” I have been told of rabbinic responses ranging from total indifference towards the congregant’s genuine grief to a complete funeral service for a French poodle, including El moleh rakhaim and Kaddish; both extremes seem equally inappropriate.

What guidance does the Tanakh have to offer us? Our Bible mandates compassion to animals in several well-known passages (beasts of burden rest on Shabbat as we do³, an ox on the threshing floor may not be muzzled⁴, and unlike species may not be yoked together⁵). However, the relationship of people to their pets is not explored. This is not entirely surprising. Possession of pets implies disposable income and appropriate cultural attitudes. We must

remember that the ancient Egyptians worshipped dog- and jackal-headed gods, and deified cats⁶. Ancient Assyrians and Romans used mastiffs in wars⁷. Such associations may have caused negative attitudes towards ownership of dogs and cats among ancient Jews. References to dogs in the Bible are mostly derogatory; cats are not mentioned at all.

However, pets today do play an important role in the lives of millions of families. Advances in modern veterinary care have also increased the lifespan of pets, so that 14 -year old dogs and 16- year old cats are not uncommon. When the companion of so many years is lost, a bond is broken, and the grief of the owner is very real. Furthermore, pet owners may be faced with the very difficult decision of euthanizing an ill animal, which can lead to unresolved feelings of guilt and uncertainty⁸. Judaism has rituals associated with many other life changes - we should be able to provide comfort to grieving pet owners in a manner consistent with our traditions.

To this end, I composed the following brief ritual that can be used at a memorial or burial service of a pet. It was written with the intent of providing closure and solace to a pet owner from a Jewish perspective.

Ritual on the Loss of a Pet

Leader or another person reads Gen. 1:20-25:

God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And God saw that this was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

God said, "Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind." And it was so. God made wild beasts of every kind, and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good.*

Leader: The fish, birds, reptiles, and animals were on the earth before human beings were. When we came, we learned to take care of them. We took care of _____ and enjoyed his/her companionship. Today we gather to mourn the passing of _____, beloved pet of the _____ family. In his/her own way, he/she was a very special creature. We feel sadness and loss that he/she is no longer here with us, and in this time seek our comfort from the Source of life. Barukh ata Adonai, borei et ha-kol. Blessed is God, Creator of all.

All read together: (from Ps. 36)

Lord, your faithfulness reaches to heaven
Your steadfastness to the sky
Your beneficence is like the high mountains;
Your justice like the great deep.
Man and beast you deliver, Oh Lord.*

Leader: Source of life, we praise you each day for your compassion that encompasses the earth and all its creatures. We give you thanks for the gift of life that we shared with _____. Let us now remember him/her as he/she lived and brought joy to us. (Leader invites those present to share memories of the deceased pet).

Leader: Let us now take a few moments for us to think about what _____, and indeed all other special animals, mean to each of us.

(Silent meditation)

Leader: For what our pets have done for us, let us thank the Source of all life. And let the remembrance of _____ inspire us to help other of God's creatures. We are sending a donation to (an animal-related charity) in his/her name. We do this as honor to _____'s memory, and as part of our responsibility to take care of the creatures entrusted to us.

Leader: We praise You, Lord our God, who has blessed us with the companionship of pet animals. In Your wisdom, you gave us the life of _____ to share with our own. This gift You bestowed has given us love and delight in years past. In Your mercy be with us as we mourn his/her passing. Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, ha-m'rahaim al b'riotav. Blessed is the Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has mercy upon His creatures. And let us say Amen.

(All read together)

The Lord is a haven for oppressed
A haven in times of trouble
In times of trouble I call you
For you will answer me.
It is you who lights my lamp
The Lord my God lights up my darkness.
Look to the Lord.
Be strong and of good courage.
Look to the Lord! *

*JPS translation

1. M. Stern, "Psychological Elements of Attachment to Pets and Responses to Pet Loss" *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* Vol. 209, No. 10 1996, p.1707
2. Center for Information Management, *U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook* (American Veterinary Medical Association, Illinois 1997)
3. Exod. 20:10, 23:12, Deut 5:14
4. Deut. 25:9
5. Deut. 22:10
6. E. J. Schochet, *Animal Life in Jewish Tradition* (Ktav Publishing House, New York 1984) p. 23
7. J. McLoughlin , *The Canine Clan* (Viking Press, New York 1983) p. 108
8. H.A. Nieburg and A. Fischer *Pet Loss: A thoughtful guide for adults and Children* (Harper and Row, New York, 1982) p. 55

Suggestions For Further Reading

A. M. Beck and A. H. Katcher, *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York 1983)

R. Kalechofsky, ed., *Judaism and Animal Rights: Classical and Contemporary Responses* (Micah Publications, Marblehead MA 1992)

A.H. Katcher and A. M. Beck, eds., *New Perspectives on Our Lives with Companion Animals* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia PA 1983)

W.J. Kay et al, eds., *Euthanasia of the Companion Animal* (The Charles Press, Philadelphia 1988)

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G.Kowalski, *Good-bye, Friend* (Stillpoint Publishing, Walpole, N.H. 1997)

L. Lagoni et al, *The Human-Animal Bond and Grief* (W.B. Saunders, Philadelphia 1994)

J. Quackenbush and D. Graveline, *When Your Pet Dies* (Pocket Books, New York, N.Y. 1985)