

When a Beloved Pet Dies

By Rabbi Janet Offel

The death of a beloved pet is a traumatic experience and it is important to find an appropriate and meaningful way to mark the loss. Our tradition does not offer an ancient ritual for this because it is only in contemporary times that humans have formed the type of close emotional attachment to our pets that we find natural. For most of history, domesticated animals were used for work or consumption, and were not understood to be the companions and, indeed, members of the family that they are considered today. Yet we can turn to our Jewish tradition for support in this time of loss and grief. Our tradition honors all life as we are reminded in Psalm 145, recited in the daily liturgy: “God’s mercy is upon all creation.”

As Rabbi Shoshama Wiener notes, “Participating in rituals and acts of tzedakah are Jewish ways of finding comfort.” In addition to participating in a ritual to mark the loss of your pet, consider making a donation in memory of your pet to an animal related charity. In this way, the memory of your pet can continue to be a blessing, and bring blessing, in this world.

A word of caution. Although it is entirely appropriate and I would suggest important to create a ritual for the loss of a pet, it is not appropriate to incorporate our traditional mourning/memorial liturgy (i.e. Eil male rachamim and Kaddish) for this purpose. Although we love and adore our pets and they are significant members of our families, they are not human. It is important that we remain cognizant of the boundaries that do exist as a part of the natural world--raising up and honoring our creature companions without debasing the responsibilities, benefits and privileges that come with being human.

Ritual on the Loss of a Beloved Pet

(Adapted from “Ritual on the Loss of a Pet” by Ruth E. Chodrow, CCAR Journal, Fall 1998)

Adonai, Your faithfulness
reaches to heaven;
Your steadfastness to the sky;
Your beneficence is like
the high mountains;
Your justice like the great deep;
humanity and beast
You deliver, Adonai.
(Psalm 36:6-7)

יְהוָה בְּהַשְׁמִים חֶסֶדְךָ אֱמוּנָתְךָ
עַד-שְׁחָקִים: צְדָקָתְךָ כְּהַרְרֵי-אֵל
מִשְׁפָּטְךָ תְּהוּם רַבָּה אָדָם וּבְהֵמָה
תוֹשִׁיעַ יְהוָה:

Source of Life, we praise you each day for the 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.

(Those present are invited to share memories of the deceased pet.)

(After everyone has shared their remarks, take a moment of silence followed by reading the appropriate text from the following two choices):

For fish, birds and reptiles:

In the Torah we are reminded that on the fifth day, “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” (Genesis 1:20-21).

For dogs, cats, horses, hamsters, rabbits, etc:

In the Torah we are reminded that at the beginning of the sixth 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” (Genesis 1: 24-25).

(Continue below:)

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 have gathered to mourn the death of our beloved pet. In his/her own way, he/she was a very special creature. We feel grief, sadness and loss that he/she is no longer here with us, and in this time seek our comfort from the Source of Life.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, בּוֹרֵא אֶת הַכֹּל

Baruch ata Adonai, bore et ha-kol.

Blessed are You Adonai, Creator of all.

(The following paragraph is optional):

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

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who has blessed us with the companionship of _____. In Your wisdom, this gift has given us love and delight. In Your mercy, be with us as we mourn his/her death.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמְּרַחֵם עַל בְּרִיּוֹתָיו

Baruch ata Adonai, Elohenu melekh ha-olam, ha-merahem 'al b'riotav.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has mercy upon Your creatures.

And let us say: Amen.

לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם

Lech l'shalom

May our beloved _____ go in peace, and come to his/her eternal home in peace.

Sources:

The Book of Jewish Sacred Practices: CLAL's Guide to Everyday & Holiday Rituals & Blessings, Ed.'s Rabbi Irwin Kula and Vanessa L. Ochs, Jewish Lights Publishing:Woodstock, 2001.

"A Jewish Response to Pet Loss," Ruth E. Chodrow, CCAR Journal, Fall 1998, pgs. 23-27.

"Responsa: Should a Jewish way of grieving for animal companions be created?" Soshama Wiener, Moment Magazine, October 1993, pgs 24-25, 85.