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**Herman Wouk, Legendary Author who Brought Judaism Into the Mainstream, Dies at 103**

**By Rachel Gordan**



**Herman Wouk in 1975 (Alex Gotfryd/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)**

BOSTON ([JTA](http://jta.org/)) — Herman Wouk, the bestselling Orthodox Jewish author whose literary career spanned nearly seven decades and who helped usher Judaism into the American mainstream, died Friday at the age of 103.

His agent confirmed the news to [The Associated Press](https://www.apnews.com/1ee28153a1e54f52a516352171c7f41d).

Wouk was the author of two dozen novels and works of nonfiction, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning “The Caine Mutiny” from 1951, which was a fixture on best-seller lists for two years, and the best-selling “Marjorie Morningstar” from 1955. Both books were later adapted for the screen.

His novels “The Winds of War” and “War and Remembrance” both became successful television miniseries. By the mid-1950s, Wouk’s popular and financial success as an American Jewish novelist was unmatched.

Even more unusual for a writer of Wouk’s celebrity was his Orthodox observance and treatment of Jewish religious practice in his writing. Wouk embodied the new postwar possibilities for American Jews and his writing was both cause and effect of the normalization of Judaism within the larger American Judeo-Christian tradition.

When he appeared on the [cover](http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,893076-1,00.html) of Time in 1955, the magazine described Wouk’s blend of worldly success and Jewish religious observance as paradoxical.

“He is a devout Orthodox Jew who had achieved worldly success in worldly-wise Manhattan while adhering to dietary prohibitions and traditional rituals which many of his fellow Jews find embarrassing,” the article said.

At the time, Wouk’s fame seemed like an incredible feat for an Orthodox Jew. Unlike other Jewish novelists, who had focused on Jewish immigrant culture and tended to portray religious Judaism as foreign and exotic, Wouk made Jewish religious observance appear mainstream in his books. Scenes of a Passover seder and a bar mitzvah service became scenes of middle-class American life in “Marjorie Morningstar.”

None of this escaped criticism. With the exception of “The Caine Mutiny,” reviews of Wouk’s works were [typically mixed](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/05/herman-wouk-at-100-one-of-the-greatest-american-war-novelists/393203/). Both Jewish and mainstream reviewers expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of his writing, his conservative outlook on politics and sex, and his treatment of Judaism. Some rabbis even criticized Wouk for mocking Jewish observance — though in the coming decade, Philip Roth’s fiction would radically change their perspective on what counted as literary denigration of Judaism.

Meanwhile, fellow Jewish novelists like Roth, Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer viewed Wouk as conforming to middle-class American values that prioritized marriage, family, religion and service to country. Not only did he stay married to the same woman for more than six decades, but Wouk expressed pride in his military service, for which he received a U.S. Navy Lone Sailor Award. Wouk in turn saw the others as bowing to fashionable literary trends of rebellion and shocking readers.

From his debut novel, “Aurora Dawn,” in 1947, to his last book, “Sailor and Fiddler: Reflections of a 100-Year-Old Author” — published in 2015 when he had reached a century — Wouk wove themes central to the American Jewish experience throughout his work. Even “The Caine Mutiny,” a less Jewish novel than later works, included Lt. Barney Greenwald, who gives a moving speech in defense of a lieutenant who helped keep Greenwald’s Jewish mother from being “melted down into a bar of soap” by the Nazis.

Set in the 1930s and ’40s, Wouk’s fourth book, “Marjorie Morningstar,” heralded a new era for American Jews. The novel followed the journey of a New York Jewish protagonist no different from any other bright and beautiful young woman of the era, an image further cemented by Natalie Wood’s portrayal of Marjorie in the 1958 film version.

Not since the 1927 film “The Jazz Singer,” starring Al Jolson, had a movie shown Jewish religious scenes. But unlike “The Jazz Singer,” Marjorie and her religion were not exoticized — Jewishness was portrayed as middle class and American. With Marjorie, Wouk had succeeded in making a story about Jews into an American story.

Marjorie also marked a turning point in his writing career. With confidence that he had readers who would follow him to less popular subjects, Wouk’s fourth book, his first work of nonfiction, took on the subject of Orthodox Judaism. Published in 1959, “This Is My G-d” was a primer about the Jewish religion intended for both Jewish and non-Jewish readers.

As other American celebrities would do, Wouk used his fame to draw attention to his little-understood religion. Serialized in the Los Angeles Times, “This Is My God” introduced readers to such Jewish particulars as the laws of kashrut and family purity and the holidays of Sukkot and Shavuot. The book showed, through anecdotes from Wouk’s glamorous Manhattan life, that it was possible to be both a modern American and Orthodox.

At a time when Jews still encountered quotas at universities and discrimination in hiring and housing, Wouk’s example provided inspiration. “This Is My G-d” became a popular bar mitzvah and confirmation gift for young Jews of all movements.

Born in the Bronx borough of New York City on May 27, 1915, Wouk was the second of three children of Esther and Abraham Wouk, both immigrants from Belarus. Abraham Wouk began work as a laundry laborer and found financial success in the laundry business. Herman spent his early years in the Bronx receiving basic Hebrew training from his grandfather. His childhood included the teasing and bullying that was common for bookish boys in rough neighborhoods.

From an early age, Wouk found a haven in reading, family and Judaism. After graduating from the public Townsend Harris High School, Wouk entered Columbia University, where he served as editor of its humor magazine. He also took courses at Yeshiva University.

Upon graduating, Wouk briefly abandoned his religious lifestyle when he became a radio dramatist, writing for the comedian Fred Allen. Although the work was lucrative, Wouk felt a void in a life without Jewish learning and religion, and he eventually returned to his previous level of observance.

In the coming years he would reside in the Virgin Islands, New York’s Fire Island, Washington, D.C., Manhattan and Palm Springs, California — and in all those locales he was involved in setting up Jewish study and prayer groups.

Following Pearl Harbor, Wouk joined the Navy and served in the Pacific, where he was an officer aboard two destroyers, participated in eight invasions and won several battle stars. Wouk also started to write “Aurora Dawn” while aboard ship. After Wouk sent part of a draft to one of his former Columbia professors, the professor connected Wouk with an editor, and a contract followed.

While his ship was being repaired in California, Wouk met Betty Sarah Brown, a graduate of the University of Southern California and a civilian Navy employee. After her conversion to Judaism, the couple married in 1945 and had three sons. Betty, who died in 2011, would eventually become her husband’s literary agent.

Wouk is survived by two sons, Nathaniel and Joseph, and three grandchildren. His oldest son, Abraham, died in a 1951 swimming pool accident.

(Rachel Gordan is an assistant professor of religion and Jewish Studies at the University of Florida, where she is the Shorstein fellow in American Jewish culture.)

*Reprinted from the May 17, 2019 dispatch of the JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency)*

**Rav Avigdor Miller**

**On Yartzeit Candles**



**QUESTION:**  What's the benefit of lighting a candle for a person's *yartzeit*?

**ANSWER:** When someone is *nifter* and candles are lit for that person, it is a *kavod* for the *meis*. And that's because a candle is a beautiful symbol. A flame is a beautiful thing, and even today it's hard to explain exactly how it works. The physical materials - the wick, the wax, the oil - turn into light.

That symbolizes the *neshama* that was enclosed in a *guf* and is now only *neshama*. It's now *ohr*. Like the *ohr* of the candle that has been transformed from physical materials into light, the *guf* has been transformed into *neshama*. And the *neshama* is now *ohr*, shining in *Olam* *Habah*. And when we light the candle and show that we recognize this truth, it gives *nachas* to the *neshama*.  
  
 When someone passes away, that person doesn't stop existing. The *neshama* is real and it is existing in *Olam* *Habah*. And the *neshama* can still feel and recognize these things. So when the *nifter* is honored by the family when they light a yartzeit candle, it is a *nachas* *ru'ach* for the *neshama*.

The symbol of the light that comes from the wax and the wick is an important thing. And *ohr* is a tremendous thing. Not only the sunlight. But even artificial light is such a gift! Every מוצאי שבת we make a special *bracha* on artificial *ohr*. *Borei me'orei ha'aish*. A bracha on fire, on electric light, on other lights.

It's a great blessing to have artificial light. And therefore, the light of the candle is a beautiful symbol. It's a symbol for the *neshama* that has turned from *gashmi'us* into *ruchni'us*. And the *neshama* in the next world is happy that people are lighting the candle and recognizing the truth of the Next World. It's a *nachas ru'ach* for the *neshama*.

*Reprinted from the May 2, 2019 email of Toras Avigdor (Tape #E-235 – November 2000).*

**The Shmuz on****Parshas BeHar**

**Everybody is Doing it**

**By Rabbi Bentzion Shafier**

**Founder of TheShmuz.com**



*“You shall sound a broken blast on the shofar, in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month; on the Day of Atonement you shall sound the Shofar throughout your land*.” — VaYikrah 25:9

**The Mitzvah to Blow the Shofar on Yovel**

When we are on our own land, we are commanded to keep every seventh year as the *shmittah* year, and at the completion of seven *shmittos*, to add an additional *shmittah* year — the *yovel*. During this year, all land lays fallow. Homesteads return to their original owners, and all Jewish slaves are freed.

On Yom Kippur, at the start of the *yovel* year, we have a specific commandment to publicly blow the *shofar*.

**Why We Blow the Shofar on Yovel**

The *Sefer HaChinuch* explains that the Torah commands us to blow the *shofar* on *yovel* because freeing a slave is a very difficult *mitzvah*, and the slave-owners need *chizuk*. A master who has had a slave for many years may well have become dependent upon him and find it hard to part with him. By sounding the *shofar*, we are publicly proclaiming that it is *yovel*, and all Jews will be freeing their slaves. The master will then recognize that throughout the Land of Israel, everyone is freeing his slaves, and so it will be easier for him to free his own slave.

**Why is it Easier Because Others are Doing it?**

This statement becomes difficult to understand. Why does it become easier for a slave owner to free his slave because others are doing the same? The slave owner is a businessman, not a teenager. We are dealing with a mature person, faced with a difficult test. What difference does it make to him whether this is a popular *mitzvah* or not?

The *mitzvah* is difficult because he is being asked to give up something that he has become attached to and is dependent upon. Since that’s what makes the *mitzvah* difficult, what difference does it make to him whether there are many other people doing the same or if he is the only person on the planet doing it?

**Understanding Human Nature**

The answer to this question is based on understanding human nature. Psychologists from Freud to Skinner to Maslow have been debating the inner nature of the person for decades. With ever-changing views and understandings, that which one generation accepts as gospel, the next rejects as tomfoolery. Here we get insight into the nature of man from the One Who truly knows **–** from his Maker.

That understanding is that we humans are highly social. We are affected by our environment. Our perspective on the world is affected by what those around us do. Peer pressure isn’t something that only impacts the world of the teenager. It affects everyone. “My crowd,” “my *chevra*,” and “my society” affect the way I view things. Ultimately, they help shape my value system.

The Torah is teaching us that even a mature adult faced with a difficult trial will be greatly influenced by what others are doing. If something is done by everyone, it will be much easier for him. It won’t lessen his financial loss, and it won’t ease the burden of replacing a loyal servant, but it will help him gather the fortitude to make the proper decision since everyone is doing it.

**Creating Our Own Society**

This concept has very real application in our lives. We live in times when society at large has lost its moral compass. Particularly in the United States, once a bastion of family values and morality, we now watch daily as new innovations in decadence and promiscuity pour forth. We can’t open a newspaper without being exposed to a new depth of moral decay. Ideas, concepts, and images that wouldn’t have been accepted in the most base of publications a generation ago are now commonplace in the most respected ones.

We may be tempted to assume that this doesn’t affect us. After all, we are different. We don’t buy into the culture of the times. And while we may feel self-assured and secure in our position, the reality is that we are human, so it can’t help but affect us. The question is: what can we do about it?

**The Whole World Agrees**

The Gemara often uses an expression: “*kulei alma lo pligi*” **–** “***the whole world agrees***.” To the Torah sages, their world was the whole world. If you had an opinion about an issue of *Halacha*, you were in the world. If not, you weren’t. This is illustrative of a perspective. While they were certainly aware of people outside of their sphere, they created their own world.

This may sound myopic and cloistered, but it is based on a fundamental understanding of the human. To remain pure in an impure world, we need to create our own world.

To some extent, we have done just that. We now have our own music, our own novels, and our own magazines. We have, to a degree, created our own culture. But this comes with a cost. There is no question that *The New York* *Times* has better writers than do the *Yated* and the *Hamodia*. The world of Jewish music is quite limited in its scope and development. There is much out there in the world at large that has great value, but it doesn’t come without baggage. In our times, the baggage far outweighs the advantages.

To some, this may sound like “Ghetto Judaism” **–** limiting, closed off, isolated from the world. And in truth, it is. But it’s not out of being small-minded. It stems from recognizing the extent of the problem and the nature of the human. The unfortunate reality is that we can’t just take the good and ignore the bad. If we wish to live as a holy nation in these times, we need create an oasis of purity. We need to create our own world.

*Reprinted from this week’s website on TheShmuz.com This is an excerpt from the [Shmuz on the Parsha book](https://theshmuz.com/product/shmuz-on-the-parsha-book/).*

**The Connection of the Yovel Year to Arrival of Moshiach**

**From the Talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe**

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Zt”l**



This week's portion, Behar, deals with shemita -- the commandment to allow the land of Israel to lie fallow every seventh year.

It also discusses the laws of the yovel -- jubilee--year -- when all inheritances return to their rightful owners. If you keep these mitzvot properly, G-d promises, "The land shall yield its fruit, and you shall eat your fill, and dwell in safety in it."

Interestingly, it is only after a detailed list of these laws that the Torah mentions a concern that might arise.

"And if you should say, 'What will we eat in the seventh year? Behold, we are not permitted to sow, and we cannot gather in our harvest!'" G-d promises that the sixth year's harvest will be so plentiful that it will be sufficient for three years -- the sixth, seventh, and even eighth year of the cycle.

Why isn't this question included in its logical place, with the rest of the laws of shemita?

Furthermore, the verse "What will we eat?" appears immediately after G-d has already promised that the land will yield its fruit. If so, why is the question even asked?

We must therefore conclude that the question "What will we eat?" contains a deeper significance than merely inquiring about the agricultural yield of Israel.

The question is asked by one who wishes to uncover the inner, spiritual meaning of the mitzva; it therefore appears separately, after the details of the commandment have been delineated.

In truth, the question is how G-d's blessing will be manifested, not if His promise will be fulfilled.

Will G-d cause manna to fall like in the desert, or will He perform a different miracle to sustain the Jewish people?

For in essence, the blessing of the shemita year not only transcends natural law, but utterly contradicts it! According to the laws of nature, every successive year the earth is sown serves to deplete it of its nutrients and goodness; during the sixth year of the cycle, the land would naturally be at its lowest ebb.

This, then, is precisely G-d's special blessing: Despite the fact that according to nature the earth is at its weakest point, the land of Israel will nonetheless yield bountifully.

In the spiritual sense, the six years of working the land are symbolic of the six millennia before Moshiach; the seventh year is symbolic of the Messianic era.

As we are now at the end of the sixth millennium, just prior to Moshiach's arrival, we ask the same question as that of the shemita year: How is it possible that our own spiritually- inferior generation will be able to bring the Redemption?

Once again, the answer lies in G-d's promise to the Jewish people: When we serve Him in a manner that totally transcends logic and understanding, He will surely send us the bounty of Redemption, speedily in our day.

*Reprinted from the Parashat Behar 5755/1995 edition of L’Chaim Weekly (Issue #263), a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.*

**Rabbi Berel Wein on**

**Parashat Behar**



This week's Torah reading seems to emphasize that the granting of the Torah to Moshe, and through him to Israel generally, took place at the Mountain of Sinai. Since the Torah does not deal with incidental geographic details, this emphasis regarding the mountain bears study and analysis. Mountain climbing is a sport for the hardy of spirit and the physically fit.

However most of us are perfectly content with our lives without attempting to scale cliffs. Yet, in a spiritual sense, the Torah seems to indicate that living a moral and observant Jewish lifestyle requires spiritual mountain climbing.

The Talmud teaches us that Mount Sinai was a rather modest mountain in height, as mountains go. It was chosen, so to speak, because it represented humility amongst its greater companions, such as the Alps and the Himalayas. Yet, it required effort, energy and purpose to be able to ascend it. In that respect it represents the Torah itself, which was given to Moshe on its summit.

Life is never smooth or easy – a flat plain, simple to traverse. Rather, it is always an uphill climb that many times leaves us short of breath and doubtful of hope. We all know this to be true of our physical lives and it is doubly so regarding the spiritual component of our existence.

There is a phrase in Yiddish that says: “It is hard and difficult to be a Jew.” Well, like most Yiddish aphorisms, this one is certainly accurate and telling. The only problem is that, over the long run of history, it is obvious that it is much more difficult and harmful for us not to live proper Jewish lives.

The prophets always speak of Jewish redemption as being a formidable mountain that somehow will be flattened and made into a smooth and level plain. What appears to be formidable and forbidding, almost impossible to overcome, a gigantic mountain which blocks our view of the horizon will somehow eventually be transformed and made accessible and comfortable. I think that that is a proper metaphor for Jewish life generally and for Torah life and values particularly**.**

It is a mountain to climb but once ascended it leads to smooth going and a level journey through life. The Talmud records for us that the temptations of life appear to the righteous as mountains, and that they stare in amazement at their ability to somehow overcome each obstacle. The wicked, evil temptation appears to be as thin as a single hair that can be easily dismissed.

However once engaged with that hair, one runs the danger of being inextricably shackled by it. So the Torah bids us all to be mountain climbers. We are to steel ourselves against the difficulties that living a Jewish life presents and realize that according to the effort will be the reward. There is no easy way or smooth path to a concentrated Jewish life. The example of Moshe climbing Mount Sinai remains the metaphor for all of us and for all Jewish life till eternity.

*Reprinted from this week’s website of Rabbiwein.com*

**Shemita and Mount Sinai**

**Rabbi Eli J. Mansour**



The Torah in Parashat Behar presents the laws of Shemita – the seventh, “sabbatical” year when farmers were forbidden from working their lands, and were required to allow all people to freely partake of their fields’ produce.  The opening verse of the Parasha states, “G-d spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai,” emphasizing that this Misva was told to Moshe at Sinai.

The commentators raise the question of why this point needed to be mentioned.  After all, weren’t all the Torah’s laws conveyed to Moshe at Sinai?  Why specifically in reference to Shemita did the Torah need to inform us that the command was taught at Mount Sinai?

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin (1880-1966) suggests an answer based on the Midrash’s interpretation of the verse in Tehillim (103:20), “Barechu Hashem Malachav Giboreh Koah Oseh Debaro” – “Bless Hashem, His angels, those mighty in strength who obey His word.”

The Midrash explains that this verse refers to two different groups of people.  The phrase “His angels” refers to Beneh Yisrael at the time of Matan Torah, when they declared, “Na’aseh Ve’nishma” – “We will do and we will hear.”

With this declaration, they committed themselves to a set of obligations and restrictions which they had not yet heard.  They announced their allegiance to G-d’s laws before learning what this entails, a level of commitment which is more “angelic” than human.  They rose to the level of “Malachav,” of G-d’s angels, by committing themselves unconditionally to whatever G-d commands them.

The next phrase in the verse – “those mighty in strength who obey His word” – refers to farmers who obey the laws of Shemita.  This Misva, more so than perhaps any other Misva in the Torah, requires courage.  Imagine a retailer with a store on Fifth Ave. shutting down his business for an entire year, during which time he keeps the door open with a large sign announcing, “All merchandise free for the taking.”

Without exaggeration, this is precisely what the Torah demands of farmers in Eretz Yisrael during Shemita.  They are to shut down their enterprise for a full year and allow all people to help themselves to their produce.  These farmers are “Giboreh Ko’ah,” the courageous heroes of the nation.

Rav Sorotzkin suggests that this is the connection between Shemita and Mount Sinai.  These two occasions marked the highest level of commitment to G-d.  Both at Matan Torah and during Shemita, Beneh Yisrael expressed their firmly-held belief that the highest value is observing G-d’s laws.  This belief is what led them to make the blind commitment of “Na’aseh Ve’nishma,” and what led them to leave their fields every seven years.

The law of Shemita is thus rooted in Sinai, in the firm faith displayed by Beneh Yisrael when they received the Torah and announced their willingness to obey all the Misvot regardless of the sacrifices it entails.

*Reprinted from this week’s website of the Edmund J. Safra Synagogue in Brooklyn, NY.*

**Suicide in Jewish Law**

**By [Shlomo Minkowitz](https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/23095/jewish/Minkowitz-Shlomo.htm" \o "Browse more articles by Minkowitz, Shlomo)**



***Illustration by Rifka Korf***

*This article discusses the general topic of suicide from the perspective of Jewish law, not mental health. If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, please get help; call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 and/or speak to a mental health professional. More resources can be found*[*on their website*](https://www.chabad.org/4384783)*.*

The prevalence of suicide in our society has been gradually rising.[1](javascript:doFootnote('1a4372311');) In fact, according to recent data, suicide is one of the leading causes of death among the ages of 10 and 34, second only to unintentional injury.[2](javascript:doFootnote('2a4372311');) From the perspective of *[halachah](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4165687/jewish/What-Is-Halakhah-Halachah.htm)*, some of the fundamental questions we need to answer are: What is the halachic/philosophical objection to suicide? What are the halachic ramifications of one who commits suicide? What are the halachic criteria for a death to be considered a suicide? How do we address the many instances of suicide, individual and communal, that occurred throughout our long, tragic history of persecution?

**Nature of the Halachic Prohibition**

The prohibition of suicide is based on a verse in Genesis: “And surely your blood of your souls I will demand.”[3](javascript:doFootnote('3a4372311');) The Talmud quotes [Rabbi Eliezer](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112309/jewish/Rabbi-Eliezer-Ben-Hyrkanos.htm), one of the great Tannaic sages, who interprets this verse as meaning, “And surely from your souls (‘from yourselves’) I will demand your blood (‘I will hold you liable for taking your own life’).”[4](javascript:doFootnote('4a4372311');) So we know that suicide is prohibited, but what is the rationale?

At its heart, the rationale stems from the basic concept in Jewish thought that one’s body is not his own property but a loan from G‑d; one has no autonomy over his own body or the bodies of others.[5](javascript:doFootnote('5a4372311');) Based on this concept, just as one may not murder his fellow, one is similarly forbidden from “murdering” himself. Indeed, Maimonides rules that one who commits suicide is guilty of murder and will be held accountable in the Heavenly Court.[6](javascript:doFootnote('6a4372311');)

On a more philosophical level, there are several other rationales that make suicide a distinctly reprehensible act.[7](javascript:doFootnote('7a4372311');)

To begin with, one who commits suicide has by definition committed a sin without any option for repentance. Furthermore, one’s death, in and of itself, can achieve atonement, in some instances achieving atonement when Yom Kippur cannot.[8](javascript:doFootnote('8a4372311');) By killing oneself, one’s death becomes a sinful act[9](javascript:doFootnote('9a4372311');) rather than an atonement, and in a sense, one has “squandered” this opportunity.

In addition, the act of suicide implies that one is declaring autonomy and “playing G‑d,” so to speak, and is, therefore, an implicit rejection of G‑d’s sovereignty. The act of suicide also intimates that one is denying that the soul in fact lives on and will face judgment before the Heavenly court, thereby implicitly repudiating the immortality of the soul.

**Halachic Ramifications**

Given that suicide is considered such a reprehensible act, what are the halachic ramifications for one who commits suicide? (Please note, we are referring to one who has unequivocally committed suicide; as we’ll see later, there are a number of criteria that must be met in order to characterize one as such.)

Maimonides writes that when one commits suicide, we withhold all traditional rites and rituals from him, such as mourning him or eulogizing him, but any rite or ritual that is performed as an honor for the living is not withheld*.*[10](javascript:doFootnote('10a4372311');) Maimonides further implies that one who commits suicide has no share in the World to Come.[11](javascript:doFootnote('11a4372311');)

**Burial in a Jewish Cemetery**

With respect to burial, the Jewish community does nevertheless ensure that the suicide receives a burial.[12](javascript:doFootnote('12a4372311');) However, the question often arises as to whether the suicide victim can be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The classic halachic works do not mention this restriction when discussing the laws of suicide.[13](javascript:doFootnote('13a4372311');)

However, there is a more general ruling mentioned in the Talmud that one does not bury a “wicked” person near a “righteous” person.[14](javascript:doFootnote('14a4372311');) There are halachic experts who have applied this general ruling to suicides, stating that insofar as this person’s death itself was an act of sin, we have no choice but to consider him wicked and to apply this restriction.[15](javascript:doFootnote('15a4372311');) It should be noted, though, that applying this restriction does not preclude a suicide from being buried in the Jewish cemetery, it just mandates that he be buried at a distance from others.[16](javascript:doFootnote('16a4372311');)

**Kaddish for Suicide**

With respect to saying the Kaddish prayer, Rabbi Moshe Sofer, a great 18th-century European rabbi and halachic authority known as the Chatam Sofer, writes that insofar as the Kaddish prayer elevates the soul of the departed, why would we not say it for one who commits suicide? In his words, “Because he did not behave as a Jew, should we not save him from the abyss? If he fell, should we not raise him back up?”[17](javascript:doFootnote('17a4372311');) Rabbi Sofer further writes that even though there is the opinion that we do not mourn for a suicide, if the lack of mourning will result in unbearable shame for the family, then the family may go through the traditional rites of mourning to be spared the embarrassment.[18](javascript:doFootnote('18a4372311');)

As we’ll soon see, given the strict definition of suicide in *halachah*, it is quite rare for these harsh ramifications to be implemented.

**Halachic Definition of Suicide**

How does *halachah* define a suicide? Maimonides writes that “one who [explicitly] states that he is ascending to the roof [to jump], and then is seen immediately ascending to the roof in anger and falling to his death, is assumed to have committed suicide.”[19](javascript:doFootnote('19a4372311');) A similar phraseology is used in the Code of Jewish Law.[20](javascript:doFootnote('20a4372311');)

Rabbi Yechiel Epstein, one of the renowned halachic experts (*poskim)* of the 19th century, elaborates on this definition of suicide in his classic work *Aruch HaShulchan*. Rabbi Epstein writes that essentially only one who kills himself while being of clear and sound mind, free from internal or external coercion, is considered to have committed suicide. If, however, it’s possible that there is another factor at play, such as extremes of fear, pain, distress or mental illness, then it’s almost as though this person were “coerced” into suicide, and it’s not considered a suicide of clear and sound mind. This does not mean that misery is a valid excuse for suicide, only that, post facto, we do not treat the deceased as a suicide.[21](javascript:doFootnote('21a4372311');)

Additional examples of extenuating circumstances in which the person is considered “coerced” to commit suicide, as it were, are the fear that he would otherwise be tempted to sin[22](javascript:doFootnote('22a4372311');) or a misguided attempt to achieve atonement.[23](javascript:doFootnote('23a4372311');)

What arises from the writings of Rabbi Epstein and others is that essentially we latch onto any rationale we can to avoid considering it a deliberate suicide in the *halachic* sense. In other words, it is not considered a true *halachic* suicide as far as mourning and burial are concerned unless there is no other theoretical alternative.

Based on the circumstances of the death, there are three basic types of rationales we can attempt to apply when considering whether it was, in fact, a suicide:

1) Maybe this person didn’t, in fact, kill himself.[24](javascript:doFootnote('24a4372311');)

2) We know for sure that this person killed himself, but there was some time lag between his actions and his death, and therefore it’s possible he regretted his actions before he died.[25](javascript:doFootnote('25a4372311');)

3) We know for sure that this person killed himself with immediacy; however, it’s possible there was some compelling factor, such as extreme distress or a misconception, “coercing” him to commit suicide.[26](javascript:doFootnote('26a4372311');) [27](javascript:doFootnote('27a4372311');)

Given the extremely limited halachic definition of suicide, it is rare to find a situation where we cannot apply some rationale or another to preclude it from being considered a suicide, and it is therefore rare to actually apply the halachic ramifications discussed above. (Of course, the above discussion in no way legitimizes or minimizes the fact that one may not take his own life. Rather, we are determining how the action is to be perceived after the fact.)

**Precedents in Jewish History**

Armed with these qualifying factors, we can better explore and understand the multiple tragic accounts of suicide throughout our long history.

The only explicit suicide mentioned in the Bible is that of the great [King Saul](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/463971/jewish/Saul-First-King-of-Israel.htm), the first Jewish king. While in battle with the Philistines and realizing that capture was imminent, King Saul asks his arms-bearer to kill him. When the arms-bearer refuses, King Saul grasps his sword and falls on it, [killing himself](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/463972/jewish/Death-of-King-Saul.htm).[28](javascript:doFootnote('28a4372311');) According to many opinions, his behavior is not condemned,[29](javascript:doFootnote('29a4372311');) and several explanations are given as to why this is not considered a suicide. According to one explanation, King Saul feared that if he were captured, the ensuing attempt to liberate him would come at the cost of many lives.[30](javascript:doFootnote('30a4372311');)

There are multiple other stories in the Talmud of suicide; of those that are not condemned, one of the extreme extenuating circumstances of either internal or external coercion can often be applied. One example is the famous story of [Chana and her seven sons](https://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/429014/jewish/Chanah-and-Her-Seven-Sons.htm), which takes place during the Greek persecution during the Second Temple period.[31](javascript:doFootnote('31a4372311');) After her sons are killed one after another when they refuse to abandon Torah, we are told that she ascends to the roof and throws herself to her death. There, too, the mental distress caused by the enormity of her grief would exclude this from being considered a suicide in the halachic sense.[32](javascript:doFootnote('32a4372311');) Another example is the tragic saga of hundreds of Jewish children who are being taken captive to Rome for purposes of prostitution. All commit suicide en route.[33](javascript:doFootnote('33a4372311');)The early Talmudic commentators suggest that their suicide was driven by their fear that they would be tortured into sinning,[34](javascript:doFootnote('34a4372311');) and therefore it was not considered a suicide.

From a different angle, there is the interesting anecdote related about a known sinner in the Second Temple period who has a change of heart. To gain atonement for his past ways, he creates an elaborate scheme to punish himself with all four methods of capital punishment simultaneously[35](javascript:doFootnote('35a4372311');); upon his death, his actions are implicitly condoned.[36](javascript:doFootnote('36a4372311');) What he did was forbidden. However, as discussed above, since his actions were based on the misguided attempt to achieve atonement, this, too, would not be considered a post-facto suicide in the halachic sense.[37](javascript:doFootnote('37a4372311');)

During the tragic years of the Crusades, Jews were often forced to convert to Christianity under threat of torture or death. Many Jews chose to take their own lives rather than face the prospect of succumbing and undergoing baptism; indeed, there were even those who preemptively killed their loved ones as well to prevent this outcome. With respect to those that took their own lives in this setting, one of the most prominent Talmudists from that era, [Rabbenu Yakov ben Meir Tam,](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/111838/jewish/Rabbeinu-Tam.htm" \o "Rabbeinu Tam)[known as Rabbeinu Tam](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/111838/jewish/Rabbeinu-Tam.htm), ruled that if one suspects that he will be tortured into apostasy, then it may indeed be a mitzvah to take one’s life.[38](javascript:doFootnote('38a4372311');) [39](javascript:doFootnote('39a4372311');)

**Conclusion**

In summary, then, we have seen how *halachah* considers suicide to be a most serious and reprehensible act, and how there are several serious *halachic* ramifications for one who does commit suicide.

On the other hand, after the fact, it is rare for one who kills himself to truly be considered a suicide due to the extensive factors discussed above, and it is therefore rare that those ramifications are carried out.

As above, suicide is never the right choice and categorically forbidden by Jewish law. If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, please get help; call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 and/or speak to a mental health professional.

May G‑d bless us all with complete physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be discouraged, for I am your G‑d. I will encourage you, I will also help you, and I will support you with my righteous hand.”[40](javascript:doFootnote('40a4372311');)

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**FOOTNOTES**

[1.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef1a4372311) “Suicide Statistics,” American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/, (May 9, 2019).

[2.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef2a4372311) “Ten Leading Causes of Death and Injury,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/LeadingCauses.html, (May 9, 2019).

[3.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef3a4372311) [Genesis 9:5](https://www.chabad.org/8173#v5).

[4.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef4a4372311) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Kamma 91b.

[5.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef5a4372311) Cited in Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Rotzeiach Ushemirat Nefesh 1:4. See Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah, part 5, siman 59, where he discusses this concept with application to contemporary medical ethics. This concept is the basis for the law that one is forbidden to give his friend permission to strike him, embarrass him, or otherwise pain him (cited in the Code of Jewish Law by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Hilchot Rotzeiach Ushemirat Nefesh, siman 4).

[6.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef6a4372311) Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Rotzeiach Ushemirat Nefesh 2:2.

[7.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef7a4372311) The rationales in the next two paragraphs are enumerated by Rabbi Tucazinsky in his comprehensive work on the laws of death and mourning titled “Gesher Hachaim,” part 1, ch. 25.

[8.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef8a4372311) Mishnah, Yoma 8:8, see also Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:4, where this is based on the verse in [Isaiah 22:14](https://www.chabad.org/15953#v14).

[9.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef9a4372311) As discussed previously, suicide is akin to murder. This idea, that an act of atonement cannot atone if the act itself was turned into a sin, parallels a more general concept in Jewish thought that “the prosecutor cannot also become the defender.” The Rebbe suggests a similar application of this concept with respect to Yom Kippur (namely, that even according to the opinion that Yom Kippur can atone without repentance, it cannot atone for the breaking of Yom Kippur laws themselves, see Likkutei Sichot vol 27 Acharei-Kedoshim)..

[10.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef10a4372311) Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel 1:11. However, see Lechem Mishneh ad loc., who quotes the Ramban, who maintains that mourning is in fact done for the benefit of those left behind and therefore should not be withheld. See comments by the Chatam Sofer further in the article.

[11.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef11a4372311) In Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Rotzeiach Ushemirat Nefesh 2:2, Maimonides writes that killing oneself is akin to committing murder. Elsewhere in Mishneh Torah (Hilchot Teshuvah 3:6), Maimonides writes that one who commits murder has no share in the World to Come.

[12.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef12a4372311) See Shaalot Uteshuvot HaRashba, Responsa 743, among many others.

[13.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef13a4372311) For example, in Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah, siman 345, where all the laws of the suicide are discussed, this is not mentioned. It is likewise not mentioned in Maimonides in the laws of suicide, Hilchot Avel 1:11.

[14.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef14a4372311) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 47a.

[15.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef15a4372311) See Gilyon Maharsha to Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah 345:4. (This Maharsha refers to Rabbi Shlomo Eiger, son of the renowned Rabbi Akiva Eiger, not to be confused to Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, the famous commentator on the Talmud.)

[16.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef16a4372311) Gilyon Maharsha, ibid., states that there should be at least 8 cubits (roughly 12 feet) separating his grave from the others.

[17.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef17a4372311) Chatam Sofer, Even Ha’ezer 69. A similar opinion is brought by the Sdei Chemed, Hilchot Aveilut 120.

[18.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef18a4372311) Chatam Sofer, Yoreh De’ah 326. See footnote 10 above.

[19.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef19a4372311) Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel 1:11.

[20.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef20a4372311) Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah 345:2.

[21.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef21a4372311) Aruch Hashulchan, Yoreh De’ah 345:5. There are several earlier sources that provide a basis for his opinion, for example the anecdote of the washerman related in Tractate Ketubot 103b, as per the explanation of the Yaavetz ad loc. See footnote 27 for discussion of the degree of underlying distress which must be present.

[22.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef22a4372311) See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 40a, where it is referring to a more severe sin involving illicit relationships.

[23.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef23a4372311) See Shevut Yaakov 2:111.

[24.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef24a4372311) Chatam Sofer, Yoreh De’ah 326.

[25.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef25a4372311) See Gilyon Maharsha to Yoreh De’ah 345.

[26.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef26a4372311) See Aruch HaShulchan Yoreh De’ah 345:5.

[27.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef27a4372311) In order for the suicide to be considered “coerced,” there has to be a relatively extreme degree of distress, pain, fear, etc. If one were to posit that *any*degree of distress qualifies the suicide as being “coerced,” then there would be no halachic entity of suicide, given that anyone who commits suicide presumably has some degree of distress. Of interest, there is a work which was produced in the 18th century titled “Besamim Rosh,” initially attributed to the great 13th century sage known as [the Rosh](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/210832/jewish/The-Rosh.htm), which suggests exactly this position—that *any*degree of distress whatsoever ought to qualify the suicide as “coerced.” Besides for the fundamental problem with such an approach (that suicide in *halachah* would lose all meaning), most scholars now consider the Besamim Rosh to be in fact penned by a more contemporary scholar with his own agenda and intentionally misattributed to the great Rosh as a means of gaining legitimacy.

[28.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef28a4372311) [I Samuel 31:1](https://www.chabad.org/15860#v1)-5.

[29.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef29a4372311)nSee Radak to [I Samuel 31:5](https://www.chabad.org/15860#v5), Radvaz to Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel 1:11, and many others.

[30.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef30a4372311) Yam Shel Shlomo to Bava Kama, 8:59; there it elaborates that King Saul knew that his death was imminent regardless. Another reason given there is that it was not considered a suicide because he killed himself to prevent the widespread desecration of G‑d’s name that would result if the great King Saul was captured. According to others, King Saul was simply terrified of the pending torture should he be captured, and therefore his suicide was “coerced” by fear.

[31.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef31a4372311) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin 57b.

[32.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef32a4372311) In the version of this story quoted in Midrash Eichah Rabbah 1:50, the text states clearly that “that woman became insane, fell from the roof and died.”

[33.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef33a4372311) Babylonian Talmud, Ibid.

[34.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef34a4372311) Tosafot “*koftzu”* ad loc.

[35.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef35a4372311) There were four possible methods of capital punishment meted out by the Jewish courts: stoning, burning, decapitation, strangulation. This man erected a creative contraption which would allow him to kill himself with all four methods simultaneously.

[36.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef36a4372311) Midrash [Tehillim 11:7](https://www.chabad.org/16232" \l "v7).

[37.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef37a4372311) See footnote 23.

[38.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef38a4372311) Rabbeinu Tam, quoted in Tosafot “*Ve’al”* to Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zarah 18a. With respect to those that preemptively took others lives, see Daat Zekeinim to [Genesis 9:5](https://www.chabad.org/8173#v5), where this behavior appears to be strongly condemned, based on a chilling anecdote. However, the Beit Yosef writes (Tur Yoreh Deah 157) that there are conflicting opinions regarding its permissibility.

[39.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm" \l "footnoteRef39a4372311) As alluded to in the article, there are times when a Jew may choose to be killed, depending on the circumstances, and it may in fact be a mitzvah to do so. The extent of this permit and situations in which it is lauded are beyond the scope of this article. See [Is a Jew Required to Die Rather than Transgress a Torah Command?](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/581438/jewish/Is-a-Jew-required-to-die-rather-than-disobey-a-Torah-command.htm) [40.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4372311/jewish/Suicide-in-Jewish-Law.htm#footnoteRef40a4372311)

[Isaiah 41:10](https://www.chabad.org/15972#v10).

[](https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword.aspx?kid=23095)

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