

**Death Wings Project Jewish Edition**  
**Shomer Collective Fellow - Betzy Lynch**

**Inspiration:**

In Bess Welden's play, *Death Wings*, the central character, Grand, shows us her invented end-of-life ritual and creative practice. When someone is dying, she asks them to tell her the story of their life in five sentences. She then collects paper, fabric, and fibers to craft a set of wings that she believes helps the person travel from this life to what comes next.

When her father was dying, Bess made a set of human-sized wings out of his handkerchiefs, neckties, pajamas, family photos, maps of places that were important to him, and other reclaimed materials. The hands-on, generative, and meditative process became an essential part of her grieving process. The wings are both a visual memorial and a way of letting go.

**Experience:**

*Death Wings: A Hands-on Creative Ritual for Remembering and Letting Go*. This workshop is a three-hour session for gathering in a small group, gently opening up to some thoughts and feelings about loss and grief, engaging in a simple art project (no experience necessary, please watch this video for a preview), and then optional sharing of reflections/stories about what emerges for you and the group through the process.

**Audience:**

The workshop is designed for people over the age of 16.

**For more information about hosting a workshop or training:**

Connect with [Bess Welden](#) @ [deathwingsproject](https://www.deathwingsproject.com).

## **Objective of Death Wings (Jewish Edition):**

Participants will gain an understanding of Jewish traditions related to dying, death, and grief, while exploring creative expressions of mourning through a hands-on workshop. The lesson will provide spiritual, emotional, and communal support, allowing participants to connect with these traditional customs in a creative space of exploration.

## **Duration:**

3 hours (including a break)

## **Materials Needed:**

- Whiteboard and markers
- Mesh for wing-making
- Pens, markers, paper
- Scissors, rulers, glue guns, glue sticks
- Fabric, recycled papers, crafting papers
- Printed facilitation plan
- Name tags
- Food and snacks, napkins, plates, cups, utensils
- Large envelopes
- Tissues
- Welcome sign (optional)
- Yarn (optional)

## **What is Jewish about Death Wings project?**

### **Exploring Jewish rituals related to grief to set intentions for the workshop (30 minutes)**

#### **1. Mirroring Shiva to Set the Tone**

In Jewish tradition, shiva is a time of intense mourning observed by the immediate family of the deceased. During this period, there is a custom for visitors not to initiate conversation with the mourners. This practice is rooted in deep respect for the mourner's grief and the belief that the mourner should dictate the tone and content of any interaction.

Here are a few key reasons why visitors generally do not speak unless spoken to:

- A. Respect for the Mourner's Experience:
  - Shiva is a time when mourners are processing their loss and may not have the emotional energy to engage in conversation. By not speaking, visitors allow mourners to express their grief in their own way, without feeling pressured to respond or engage.

- B. Creating a Sacred Space:
  - The shiva home is considered a sacred space where the focus is on the memory of the deceased and the mourning process. Silence helps maintain a solemn and contemplative atmosphere, allowing mourners to reflect and grieve without distraction.
- C. Allowing the Mourner to Lead:
  - In this setting, the mourner's needs are prioritized. By waiting for the mourner to initiate conversation, visitors show deference to their emotional state. This approach acknowledges that mourners might prefer silence or may choose to share memories, thoughts, or feelings when they feel ready.
- D. Communal Support Without Pressure:
  - The presence of others during shiva is meant to provide comfort and support through solidarity, rather than through conversation. Simply being there for the mourner, without the need for words, can be a powerful gesture of support.

This workshop uses these principles in setting the connect to the Jewish value of sensitivity to others' emotions and the importance of giving space to those in mourning to experience their grief without the demands of social interaction.

## 2. Modeling Kriah in Creating your Wings

- A. The ripping of the cloth, known as **Kriah**, is a Jewish mourning ritual performed at funerals. It symbolizes the mourner's profound grief and the tear in the fabric of their life caused by the loss of a loved one. Immediate family members, such as parents, children, spouses, and siblings, tear a piece of their clothing or a black ribbon worn on their clothing as an outward expression of their inner pain and sorrow. The act of Kriah is a powerful, symbolic gesture that visually represents the mourner's broken heart and the deep emotional impact of the loss. Modeling

This workshop uses the physical act of tearing or cutting the materials to make your death wings as physical expression of the torn fabric as grief has torn the fabric of our lives.

## 3. Exploring Yahrzeit/Yizkor - What does it mean to commemoration and release grief

- A. Structured Remembrance: Both Yahrzeit and Yizkor provide structured times throughout the year to focus on the loss. This regularity helps prevent grief from becoming overwhelming by providing a healthy outlet for mourning and reflection.
- B. Community Support: These rituals are often observed in community settings, which can offer a supportive environment. The communal aspect can help individuals feel less isolated in their grief.
- C. Personal Reflection: While these rituals are communal, they also offer space for personal reflection. The quiet moments during Yahrzeit or

Yizkor can be deeply personal, allowing individuals to confront their feelings and find a sense of peace or resolution.

- D. Transformation of Grief: By turning grief into prayer, charity, and remembrance, these rituals allow mourners to transform their sorrow into acts of meaning and connection, helping to release the hold that grief may have over them.

## Workshop Outline:

### Introduction (20 minutes)

- **Arrival and Settling In (10 minutes):** Greet participants, offer food and drinks, and address any questions about the session.
- **Opening Circle (10 minutes):**
  - Introduce the purpose of the session: to explore Jewish rituals surrounding death and grief, and to engage in a creative exercise to express these themes.
  - Share community agreements (e.g., confidentiality, self-care, pace, listening with presence).
  - Set the tone by emphasizing that this is not a replacement for professional grief counseling but a space for creative exploration and community support.

### Creative Exploration: Wing-Making Workshop (100 minutes)

- **Setting Intention (20 minutes):**
  - Share the concept of "Death Wings" as a symbolic act of mourning and letting go.
  - Distribute writing prompts for participants to reflect on who or what they are mourning and what they hope to release through this process.
- **Wing-Making (80 minutes):**
  - Provide instructions and demonstrate basic techniques, including the symbolic act of cutting or tearing fabric, connecting it to the ritual of Kriah.
  - Encourage participants to engage in the creative process, offering assistance as needed. Allow for periods of silence and music as the group feels comfortable.

### Integration and Reflection (25 minutes)

- **Gallery Walk (15 minutes):**
  - Participants present their wings to the group, sharing any insights or emotions that arose during the process.
- **Verbal Debrief (10 minutes):**
  - Facilitate a discussion on what participants discovered, any challenges they faced, and how the experience has shifted their feelings.
  - Discuss options for what to do with the wings, including participation in an online gallery or other creative displays.

### Conclusion (15 minutes)

- **Final Check-Out (5 minutes):**
  - Invite participants to share a word or phrase that captures how they feel at the end of the session.

- **Closing Remarks (10 minutes):**
  - Thank participants and the host, and provide information on additional resources or support if needed.
- **Follow-Up:**
  - Send a follow-up email 5-7 days later, inviting feedback and offering continued support.

