

Lights of Remembrance: Jewish Rituals and Prayers in The Fight Against HIV/AIDS

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Received: 03 March 2025; **Accepted:** 02 April 2025; **Published:** 01 May 2025

Abstract: This article examines the role of Jewish prayers of remembrance and healing for those affected by HIV/AIDS, focusing on the intersection of faith, liturgy, and social justice. Drawing on key Jewish prayers such as the Kaddish (prayer for the dead), Mi Sheberach (prayer for healing), and the lighting of candles during observances like World AIDS Day, the study explores how Jewish communities have used these rituals to offer spiritual solace, collective memory, and hope for an AIDS-free future. By analyzing textual sources, interviews with community leaders, and observations from Jewish AIDS-related services, the paper highlights how Jewish prayer practices have been adapted to address the emotional, psychological, and social impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The findings demonstrate how these prayers not only provide comfort for those mourning loved ones but also foster solidarity and activism in the fight against HIV/AIDS, promoting healing and justice within the community.

Keywords: Jewish prayers, HIV/AIDS, healing rituals, Kaddish, Mi Sheberach, remembrance, World AIDS Day, social justice, faith and health, collective memory, Jewish liturgy, spirituality and activism.

Introduction: HIV/AIDS has impacted communities worldwide, and the response to this pandemic has varied across cultural, social, and religious contexts. Within the Jewish community, both the trauma and resilience brought on by the epidemic have been met with prayer, remembrance, and healing rituals. Jewish prayers of remembrance and healing serve as both spiritual responses to the pain of loss and affirmations of hope for an AIDS-free future. This article explores how Jewish liturgy, particularly prayers and rituals, has been employed to address the emotional, psychological, and social impact of HIV/AIDS. The focus will be on key Jewish prayers and practices of remembrance, including the Kaddish (prayer for the dead), Mi Sheberach (prayer for healing), and the lighting of candles during observances such as World AIDS Day.

The title, "Tonight, These Lights Are Beacons of Hope for an AIDS-Free World," captures the symbolic act of lighting candles as a form of remembrance and healing. The phrase resonates deeply within the context of the

Jewish tradition, which places high value on collective memory and the sanctification of life. This paper examines how these practices have not only provided solace but also contributed to a broader understanding of the intersection of faith, illness, and social justice in the Jewish community.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has shaped the global landscape in profound ways, with its impact reaching not only public health systems but also religious and spiritual communities worldwide. In particular, Jewish communities have grappled with the loss, stigma, and pain caused by HIV/AIDS, responding with rituals and prayers that reflect both the deep emotional turmoil and the hope for healing. While much of the early response to the AIDS crisis in many communities was characterized by fear and silence, Jewish prayers of remembrance and healing have provided a spiritual framework for addressing both the immediate needs of the sick and the long-term process of mourning and remembrance.

At the heart of the Jewish approach to suffering and

loss lies a commitment to memory and spiritual resilience. In Jewish tradition, prayers and rituals are central to the processes of mourning and healing, serving as vital tools for both individual and communal coping. These prayers are not only expressions of grief but also vehicles for hope, resilience, and collective action. The act of remembrance is imbued with the belief that through prayer, the soul of the deceased lives on and is honored, even in the face of death and disease. This concept of memory and continuity is particularly significant in the context of HIV/AIDS, as the epidemic has claimed millions of lives and continues to disproportionately affect marginalized communities, including queer and ethnic minority populations.

The title, "Tonight, These Lights Are Beacons of Hope for an AIDS-Free World," draws attention to the symbolic power of lighting candles in Jewish rituals, which has taken on new significance in the wake of the AIDS crisis. The act of lighting candles, especially during observances such as World AIDS Day, has become a public and communal statement of remembrance for those who have passed away due to AIDS-related illnesses. In Jewish ritual, the act of lighting a candle is often associated with Ner Tamid (the eternal light) or Ner Neshamah (the light of the soul), which reflects the belief in the enduring presence of the soul even after death.

Jewish prayers like the Kaddish, traditionally recited for the dead, have been adapted and embraced as collective prayers of mourning for those lost to the epidemic. Similarly, the Mi Sheberach, a prayer for healing, has been recited not only for those living with HIV/AIDS but also for their caregivers, families, and loved ones. These prayers have become powerful expressions of community solidarity and activism, framing the AIDS epidemic within the larger context of Jewish values such as chesed (loving-kindness), tzedakah (charity), and tikkun olam (repairing the world).

The Jewish response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic also reflects broader cultural shifts in how faith-based communities approach public health crises. While many religious communities struggled with the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS, the Jewish community's emphasis on collective responsibility and social justice led to an outpouring of compassion and activism. This response, rooted in Jewish ethics and social teachings, helped foster a sense of solidarity and dignity for those affected by HIV/AIDS, offering them not only spiritual healing but also a platform for advocacy and support.

This article explores the role of Jewish prayers and

rituals, such as the Kaddish, Mi Sheberach, and the lighting of candles, as essential elements in the remembrance and healing process for those affected by HIV/AIDS. Through the lens of Jewish liturgy, the paper examines how these prayers have served as both personal and communal acts of resilience and hope, emphasizing the intersection of faith, memory, and activism in the ongoing fight against HIV/AIDS. It aims to demonstrate how Jewish practices of remembrance and healing have helped redefine the relationship between faith and health, offering a model for how religious communities can respond to public health crises with both compassion and activism.

By investigating the use of Jewish prayers in the context of HIV/AIDS, the article seeks to illuminate the spiritual and social dimensions of the epidemic and its impact on the Jewish community. In doing so, it also raises important questions about the role of religious rituals in addressing modern-day crises and the power of prayer and remembrance in fostering a more compassionate and just society.

METHODS

The study employs a qualitative research approach with a focus on textual analysis, interviews, and ethnographic observation. Primary sources of analysis include:

1. Jewish prayers and liturgies: Texts such as the Kaddish, Mi Sheberach, and Yizkor (memorial prayer) are examined for their thematic relevance to illness, death, and healing.
2. Interviews: Conversations with Jewish clergy, community leaders, and individuals who have been involved in AIDS-related activities in Jewish contexts were conducted to explore the role of prayer and liturgy in coping with HIV/AIDS.
3. Observational Fieldwork: Participation in Jewish memorial events such as World AIDS Day services, where candles are lit, and prayers are recited, provided insights into how communal practices reflect personal and collective responses to the epidemic.
4. Secondary literature: Works on Jewish responses to the AIDS crisis, including scholarly articles, books, and oral histories from the HIV/AIDS epidemic, contribute to framing the findings.

RESULTS

The results of the study reveal several key themes in the intersection of Jewish liturgy, healing, and remembrance in the context of HIV/AIDS:

1. Prayers of Remembrance:
 - o Kaddish and Yizkor prayers have taken on special significance in Jewish communities affected by

the AIDS crisis. The Kaddish, traditionally recited for the deceased, has been used as a collective prayer for those who have died from HIV/AIDS. This prayer has become a poignant act of remembrance, especially in cases where death from AIDS was stigmatized and marginalized.

- o Yizkor, the memorial prayer recited on certain Jewish holidays, has been adapted to honor individuals lost to AIDS, creating a space for public mourning and remembrance that is otherwise absent in traditional Jewish rites.

2. Healing Prayers:

- o The Mi Sheberach, a prayer for healing, is often recited for individuals living with HIV/AIDS, both for physical healing and for emotional and spiritual strength. The recitation of this prayer in community settings provides a sense of support and solidarity for those living with the virus.

- o In Jewish communities, the Mi Sheberach is often linked with charity events and fundraising initiatives that support people living with HIV/AIDS, illustrating the intersection of faith and social justice.

3. The Symbolism of Lighting Candles:

- o Lighting candles, particularly during World AIDS Day, has become an essential part of Jewish remembrance and activism surrounding HIV/AIDS. The act of lighting candles symbolizes hope and solidarity, aligning with the Jewish value of *ner tamid* (the eternal light). This ritual has taken on new meaning in the context of the AIDS crisis, where each light represents a prayer for an AIDS-free world.

- o Candles are also a representation of the *ner neshamah* (soul's light), linking the physical light of the candle to the soul of those who have passed away. This powerful symbolism underscores the Jewish belief in the enduring nature of the soul, even in the face of death.

4. Community Support and Solidarity:

- o Jewish prayer and liturgy have played a significant role in fostering a sense of community solidarity for people affected by HIV/AIDS. Services held in synagogues and community centers not only provide a space for healing through prayer but also raise awareness about the ongoing impact of the epidemic, especially in marginalized communities.

- o Through these communal efforts, Jewish communities have been able to mobilize activism around HIV/AIDS, combining spiritual support with pragmatic action (such as advocacy, education, and care for people living with HIV/AIDS).

DISCUSSION

The prayers and rituals explored in this study underscore the powerful role of memory and healing within the Jewish tradition, particularly in times of crisis. The lighting of candles, the recitation of Kaddish, and the Mi Sheberach reflect key elements of Jewish liturgical practice—remembrance, healing, and hope for the future—while adapting these practices to respond to the AIDS epidemic. The act of lighting candles during World AIDS Day, for example, serves as a potent symbol of hope and a reminder of the need for ongoing action against the disease.

In the context of HIV/AIDS, Jewish prayers of remembrance are not only expressions of sorrow for lives lost but also celebrations of life and resilience. The Jewish community's engagement with these prayers speaks to a broader commitment to social justice, as individuals and communities seek both spiritual healing and tangible solutions for those affected by HIV/AIDS.

One important theme that emerges from this study is the challenge of stigmatization that has often accompanied the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In many Jewish communities, individuals living with HIV/AIDS have faced significant social and spiritual marginalization. However, by integrating HIV/AIDS concerns into the traditional practices of prayer and remembrance, Jewish communities have begun to transform the narrative surrounding HIV/AIDS from one of shame and isolation to one of compassion, solidarity, and public recognition.

Moreover, the emphasis on collective prayer and communal involvement in the healing process demonstrates how faith-based practices can foster a sense of belonging and empowerment among those affected by HIV/AIDS. In this way, Jewish prayers of remembrance and healing serve as both spiritual and social interventions, offering a holistic approach to the epidemic that addresses both the emotional and social dimensions of the disease.

The intersection of Jewish liturgy and HIV/AIDS represents a profound exploration of faith in the face of suffering, loss, and stigma. The prayers of remembrance and healing examined in this study—such as the Kaddish, Mi Sheberach, and the lighting of candles—serve as powerful acts of spiritual resilience for individuals and communities affected by the AIDS epidemic. The role of these rituals is multifaceted, operating on both personal and collective levels to offer comfort, remembrance, and, importantly, a means of social activism in the face of a health crisis. In this discussion, we analyze how these prayers not only provide immediate relief but also function as tools for broader social change, fostering a sense of solidarity, dignity, and hope in the Jewish community's response

to HIV/AIDS.

Prayers of Remembrance and Their Role in Healing

The Kaddish and Yizkor prayers, which have traditionally been used in Jewish communities to honor the dead, take on a heightened emotional significance in the context of HIV/AIDS. The Kaddish, which praises God's name and affirms the sanctity of life, serves as a public act of mourning for those who have died from HIV/AIDS. This is especially poignant in a time when many individuals living with HIV/AIDS, particularly from marginalized groups, faced the stigma of silence and discrimination, both within society at large and, in some cases, within religious communities. The use of the Kaddish allows families and communities to publicly acknowledge the lives lost to AIDS and to continue to remember those who, due to the nature of the disease, may have passed away without the communal recognition typically given to other forms of illness or death.

In many Jewish communities, the recitation of Yizkor, traditionally performed on major holidays, has been adapted to include those who have died from AIDS. This adaptation is an important way of ensuring that these individuals are not forgotten, challenging the marginalization and erasure that often accompanied deaths due to HIV/AIDS, particularly during the early years of the epidemic when stigma was pervasive. By incorporating the Yizkor prayer into memorials for AIDS victims, Jewish communities not only affirm the sanctity of the lives lost but also call for remembrance and justice. This adaptation reflects the Jewish value of memory—or *zichron*—which holds that the names and lives of the deceased must not be forgotten, a particularly important sentiment in the fight against the stigmatization of those who died from AIDS.

Healing Prayers and the Power of the Mi Sheberach

The Mi Sheberach, a prayer traditionally said for the sick, plays a central role in the Jewish community's response to individuals living with HIV/AIDS. This prayer is recited for those who are ill, asking for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. Its use for individuals living with HIV/AIDS illustrates the transformative power of prayer within the Jewish tradition. It not only provides spiritual support but also creates a space for the sick and their families to feel cared for, seen, and valued by the community. The communal recitation of the Mi Sheberach at synagogue services or in private settings can offer a profound sense of solidarity, reminding those who are living with HIV/AIDS that they are not alone in their struggle.

In Jewish communities where HIV/AIDS has been particularly impactful, the Mi Sheberach has been adapted to include prayers for caregivers and

advocates, recognizing the collective nature of the response to the epidemic. This reflects a shift in the understanding of illness from an individual to a communal experience. As Jewish ethics emphasize the importance of community support (*keshet*), the Mi Sheberach functions as both a spiritual and social act, drawing the wider community into a shared responsibility for the well-being of its members, particularly those affected by HIV/AIDS.

The Symbolism of Lighting Candles: A Beacon of Hope

One of the most visible and poignant practices within Jewish responses to HIV/AIDS is the lighting of candles, particularly during World AIDS Day and other memorial events. The act of lighting candles carries deep spiritual and symbolic meaning in Jewish tradition. The Ner Tamid (eternal light) in the synagogue represents God's divine presence, symbolizing the unbreakable connection between humanity and the sacred. In the context of HIV/AIDS, the Ner Neshamah (the light of the soul) becomes a symbol of life, memory, and hope—especially for those whose deaths might otherwise be overlooked or stigmatized. Lighting candles in memory of those who have died from AIDS creates a visible, communal act of remembrance, drawing attention to the ongoing fight against the epidemic and affirming the worth of the individuals lost.

Moreover, the practice of lighting candles offers a deeply symbolic gesture of hope, not only in remembering those who have passed but also in calling for an AIDS-free world. This act is aligned with the Jewish value of *Tikkun Olam*—repairing the world—and reflects the community's commitment to social justice and advocacy. In this context, candles do not just symbolize mourning but also signal the collective desire for action, healing, and the eradication of HIV/AIDS. Through this act, Jewish communities participate in both a spiritual and political statement, aligning prayer with activism.

Community Solidarity and the Jewish Response to HIV/AIDS

Beyond the individual rituals of remembrance and healing, the Jewish response to HIV/AIDS emphasizes community solidarity. Jewish ethics emphasize the importance of collective responsibility, and the epidemic has provided an opportunity for the community to come together and act. Early responses to HIV/AIDS in the Jewish community included the establishment of educational programs, fundraising efforts for HIV/AIDS research, and the creation of safe spaces for those living with the virus. These efforts were motivated by the Jewish principles of *tzedakah* (charity) and *chesed* (loving-kindness), both of which urge individuals to respond to suffering and injustice

with compassion and action.

In the case of the AIDS epidemic, the Jewish community's response was not limited to spiritual support. It extended to practical interventions such as fundraising for HIV/AIDS research, creating care networks for people living with HIV/AIDS, and providing advocacy for greater access to healthcare and education. This multifaceted approach highlights the Jewish tradition of addressing both spiritual and material needs in times of crisis, ensuring that those affected by the epidemic were not only mourned for but also actively supported in their daily lives.

The Tension Between Stigma and Healing

Despite these positive efforts, there has also been tension within Jewish communities around the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. For many, the initial response to the AIDS epidemic was marked by fear and silence, especially since the disease was often associated with sexual behaviors that were seen as taboo in some religious contexts. However, the adaptation of Jewish liturgies, the recitation of healing prayers, and the mobilization of the community to support those affected by HIV/AIDS reflect a shift toward acceptance and inclusive healing.

This transformation, which is still ongoing in some communities, represents a deeper understanding of the intersection between faith, justice, and human dignity. As more Jewish communities engage in public advocacy for the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS, they also continue to challenge the stigmatization of the disease. Lighting candles, reciting prayers, and offering solidarity help break down the silence and shame that often accompany the epidemic, replacing it with messages of hope, acceptance, and healing.

The Future of Jewish Prayer and HIV/AIDS Advocacy

Looking forward, Jewish prayers of remembrance and healing can play an essential role in ongoing efforts to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The symbolic power of prayer, memory, and communal solidarity can help sustain the momentum of AIDS activism, while also ensuring that those who have been lost to the epidemic are never forgotten. The continued evolution of Jewish liturgies in response to HIV/AIDS, including the inclusion of the Mi Sheberach for those affected by the disease, is an example of how religious practices can adapt to the needs of contemporary issues.

In sum, Jewish prayers and rituals of remembrance offer a holistic approach to dealing with the emotional and social impact of HIV/AIDS. They provide spiritual solace to individuals and families while simultaneously fostering a collective responsibility to fight for justice, equality, and compassion for all those affected by the

epidemic. As such, Jewish communities stand at the intersection of faith and activism, showing how religious practices can not only help heal the soul but also inspire social change.

CONCLUSION

The Jewish prayers of remembrance and healing for those affected by HIV/AIDS, including the recitation of Kaddish, the use of the Mi Sheberach prayer for healing, and the lighting of candles, provide powerful tools for emotional and spiritual support in the face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. These practices not only serve to honor the memory of those who have died but also offer hope for those living with the disease. By incorporating these rituals into their communal response to HIV/AIDS, Jewish communities have created a framework for healing that addresses both the physical and spiritual dimensions of the crisis. These acts of remembrance and solidarity continue to inspire hope for an AIDS-free world, highlighting the ongoing relevance of Jewish prayer and ritual in promoting justice, compassion, and collective well-being.

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