

How to Prepare a Eulogy

by Rabbi Edward Feinstein

At American funeral services, the eulogy, or memorial speech, is typically delivered by a clergyman—a rabbi, minister, priest, etc. This is not Jewish tradition. In Jewish tradition, it is the obligation of the community—the lay community—to celebrate the life of the deceased in words. Children and grandchildren, friends, neighbors bear the obligation to share memories of the deceased. This traditional practice is now returning to Jewish funerals.

What do you say? And how do you prepare a eulogy?

The purpose of a eulogy is to locate and specify what is immortal and lasting in a life. The body dies, but the person we love and respect hasn't died. The person still lives with us – in our memories, in our lives, in our values. The eulogy is a depiction of that which remains immortal after the death of the body.

Ask yourself:

- What did I learn from this life?
- What were this person's most cherished values?
- What brought this person their greatest joy?
- What moments did we share that reveal the character of the person?
- What was this person most proud of?
- What would he/she want to say to his/her children, grandchildren, and friends as a summary of the life?

Isolate two or three themes or values that most characterized the person. Describe these themes or values and add an anecdote, reminiscence, or an event that illustrates how they were part of the life. For example, *“Grandma loved family most of all. Her happiest times were holidays when we all gathered. Just last Passover...”*

There are many wonderful texts in the Jewish tradition that describe and celebrate our values. Use these texts to illustrate and celebrate the value of the deceased. If you need assistance locating a good text, ask your rabbi.

Sometimes, the easiest way to prepare a eulogy is write a letter to the deceased. In your letter, list the things you gained from this person's life: love, wisdom, kindness, etc.

What are you most grateful for in this life? For example: “*Dear Grandpa, I am grateful for the honesty and integrity you taught...*”

Remember a few things as you prepare:

- Prepare your eulogy talk in advance. Write it out. Do not depend upon your ability to speak extemporaneously. The emotions of a funeral are very strong, and you might find yourself standing in front of a crowd with a blank mind.
- Keep your talk brief. You cannot capture an entire life. So share what is most important in a few minutes. Any eulogy longer than ten minutes will lose the attention of an audience.
- Your goal is to help the gathering of friends and family to remember a life that has been lost. If there were moments of humor and joy in the life, by all means include them. There is nothing wrong with laughter at a funeral service. But remember that you are not there to entertain an audience. Getting laughs is not the goal.
- Describe important moments that you shared with the deceased. But remember that the eulogy is not about you. This is not your funeral, and not the time to elevate yourself.
- At times of loss, family and friends are vulnerable and sensitive. Read over your eulogy to be sure that nothing you say can be hurtful to a member of the family or a friend. Have someone else read over your eulogy to be sure nothing could be construed as hurtful.
- Not everything you say has to be in praise of the deceased. All of us have faults and darker sides to our character. If you are careful, you can share some of this in your eulogy. But do not say anything that comes from anger. If you are angry with the deceased, it is better not to say anything in public. There are times and places for sharing these feelings. Not at a funeral.

As you deliver your eulogy:

- You may find yourself getting choked up. This is to be expected. Just stop, take a breath, and continue.
- If you can't gather your emotions, then have someone else—another member of the family, or the rabbi—stand with you and read the remainder of your remarks.