

# **TO DUST**

*DISCUSSION GUIDE*

## **INTRODUCTION: A NOTE FROM THE FILMMAKER**

TO DUST hopes to generate more questions than it intends to answer. To challenge, but not to preach. There are no right or wrong conclusions to be made here, just the aspiration and invitation to conversation.

The film, however, does operate with a firm belief that when we cultivate a sense of humility and awe in the face of the unknowable - whether at the outer reaches of science, the upper reaches of religion, or the inner reaches of a human heart - and try our best to carry that humility into our conversations with one another, that that can, in and of itself, be profoundly spiritual.

With that, we hope that you enjoyed the film and encourage you to discuss with passion and respect. The discussion guide is organized by topics and themes. Please bounce around as per your own interests and inclinations.

Shawn Snyder, *Co-Writer/Director*

## ON OUR PERSONAL, SOCIETAL AND CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP(S) TO DEATH

The Rebbe encourages Shmuel, "Maybe don't think about these things?" And tells him, "If you look behind that door, you'll go mad."

Is opening the door on death, lifting the veil, and staring our mortality in the face (with all of its implications, both existential and biological) a healthy or a morbidly maddening pursuit?

Is TO DUST a cautionary tale about how mad you'll *actually* go if you do open this door? Shmuel is certainly thrust into his own brand of insanity. Or do we sometimes need to go mad in order to heal and grow? Does shining a light in the darkness help take a sting out of the darkness? Is there any comfort that could be found by going down the rabbit hole, getting into the dirt with our fear, dread, and repulsion? Might this vary from person to person? How can we accommodate respective thresholds?

Shmuel's nightmares (and his quest) evolve, but where do they psychologically and emotionally stem from? Is his obsession primarily with her body or her soul or does it fall equally into both camps?

In the end, when finally given the opportunity, why *doesn't* Shmuel look at Rivkah's corpse?

Have you had any of the same thoughts and/or fears about loved ones lost or your own mortality? If so, have you found yourself able to talk openly about it or are there too many taboos to overcome - personal, familial, cultural, societal? Is there a tendency to repress? Is this healthy? Or protective?

In what ways does society, our cultures and traditions, the funeral industry, itself, shield us from the reality of death? If so, why?

Recommended Website:

[www.orderofthegooddeath.com](http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com)

## ON TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF GRIEF

Does Shmuel actually know what he's after? When Albert presses him in the woods, Shmuel emotionally confesses that maybe he doesn't.

Is Shmuel's journey a journey to achieve a stated goal or a journey to figure out what that goal might be? Perhaps both? Is he trying to follow clearly defined instincts or make sense of irrational instincts by giving shape and order to their chaos? Does he know where he's heading or is he just putting one foot in front of the other, trying to fill the void and regain some agency, until he figures it out?

How does his journey evolve? Does the goal keep changing? Does Shmuel's odyssey through death lead him back to life? Does he find *any* peace and healing by the end and, if so, is it via what he was seeking at the start?

How is this similar to the grieving process, in general?

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## ON THE STAGES OF GRIEF

Consider Kübler-Ross' Classic Model of the Five Stages of Grief: *Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance*. Updated models also include *Shock*, before Denial. And *Testing* - or "seeking realistic solutions" - after Depression and before Acceptance. It is increasingly acknowledged that these are to be used as mere framing tools and are not definitive stops on a linear timeline through grief.

That said, can you identify any of these stages in Shmuel's journey? In sequence or out of order? All or only some? Are there any of these stages that he seems particularly stuck in? Are there additional or alternative stages that the model doesn't account for?

How about in your own personal experiences with grief? Can an individual grieving process be defined or universalized in this (or in any) way?

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## ON SUPPORTING THE BEREAVED

Shmuel's family and community struggle to understand and support him through his grief. What do you make of their intentions, even if their interventions seem to miss the mark? Who in his family and community seem to understand what he's going through the most? In what ways do they succeed in expressing empathy, sympathy, patience, permission? In what ways do they fail or bungle their efforts?

Who *outside* of Shmuel's community seems to understand what he's going through the most? In what way do *they* succeed or fail in expressing empathy?

How might we best support our own loved ones through grief? How might we best support strangers and acquaintances?

## ON JUDAISM'S GUIDEPOSTS THROUGH GRIEF

Compare the above to Judaism's ancient understanding of grief and its staged guidance through the grieving process: *Aninut*, the period from the moment of death until the end of the funeral. *Aveilut*, shiva for seven days after the funeral. *Sheloshim*, the end of shiva through thirty days from the burial. *Shanah*, from the day of burial through 11 months. *Yahrzeit*, the anniversary of the day of death. *Yizkor*, seasonal ritual remembrance on specific holy days.

Note the fact that some of these phases and the practices therein are reserved only for select relatives. And the fact that the whole approach seems purposefully designed, with psychological wisdom, to force mourners to face the finality of death, to help them accept G-d's will, to allow them a period of extreme and public grief, but divert them from excessive or prolonged grief, and ultimately to guide them back towards life.

All in all, it's a very healthy and holistic approach to death and mourning. Why then does it feel insufficient for Shmuel?

Shmuel refuses to mend his kriah-tear after thirty days. The Rebbe insists he's mourning Rivkah as if she were a parent.

Does Shmuel seem stuck in any of these particular phases or is he improperly persisting in ones he shouldn't because Rivkah was only his wife? Is his a prolonged *aninut*, full of distress, shock, disorientation, paralysis, and irrationality? An extended *shiva* or *sheloshim*, awash in aimless melancholy?

Why are the rituals not working for him? Is it on account of their potential limitations that his grief overflows or is it precisely because he's *not* following the established guidelines that his grief turns into neurosis?

Is it better that grief be allowed to move along at its own pace and on its own circuitous and odd path? Or is woefully wallowing, obsessively leaning, or depressively diving into it without guideposts and guardrails a dangerous distraction from moving forward, focusing on life, finding beauty and fulfilling one's duties therein?

Think again about the idiosyncrasies of your own experiences with grief. Did religion offer a salve, a roadmap, some perspective? Did it ever in any way feel insufficient? Were you able to find balance between the personal and the prescribed?

Does grief ever truly go away or does it only evolve? Or is it us that must evolve in order to live with its sometimes seemingly permanent presence?

## ON JEWISH BURIAL RITUALS

Research, explore, investigate and discuss. What are the reasons and rationales behind Jewish burial rituals? Why must burial occur without undue delay? Why is there no wake or viewing? No cremation? Why is burial in a Jewish cemetery required? Why no mausoleums? Why must the deceased be dressed in *tachrichim*, simple white shrouds and not fancier linens or clothing of one's own choice? Why a pine coffin? Why three holes bored into its bottom - do the holes practically or only symbolically fulfill the requirement that the body be in contact with the earth? Why does the body need to touch and return to the earth, specifically?

Is burial directly in the ground, without a coffin, as in Israel, traditionally preferable? How must regional and municipal regulations - i.e. the requirement in certain parts of the US that caskets be enclosed in concrete vaults - be honored and factored in?

Are these rules and rituals in service of the deceased, the survivors, G-d, or all of the above?

Why does Jewish law require sometimes overriding even the will (legal and figurative) of the deceased on these matters to ensure a proper Jewish burial? How do you feel about more liberal Jewish funeral homes growing lax with these decrees or even simply selling fancier pine coffins?

Why is no bodily desecration or disfigurement (i.e. tattoos) permitted? Why no embalming? Why a prohibition on autopsies? Why is it important that the body be buried in its entirety - i.e. amputated limbs are to be interred along with the rest of the body; in Israel, there's a terrorism response team that identifies and gathers all body parts, including spilled blood, to ensure a proper burial?

What are the spiritual, mystical, practical, humanistic, metaphoric reasons? Consider the Orthodox idea about the revivification of the dead that will take place in the final Messianic Age. Consider mystical ideas about *chibbut ha-kever* - the soul's necessary and necessarily agonizing purification before it can return to G-d - through natural unmediated decomposition, the rate of decomposition sometimes being determined by the degree of purification required?

*Extra Credit: Can a burial get more green/natural/organic than a traditional Jewish one? Why, then, does this still feel insufficient to Shmuel?*

*Extra-Extra Credit: Think about death, mourning and funeral traditions in other cultures and religions? How are they similar to Judaism's? Different? What do these varying approaches say about our respective relationships/comfort levels with death and loss?*

Recommended Reading:

*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Maurice Lamm.

*A Plain Pine Box*, Arnold M. Goodman.

*Journey To Heaven: Exploring Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, Leila Leah Bronner.

## **ON RITUALS OF OUR OWN MAKING**

Our rituals help us deal with our most painful losses, but are there cases in which they might not, in and of themselves, be enough? Is a personal reconciliation sometimes necessary beyond or atop traditional forms and values? Does our human/earthbound nature require engagement of the profane as well as the holy? Might we create our own rituals as we search for personal meaning? What rituals does Shmuel create for himself as he's trying to work through his grief?

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## **ON THE SACRILEGE OF SHMUEL AND ALBERT'S FINAL ACT**

Think about the sacrilege of Shmuel and Albert's final act - unearthing and reburying Rivkah's corpse beyond the confines of a Jewish cemetery.

Is it meant to be literal, mythic, metaphoric, folkloric, cinematic, poetic, symbolic? Logical? Emotional? Human? Did you experience it as cathartic? Offensive? Perhaps even both? Is it an unforgivable turn (on behalf of Shmuel and/or the filmmakers) or an inevitable and fitting conclusion (at least in the world of the film)?

Is there any way in which Shmuel's final act might be a way of honoring Rivkah rather than desecrating her? We don't explicitly come to know Rivkah, but do you in any way sense her potential complicity or an absence of consent? Is this final act carried out exclusively for Rivkah or for Shmuel, himself? Does that matter?

In what ways does Rivkah's reburial remain tethered to Shmuel's faith and tradition, despite its inherent blasphemy? If so, is there any beauty, literal or symbolic, in that retention of ritual - or is it an additional slap in the face atop an already unpardonable transgression?

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## **ON WHAT MIGHT BE *MOTIVATING* SHMUEL AND ALBERT'S FINAL ACT**

What logic or illogic is driving Shmuel in this final act - the exhumation and reburial of Rivkah? What logic or illogic is driving his whole sinful mission, for that matter? Is it scientific, religious, personal/emotional? Is he backwards engineering and bending the first two, with questionable scientific and spiritual rigor, to ultimately serve the latter? If so, is this fair, valid? Are there ways in which we do this all the time, in various circumstances, in our own lives?

Is there one overarching motivation or multiple ones intertwined, each taking a revolving and evolving turn in the driver's seat? If so, how do the multiple motivations work against each other or in concert? Are there other rationales, motivations, explanations at play that are *not* suggested here?

## ON JETHRO TULL AND TOM WAITS (OR: MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO G-D)

The film quotes Jethro Tull at the outset: "G-d is an overwhelming responsibility."

What does this quote mean in the context of the film? Does the overwhelming responsibility of G-d necessarily fall upon man? Upon Shmuel, himself? Upon Albert?

Why does Albert take on the responsibility of helping Shmuel? What logic or illogic is driving *his* participation? Is he the ultimate *Shabbos goy* - a non-Jew who performs certain types of work which religious law prohibits a Jew from doing on the Sabbath - or does he become more than that? Are his motivations different in the beginning than they are at the end?

Are Shmuel's sons, in their own way, trying to shoulder the responsibility of G-d?

Is it a particularly Jewish sentiment that we must act on behalf of G-d or that G-d must act through us?

Or does the quote simply mean that believing in G-d, following G-d's rules and/or accepting G-d's will is, itself, an overwhelming responsibility?

Put this in conversation with Tom Waits' "Blow Wind Blow," which plays over the *tahara*/credit sequence: "Blow wind blow, wherever you may go. Put on your overcoat, take me away. You gotta take me on into the night. Take me on into the night. Blow me away."

Might Waits' "wind" be construed as *ruach* - wind, breath, spirit. If so, is it G-d's spirit/breath/will that's blowing? Is it Rivkah's breath/spirit leaving her body? Or is it just the winds of random fate?

Is this wind something we must abide, accept, assist or resist? Are we consigned only to be tossed around by it, to weather it and simply survive, or might we be able to take some of the burden for (our own) growth and healing (or, perhaps, the growth and healing of others) into our own hands?

## ON DYBBUKS

Think about the mythology and poetry of the *dybbuk*.

From the prologue to the film, THE DYBBUK, which we don't see in TO DUST:

*"Wherefore from highest height to deepest depth below has the soul fallen? Within itself, the Fall contains the Resurrection. All creatures are drawn to the source of the Divine Being. In these migrations it may happen that a wandering soul - a DYBBUK - enters a human being which once it loved. When a man dies before his time, his soul returns to the earth so that it may complete the deeds it had left undone and experience the joys and griefs it had not lived through."*

From the portion of the film that we watch with Shmuel's sons:

*"There are no evil spirits. They are only the souls of human beings dead before their time, unto eternity."*

*"Not unto eternity. The souls of the dead return to this world to wander until they achieve purity. Sometimes it happens that a vagrant soul enters the body of a human being whom once it had loved. That is a DYBBUK."*

*"Come, my bridegroom, I shall bear both our souls like unborn children."*

Is a *dybbuk* the literal soul, untethered and unsettled, of the person who's been lost? Their figurative essence? Grief itself? Is it something that ought to be exorcised or something that should actually be embraced and allowed to embed?

Recommended Reading/Viewing:

*A Dybbuk, And Other Tales of the Supernatural*, S. Ansky, Tony Kushner, Joachim Neugroschel.  
*The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Isaac Bashevis Singer.  
*The Dybbuk* (Film), 1937, Dir. Michał Waszyński, Poland.  
(Available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/tjy7O9sA1TQ>)

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## ON IMMORTALITY

What does immortality mean to you? Are there literal, spiritual, scientific, biological, behavioral, humanistic components?

Might it be made manifest through the remaining memories we carry of the deceased, their passed on personality traits, their actual genetic legacy, the impact of their actions on earth? Are the deceased only "kept alive" as long as these things persist?

Are our souls actually immortal? Is our bodily matter, repurposed and recycled, essentially immortal? All matter, for that matter?

What are the ways in which Rivkah lives on? What are the ways in which the loved ones that you've lost now live on? How do you hope that you, yourself, might live on?

## **ON JEWISH STORYTELLING and JEWISH HUMOR**

How does TO DUST fit into a larger tradition of Jewish storytelling? Consider Hasidic Folktales, Rabbinic Parables, Talmudic Dialectics, Judaism on Film.

How does TO DUST fit into a larger tradition of Jewish humor? Consider Midrashic Wit, Yiddish Vulgarity, Vaudeville/Borscht Belt, Gallows Humor and The Use of Comedy for Catharsis and Coping.

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## **ON UNIVERSALITY THROUGH SPECIFICITY (OR: IS THIS EXPLICITLY A JEWISH MOVIE?)**

Is TO DUST an explicitly Jewish movie or a movie for everyone? Is it a secular film or a spiritual film? While it aspires to universality through specificity, does it succeed?

What are the ways in which it is inherently and inextricably Jewish? Could the story be easily transplanted into another religion, for example? Could it be transplanted into another denomination of Judaism, for that matter, or is it necessary that it's situated in the Hasidic World?

*Extra Credit: On the boat, when Shmuel's kids tell him that what he's doing isn't Jewish, he replies, "No, but it menschlich," - which means "human." What does he mean by this? What is the difference?*

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## **ON THE HASIDIC COMMUNITY IN FILM AND IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION**

How does TO DUST compare to other portrayals of the Hasidic community on film? Does it seem to "get it right"? Does it manage to be respectful in spite of its blasphemous and folkloric tendencies?

Is TO DUST the story of a man who wants to leave, a man who wants to stay, or a man who wants to return? Is apostasy the inevitable end of Shmuel's secular, scientific, spiritual and emotional explorations?

Does Shmuel come to identify his community as oppressive and repressive, something he ultimately hope to escape? Or does he strive to reconcile his own idiosyncratic inclinations with a culture and community that he loves? Would his community, in the end, even tolerate such a reconciliation?

*"Beni, Beni,"* the lullaby that's sung by a female voice in the first scene and that Shmuel sings to his sons in the final scene, comes from *Mishlei 1:15* and can be translated as: *"My son, my son, do not walk the road with them; hold back your foot from their path."* What does this mean in the context of Shmuel's journey?

## **ON SECULAR EDUCATION IN THE HASIDIC COMMUNITY**

Shmuel proves himself a worthy student of Albert's, but often presents as particularly naive. Does this feel realistic or overwrought? Consider the hot button issue of secular education in the Ultra-Orthodox world? Do Ultra-Orthodox communities have the right to disregard or fight to overturn state laws governing secular educational requirements? Is secular education invariably a threat to religious instruction, a gateway to inevitable apostasy?

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## **ON RELIGION AND SCIENCE**

Are religion and science necessarily opposites? Might they be supplemental? Are there intersections where science and mysticism meet?

Do either claim and/or aspire to have a monopoly on truth?

Is science an affront to G-d or one of the ways we might further understand the intricacies and mysteries of G-d's wonder? Might science be one of the ways we take the responsibility of G-d into our own hands?

Is the Jewish dialectical tradition - an ethos of answering questions with more questions - similar to scientific investigation?

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## **ON FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND BODY FARMS**

What are the more traditional anthropological elements of forensic anthropology? Is it necessary to understand cultures and belief systems when investigating the deceased?

What are the ethics of forensic anthropological research, in general? Of body farms, in particular?

Is there some brand of "immortality" in donating one's body to science? To a forensic anthropology research facility specifically - where one's remains will fuel research, knowledge, education, justice? Where your bones will be permanently stored and studied for generations to come?

*Recommended Reading:*

<https://allthatsinteresting.com/body-farms>

## ON FRIENDSHIP

Do Shmuel and Albert actually become friends? If so, will they remain friends into the future? What if anything does each one actually like (or perhaps come to love) about the other? What brings them together, keeps them together? Do they care for and come to understand each other? Is the relationship balanced, reciprocal, co-dependent or one-sided? What positive or negative effect do they have on one another? How does each one cause the other to change, to grow, to regress? How, why and at what key turning points does their relationship evolve?

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## ON BORDERS

Think about the idea of *BORDERS*. Between the religious and the secular. The pious and the profane. The natural and the supernatural. Between faith and science. A period of grief and a time for moving forward. Also, borders between cultures, religions and belief systems themselves - consider, for example, the seeming divide between Shmuel and Stella, the Body Farm Security Guard.

Throughout Shmuel's journey and amidst his grief, many of these borders are blurred, crossed or altogether destroyed and all sides messily commingled. Does healing and growth happen when these borders are opened, when the conversation between worlds flows freely - even if clumsily - or is it only possible when they're properly restored, righted and maintained?

*Extra Credit: Think, as well, in this vein, about the borders between comedy and tragedy, between film genres themselves. How and why does TO DUST opt to blur those lines too?*

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## ON THE ENDING

Is TO DUST ultimately an utterly morbid or a somehow life-affirming movie about death? What else, in the end, is it about?

What do you make of the final scene? What do you think happens thereafter? What do you *hope* happens thereafter?