

Reflections on Jewish Death & Mourning

*Respect, Ritual
and Remembrance*

A COMPILATION OF ORIGINAL ESSAYS
EDITED BY SAMUEL J. SALKIN

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Why a Jewish Funeral?

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PREFACE

Why a Jewish Funeral?

SAMUEL J. SALKIN

Samuel J. Salkin serves as executive director of Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha, the only nonprofit Jewish funeral home and Chevra Kadisha serving the entire spectrum of the Jewish community in the United States. For over a century, it has assured the dignified burial of all its community members, irrespective of means.

In the year following my Bar Mitzvah, my Nana Ethel, my mother's mother, of blessed memory, died.

Her death was followed in the subsequent 19 months by the passing of the remainder of my grandparents. I had grown up in close proximity to them and they were each very important to me. This period was my highly concentrated introduction and education into the Jewish laws, rituals and customs surrounding death, burial and mourning. One of the insights from that time, when my parents (and thus our entire family) were in mourning for a period of nearly three years, is that while I learned a tremendous amount about what we "Jews do," I learned it by osmosis. I participated and through that doing, I began to understand. I had never been to a funeral home, attended a funeral, or been to a Jewish cemetery. Now I learned that my father would not come home that night, in order to watch over and honor his mother-in-law as a *shomer*. The next day I was a pallbearer, accompanying my grandmother to her final rest. Prior to that, my only fragments of insight were a vague idea that my grandmother participated in a "sewing circle," led by Mrs. Juskowitz, z"l, who sewed "burial shrouds" and that my family left services whenever "*yizkor* was said," because my parents' parents were alive.

Four elders in decline; four deaths; four funerals; four eulogies; shoveling earth for four burials; 56 *shiva minyanim*; gatherings of mourners, great aunts and uncles, aunts and uncles, a multitude of cousins, neighbors and family friends; an

Preface

opportunity to participate and thus begin to understand the Jewish approach to caring for and honoring the deceased and comforting the survivors. The opportunity was in the context of extended family and in community. Both elements of Jewish life are receding for all but the most traditional. At the beginning to my introduction to the ways of the Jews concerning death and dying there were shared assumptions.

Shiva equaled seven.

Today, a half-century later, in America we are challenged to ask the non-rhetorical question, “Why a Jewish Funeral?” I hope that this collection of writings will encourage engagement with that question. We have good answers from a multitude of perspectives.

I am grateful to my colleagues, friends and fellow thinkers and writers for their engagement and contributions. I am grateful to Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha for the opportunity to serve. The work, which is deeply fulfilling, allows me to grow in unexpected and unimaginable ways every day. 

“

*Rituals are
the formulas by
which harmony
is restored.*

”

TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

INTRODUCTION

Soulful Simplicity – Values-driven Jewish Death and Mourning

There is a crisis in American Jewish life. It's best described as a crisis of meaning and engagement.

Indeed, for the first time in centuries, two Jews can marry each other and have Jewish children without any connection to Jewish heritage, wisdom or tradition. Liberal values and Jewish values are virtually indistinguishable to many Jews, with the particularly Jewish content increasingly absent. To put it bluntly, much of contemporary American Judaism has been undersold and watered down.

One way to address this crisis is by looking at the detailed specifics and broad essence of the values-driven Jewish end-of-life cycle. Regardless of whether you think that life ends with dirt or the immortality of the soul, the Jewish death, funeral and mourning experience offers the deceased and the bereaved something that's exceedingly thoughtful, special and substantive.

But before you can fully understand the Jewish way of death, you have to spend a little bit of time understanding Judaism itself. And, by that I mean Jewish thought and practice, and how it has evolved, particularly in 21st century America.

In the process of doing this, you'll get a general sense of the diversity of the Jewish community, while you'll learn about specific approaches within this community that reflect how Judaism has been embraced over time.

Introduction

Without going any further, let me assert that the Jews are primarily a people, not a religion or a race. To illustrate: you don't have to believe in God to be a Jew. Much of Jewish practices and beliefs are a long-held way of life.

Death, for its part, is seen by Jews as a real and fundamental part of life. It is not distinct or separate from life.

That said, Jews believe that there are many ways to live, and many ways to die. There are fundamental guidelines, but no rigid unanimity or demands for conformity.

A good example of this diversity of thinking is that some Jews accept a supernatural authority who actively guides our lives through a divinely revealed Torah; others view what was revealed at Mt. Sinai as humanity's interpretation with an ongoing dialogue between God and humanity. When refined through prayer, this dialogue leads to good deeds and loving kindness, as well as sincere engagement with the world; still others are dismissive of the role of Mt. Sinai and Jewish law in their Jewish lives.

The breadth of perspectives on Jewish life and death can be associated with religious thought streams as well as secular points of view.

The Orthodox perspective, which accepts divine revelation at Mt. Sinai and the immortality of the soul is one religious book end; the Reform movement, which historically has been dismissive of Jewish law and which prefers to avoid a point of view on the immortality of the soul is the other. While Jews don't cremate, secular Jews may choose cremation, while others may view it as not ecologically correct or a nightmarish Holocaust echo.

Despite these differences, every stream of Judaism agrees that the occasion requires dignity for the deceased and that there is much healing work to be done when death takes place. All Jews would agree that honor and dignity must be extended to the deceased while compassion and support are offered to the bereaved.

There are no questions about this, no shades of meaning, and absolutely no equivocation.

So, Jews are both flexible and resolute when it comes to end-of-life practices, services and rituals. And what connects and grounds them are deeply established and deeply held values that are authoritative—but not authoritarian.

These anchoring values are so important, because they tell us what to do when someone dies. As a result, Jewish mourners are truly taken care of, receiving the solace and comfort they need.

What am I really saying here?

If you lose a loved one, and you do what we Jews know how to do, you'll feel like you've treated the deceased with all the beauty and grace imaginable. And, in the process, you'll be warmly supported, too.

You see, it always comes back to the community for Jews. And that community, while always evolving, is constantly, consistently and steadfastly there for those who must face the end-of-life of a loved one. In fact, the more you open yourself up to the Jewish practice, ritual and tradition surrounding death and dying, the larger your support circle will be, and the less alone you will feel.

The Jewish approach to end-of-life is not solely one way—or our way. True compassion requires lots of listening. True kindness demands that we meld individual values with communal ones. True empathy must lead to openness and a lack of judgment on our part.

This is why Jewish funerals aren't all the same, why the community is there for the unaffiliated, why our community is prepared to embrace interfaith families. Earlier I asserted, Jews don't cremate. If you truly desire cremation, we can arrange that for you, even though it's not part of our core tradition. Rabbis and cantors traditionally officiate. If you want others to officiate, that's acceptable, as long as non-Jewish deities and religious references are excluded from the ceremony. Markers and monuments are traditionally simple in design. If you want a creative expression in a marker or monument, that's permissible, as long as there isn't non-Jewish imagery or excessive adornment.

I'm trying to reinforce the fact that we must recognize the clarity of what Jews do when someone dies. We must also grasp the practical and emotional wisdom that Jews bring to the end-of-life cycle. But, because the world is changing, we must also exhibit sensitivity to families who may be culturally Jewish, but who have not fully connected to the spiritual dimension of Judaism. The challenge, then, is for Jews to make what we know and do available to a more diverse community while, at the same time, respecting and understanding others' specific needs as best as we can.

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Maintaining core Jewish values, beliefs, integrity and practices is essential, but so is staying open.

It's critical to remember, though, that our prime objective in the Jewish funeral transcends all of this.

And our focus is clear.

Indeed, what we set out to do is help the deceased soul move beyond the vessel of the body, while supporting the bereaved to heal and attain peace of mind as they come to terms with their loss. We also try to help fill the void that mourners invariably must confront, and we try to do it in a constructive, thoughtful and time-bound manner.

These are both simple and complex goals.

What is particularly powerful is that we Jews understand how to deal with the grief process in a kind, and even therapeutic, way—from the moment of death onward.

Our values are deeply embedded in this structured timeline for mourners, and there are regular and solemn markers all along the path.

We believe, for example, that funerals should take place as soon as possible after a person has died, preferably one or two days after death. Autopsies are not routinely done unless required by law. Jews do not traditionally embalm.

A holy society (*Chevra Kadisha*) provides a watcher (*Shomer*) who sits with the deceased from time of death through burial, recites psalms (*Thilim*); cleans and lovingly washes the body (*Tahara*), dresses the body in a white linen shroud (*Tachrichim*). The simple white linen shroud is sewn without knots, and is a multiple-piece garment.

Burial is in an unadorned casket that includes no metal, not even handles or nails. To meet this requirement, the caskets are assembled with wooden pegs and glue. Usually objects are not put into the casket, because we come into this world with nothing, and so we leave with nothing; all of us are equal in the world to come. And flowers are normally not sent, because Jews try to keep funerals as simple as possible.

At the funeral, an outer garment of clothing is torn by the immediate family. This is called *Kriah*. It is usually a lapel of a suit jacket or dress or sometimes a black ribbon

that is placed over the heart. Jewish law considers attending a funeral and burial to be a *mitzvah*, or “religious obligation.” Family and friends attending a funeral avoid ostentatious dress or behavior. At the cemetery, it is a religious privilege and duty to assist in the burial. *K’vurah* is the custom of placing at least three measures of earth into the grave.

Once the committal service has ended, all attending ritually wash their hands as they leave the cemetery or before entering the *Shiva* house. *Shiva* begins immediately after the burial and continues for seven days. It is a *mitzvah* to visit a house of mourning during *Shiva*. We visit to offer friendship and sympathy to the mourner.

After a week of *Shiva*, our tradition requires that mourners begin to return to the basics of daily life. Thirty days after the funeral (*Shloshim*) marks a final communal acknowledgement and participation in the passing. At the same time, the grieving continues. The bereaved are expected to consciously mark and feel their loss acutely for the next 10 months. In the eleventh month, they can fully re-enter the world of life. And, after a year, they participate in the unveiling of the memorial marker for the departed, saying *kaddish* on the first and subsequent anniversaries of the death.

If you follow—and internalize—this timeline from start to finish, our cherished Jewish values become clear and self-evident.

We start with wisdom, which is wrapped up in the ancient notion of a transcendent soul that never dies; the belief that death is part of life, as distinct from the end of life; and the conviction that we exit life as we enter it—naked, and without pageantry.

Jewish wisdom about death and dying is tied to our past, and to passages in the Torah. When Sarah died, for example, Abraham negotiated for her burial site in a cave. And when Joseph died in Egypt, he made his children promise that he would be buried in Israel, the land of his people—and Moses carried his bones through the desert. All of this is about dignity for the deceased, and the care and well-being of those who survive.

Our second value is kindness, which infuses all that we do in the end-of-life cycle. We offer special kindness to those who believe in the immortality of the soul, because when someone dies, their soul is lost and disoriented as it adjusts to death. That’s the reason we always watch the body, and never leave it alone, until burial. And that’s the reason we recite consoling psalms—to soothe a soul in transition.

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The third value is compassion, and this is fundamentally about the living, the people who are experiencing loss. When you lose someone, you might ask, “What do I do now?” We Jews know. And we’re there to help with the decisions, so you can mourn freely and grieve with all your heart. We care about what’s right for you, and we’re determined to take care of you.

Fourth, is connection. And here we’re talking about a multiplicity of connections—to God, family, friends, congregants, the community, and the greater good. They all matter in the wake of death, and they all contribute to the same feeling of togetherness, which pushes away any sense of isolation that may descend upon mourners.

For believers, the mysterious connection with God is essential, and must be reinforced in the end-of-life-cycle.

For non-believers, it is crucial that we provide an emotional place to conjure memories of the deceased. *Shiva*, which helps to connect mourners and the community following loss, helps to do this.

And, in terms of connecting to the greater good, the Jews reach out and touch humanity by making certain that those without means are provided with the same dignified funeral—at no cost.

This is connecting to the larger—much larger—community, and it leads us to the fifth value, equality. Jews believe in our fundamental human commonality. We end this bodily life as we are born. There is a simple and decent humanity in that thought and it allows us to channel our emotions toward the deceased and the bereaved without distraction.

Modesty is the sixth value. Everything we do in the Jewish funeral process lacks ostentation. From the simple white linen shroud, to the simple wood casket, to the graveside markers, monuments and headstones that lack adornment—it’s focusing on the people, the dead and those surviving, that truly count. Put another way, the Jewish funeral eschews outer-directed style for inner-directed substance and emotional depth.

The seventh, and final, value is caring. Jewish tradition tells us that the truest and most natural act of caring is one that is received but can’t be reciprocated. In other words, the ultimate in caring takes place when we give with no possibility

of repayment. This is exactly the feeling and emotional expression behind the Jewish funeral. We console the living unconditionally; and we honor the dead with hearts that are fully accepting.

We started this Introduction by discussing the importance of the values-driven Jewish end-of-life cycle.

My fervent hope, and my sincere wish, is that you now have a better sense of what Jews do when a loved one dies, or that you're at least moving closer and on the way to some thoughtful understanding of this.

It's all in that last sentence.

We know what to do. We remove all the barriers, all the obstacles, all the hurdles. And we let the love and care pour out without forgetting, for a single moment, that death has taken one of us from our warm embrace.

We know what to do. We try, as best as we can, to honor the deceased with all the dignity we can muster.

And we know what to do, because we give everything we have to the survivors in a clearly planned attempt to help mend broken hearts that are bursting with sadness and loss.

So, from planting a tree in remembrance of the deceased, to lighting a candle and remembering a loved one's name in synagogue on the anniversary of his or her death, Jews never forget.

We never forget what it means to live. What it means to die. And what it means to grieve and mourn.

We never forget.

And we won't ever forget.

There's an old saying that first Jews do and then we learn. The doing of our end-of-life services, practices and rituals have taught us much over the many centuries. What we know—now and forever—is that death and mourning must be met with a soulful simplicity based upon the wisdom and time-tried experience of our traditions.

That's the truth—our truth—and it's everlasting. 

Jewish Mourning Practices

Before Death

- Confession. The prayer recited by the dying person or for them by another. It includes the *Shema*. (*Vidui*)

- The guarding of the body between death and burial (*Shmirah*)
- Ritual cleansing/washing (*Tahara*)
- Shrouds (*Tachrichim*)
- Coffin (*Aron*)
- “True lovingkindness,” meaning the most authentic, pure form of lovingkindness. This refers to the care for the body of the deceased since we cannot expect anything in return (*Chesed shel Emet*)

From the Time of Death Until Burial

- “Blessed is the true judge” Traditional exclamation of acceptance upon hearing of someone’s death (“*Baruch dayan emet*”)
- The phase of mourning between death and burial (*Aninut*)
- A person in a state of aninut (*Onayn*)
- Sacred Society. The volunteer group that takes care of preparing the body and organizing the funeral (*Chevra Kadisha*)
- The deceased: male (*Met*), female (*Meta*)
- The guardian of the body who recites psalms and studies in the name of the deceased (*Shomer*)

The Funeral

- Tearing one’s garment as a sign of mourning (*Kriah*)
- Mourner (*Avel*)
- Mourning (*Avaylut*)
- Funeral (literally “accompanying”). The term refers specifically to the funeral procession, but generally to the entire funeral (*L’vayah*)
- Eulogy (*Hesped*)
- “God full of compassion” The memorial prayer that mentions the name of the deceased (*Ei Malay Rachamim*)

The Burial (Kevura)

- Seven stops (*Sheva Atzirot*)
- Interment by filling the grave with an inverted shovel, to signify the difficulty of burying a loved one or community member
- Prayer of acceptance (*Tzidduk HaDin*)
- Mourner's prayer (*Kaddish*)
- Mourners pass through parallel lines of friends and family, Shurot, as they say, "May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." ("HaMakom yenachem etchem b'toch sha'ar avelei tziyon v'yerushalayim.")
- Ritual Handwashing. It is traditional to pour water over one's hands prior to exiting the cemetery or at the house of *shiva*. Hands are not dried, to symbolically let the memory of the deceased linger. (*Netilat Yadayim*)

- Meal of comfort prepared by friends for the mourners to eat after the funeral (*Seudat Havra-ah*)
- The 30-day period of mourning (includes *Shiva*). One gets up from *Shiva*, but still wears the *kriah* and observes other forms of mourning (*Shloshim*)

From Shloshim Until the End of the First Year of Mourning

- The annual anniversary of a person's death (*Yahrzeit*)
- Putting up the gravestone. Also called the unveiling (*Hakamat Matzayvah*)
- Gravestone (*Matzayvah*)
- Memorial service recited in the synagogue on Yom Kippur and the last days of *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot* (*Yizkor*)
- The world to come. The most common Jewish term for the afterlife (*Olam Ha-Bah*)

Shiva and Shloshim

- The seven-day period of mourning marked by staying at home (except on *Shabbat*) and having the community come to you to offer comfort and support (*Shiva*)

The Emotional Impact Of Jewish Mourning

In one of his many excellent books on death and mourning, Rabbi Earl Grollman lists 10 guidelines for the mourner's process of moving "from helplessness to hopefulness." Notice how the *halakhah* and *minhaggim*, Jewish law and customs, takes into account all these human needs for self-acceptance, emotional expression, support from others, and time; how it mobilizes communal and personal resources to help us cope with our grief.

In sum, because our rabbis were wise in their understanding of human emotional needs, when a death occurs that hurts us deeply, the Jewish laws of mourning are a special gift to us. They give the bereaved a plan to follow; structure during a time of turmoil. They guide the comforters toward sensitivity and action: a template of comfort.

1 *Accept your emotions*

The structure and continuum of traditional Jewish mourning practices is designed to support the acceptance of loss and the related emotions a mourner may be feeling. It begins with *Aninut*, which involves the suspension of all social and communal obligations.

2 *Express your feelings*

From the moment of learning of the death or experiencing it and throughout the period of mourning, there are a myriad of opportunities to acknowledge and express your feelings. A pre-funeral eulogy discussion or preparing an obituary can be focal opportunities. Sitting *Shiva* offers a powerful context for expressing and processing emotions.

3 *Don't expect miracles overnight*

Similar to accepting your emotions, in retrospect you will be able to see how the structure and continuum of traditional Jewish mourning practices provides a guide; steps along a path, whose destination is not immediately clear.

4 *If you have children, bring them into the grieving process*

By bringing children into elements such as preparing a eulogy or obituary, and discussing in advance what to expect at a funeral and burial, you will both help take care of them emotionally and by example be taking care of yourself emotionally.

5 *Escaping into loneliness is the wrong solution*

The phases of Jewish mourning are designed to provide social and communal support. Sitting *Shiva* is a mutual process by which friends and neighbors symbolically and practically reinforce the message that you are not alone.

6 *Friends are important*

The obverse of escaping into loneliness, staying connected to friends: from them being informed of your loss; supporting you at the funeral and burial; seeing their faces in *Shurot*, the parallel lines of friends and comforters, as you exit the cemetery; and the preparation of the meal of condolence; are a few of the many opportunities to experience the ties of friendship.

7 *Help yourself and others through support groups*

For some people participating in a *minyan*, twice a day, once a day, or weekly may provide structure for support. Communal agencies such as Family and Children's Services offer bereavement groups in a more secular context.

8 *Counseling may be beneficial*

Some rabbis are particularly gifted pastoral counselors. Others may choose a more secular avenue. Your funeral director may be a good resource.

9 *You have to be nice to yourself*

At a certain point in the funeral, burial, and mourning process, the focus moves from the deceased to the survivors and mourners. While there is a formal structure in Jewish tradition, feel free to also take care of yourself in ways that you suspect will work for you: a walk alone or with friends, naps, quiet time.

10 *Try to turn your pain into a positive experience*

Returning slowly, yet steadily, to daily life is a fundamental component of Jewish tradition around death. Settling family feuds, saying *kaddish*, giving *tzedakah* in memory of the deceased, participating in *yizkor* services, preparing a *matzevah*, and the naming of a baby in memory of the deceased, are a few of the many ways to acknowledge loss, while transcending pain.

CHAPTER 1

This Thing Called Honor

RABBI JERRY LEVY

Rabbi Jerry provides rabbinic support and services especially to unaffiliated and secular Jews. He is an auxiliary chaplain at an elder care facility in San Rafael. He leads the Passover Seder at the VA Hospital in the Presidio. He tutors B'nai Mitzvah students. He publishes Shalom Maker, The Journal of Visual Torah. And, he officiates at the most profound Life Cycle Ceremonies.

Silence. Listen to the sounds of silence! This is the quiet that breaks the heart. The voice of a loved one no longer fills the room with its presence.

No reporting on the day's activities. No scheduling. No "kvetches." No planning. No concerns expressed or advice given. No sharing. No messaging. This is the silence of loss, of a profound loosening, of heartrending and/or of relief. This is the sound of one's own mortality, vulnerability and limits coming true. This is the sound of mourning, of grief and of sorrow—sometimes of anger, shame and guilt. This is the sound of "Where am I now?" and "What will I do next?"

Silence, again. Standing at the grave, at the crypt or at the seashore. Listening to the heart beating, the soul constricting and the mind numbing. Only tears remain. And, precious memories. And whatever lingers as unresolved. Here is that empty place. And also, much silence.

And when it is time to recite the memorial prayer, our Kaddish, our 1,800 year old expression of gratitude for living in the center of life and love and of creativity, of experience, of hope and of thoughts of future pending —there may be only silence. The loss of a loved one is compounded by the loss of our most personal and profound traditional words —learned but forgotten, never learned, never deemed necessary, thought unimportant.

Silence. Except for a flight departing overhead. Traffic on the breeze. The wind. Bird chirping. A cell phone ringing in the distance.

This Thing Called Honor

The rabbi reads *Yitgadal V'Yitkdash...*
One lone voice. The voice of an ordained
stranger. The surrogate of Jewish Tradition.
The stand in. The replacement part. And the
sorrow is magnified (*Yitgadal*).

Now, let's rethink this.

How can there be silence when Isaac
cried out to his father, Abraham? Or,
when Jacob wrestled with the angel of
his own conscience? Or when Joseph
revealed himself to his brothers through
the sobs of his misfortune/fortune? What
kind of silence was it when Moses stood
on holy ground and the fiery voice spoke
words of challenge, of responsibility and
of commitment and covenant? And again
at Mount Sinai when Moses amidst the
shake, rattle and roll/role of the mountain
transcribed the words of sacred intent and
instruction, chiseling, chipping, etching into
the rock of ages, words that challenged,
that demanded responsible behavior and
commitment to the principle of Oneness
and Unity?

Think the Exodus from Egypt was silent—
Anything but. Think former slaves making
ready to leave and to enter into Israelite
history. This is the sound of identity in
the making. And of the cries of Egyptians
sinking beneath the waters. And Miriam's
song and the sound of timbrels by the sea.

Think the streets of Jerusalem were silent?
No, her streets and venues were filled with
sounds. Like, Hear, O Israel, like the sound
of pilgrims bringing sacrifice, the sound of
Torah read on the Temple's steps and in the
marketplace, the sound of the battle horn
calling her defenders into decisive action,
the prayers of Jews, Christians and later,
Moslems —Jerusalem must have been the
noisiest place on earth.

What is so interesting is that this silence
breaking sound is our sound. We are
the sons and daughters of the sons and
daughters who made those sounds.

And so, we honor them for giving us the
right and the privilege of making our own
sounds in their behalf. And in so doing, we
bring honor to ourselves.

Honor? Every breath we take, a child takes,
a parent takes, a friend takes is a sacred
gift. The circumstances may be dreadful,
but in every breath potential resides.
Potential is honorable.

Honor? Every learned lesson, every
experience under the sun, every question
asked and answered or pondered is holy
endeavor. The conclusion may be difficult
to comprehend, but in every lesson learned
inspiration potentially resides. Inspiration
is honorable.

Honor? Every decision to create and not
destroy, every deed of loving kindness,
every righteous act is a manifested prayer.
And a prayer maybe a personal reflection,

far from the traditional standard, even if it is personal, individual, real, authentic, enlightening, that is precisely what makes it more than potentially uplifting. Every prayer/righteous act is honorable.

Honor? Every joyful moment, every insightful moment, every expression of sincere gratitude, every time we bless another, every re-creative, restorative realization is a *Sabbath* moment. And a *Sabbath* moment is the profound experience of self-actualization. It is an encounter with the Sacred. Potential comes to fruition. A *Sabbath* moment is all about honor.

Honor? Every nighttime storm, every limit perceived or realized, every stumble, fall, failure or disappointment is a reminder of our own vulnerability. Every loss of a loved one, every tragic report, every ever-deepening wrinkle seen in the mirror is a finite moment. Every acceptance of a situation or selfless act or shared intimate detail will always be considered a death defying moment. Life honors death. And death honors life.

When death calls at the doorstep and crosses the threshold and it will, the first principle is to honor. We honor for love and for appreciation. We honor for life and for all of the shared experiences. We honor for potential given, for all of the opportunities and for the tools to actualize. We honor for the sweetness and for the conflict,

for the similarities and for the process of self-differentiation. We honor for the past and for the unfolding future. We honor for defining values held in common and for values that differ. We honor for the struggles, for the determinations, for the devotions and for the footprints left in the trail of time.

We honor our dead. We are bound by blood and genetic material to honor them. Honor defines our never-ending covenant with them.

Heavy enough? The root of the Hebrew word “To Honor,” also means heavy, weighty, not as a burden necessarily, but as a privilege or as a meritorious responsibility. Honoring a parent, a child, a relative or a friend is a spiritual gift. Difficult as it may be, as emotionally heavy and charged as it is, still, to honor a lost loved one is a blessing given and received.

We bless our loved ones at birth, when the *Tzitit* are given (an Orthodox tradition), when the child learns *Mishnayot* (also practiced by the Orthodox), at *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, at Confirmation, at the Wedding, at the *Erev Shabbat* dinner table, and when placed in the grave (although the liturgy and the blessings are different). Seems as though we have a 4,000-year-old tradition of acknowledgement, recognition and of honoring.

This Thing Called Honor

Oh yes, this may be a difficult, uncomfortable task. Some do not know how to bless: the prescribed words unknown, heartfelt emotion too difficult to utter, expression blocked by doubt, gracious and generous words unexpressed, loving words left unsaid. Some are angry and cannot find or express words of gratitude. Some know not that honoring another is a cornerstone of our tradition. Some are indifferent.

How to honor another at end of life is not a complicated task. It is a call to the Temple and then to a Jewish Mortuary or Hevra Kaddisha. It is a wish to find a resting place in consecrated ground. These are steps in the honoring process. This helps complete the circle, the cycle and the bond between the mourner and the deceased. It's the mourner's funeral. The dead have already entered the Great Shalom. We are the ones in need of acceptance, of mourning, of blessing, of remembering, of healing and recovery.

To honor our living and our dead is our way of life.

To honor is not about love. It is about respect —for the person lost and for the persons who remain. It's about self-respect. It's about dignity and consciousness and understanding and the sense of personal authenticity. Honoring another brings honor to self. To bless another is in itself a blessing.

That is what makes the recitation of the Kaddish the spiritual equivalent of covenant.¹

“

*No person
was ever honored
for what he received.
Honor has been the
reward for what he
gave.*

”

CALVIN COOLIDGE

CHAPTER 2

We are Responsible for Each Other

MICHAEL BROOKS

Michael served as the Executive Director of University of Michigan Hillel from 1980 to 2011. He is the recipient of Hillel International's *Edgar M. Bronfman* award for lifelong leadership at Michigan Hillel. In addition to suffocating by degrees at Brandeis, Harvard, The Hebrew University, Merkaz ha-Rav Kook in Jerusalem and the University of Michigan, he and his wife Ruth, z"l, were among the founders of the Havurat Shalom community in Boston. Michael received the Covenant Award in recognition of his work as one of the country's outstanding Jewish educators.

For most people, religion is about their individual relationship with God. For Jews it is about our people's collective relationship with God and with each other.

We can pray alone, but many of the most important elements of Jewish prayer—reading the Torah, reciting *kaddish*—we can only do in the presence of at least nine other Jews. Even on *Yom Kippur*, a day of prayer and intense self-reflection, we confess our sins in the first person plural —“we have sinned, we have transgressed” —because, as our

tradition teaches us, *kol yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*—all Jews are responsible for each other, in life and in death.

Historically, when a Jewish community is founded, the first thing that is established is not a synagogue or a school but a cemetery. The immediate family members usually make the arrangements for the burial of a loved one, but for those who don't have the resources, the responsibility has traditionally been the community's.

While Jews have for centuries disagreed about what a Jew is expected to do or believe, in death we are equal. Rabban Gamliel, one of the greatest rabbis in the 2nd century CE, left instructions that he be buried in *tachrichim*—a white linen shroud—so that there should be no distinction between the wealthy (like himself) and the poor. For the same reason, our tradition mandated that burial should be in a wooden coffin. Interestingly, the burgeoning green movement in America is now embracing this form of burial for environmental reasons. We were ahead of the curve by 1900 years.

We are Responsible For Each Other

Even if some Jews may not be willing to pray in each other's synagogues or eat in each other's homes, all of us can be buried as Jews regardless of our level of Jewish observance or beliefs. In the Talmud a *kofer*—a heretic—is an individual who denies God. At the Passover seder, when we collectively remember and relive our people's experience of slavery and redemption, the *haggadah* tells us that a *kofer* is not someone who doesn't believe in God but is one who has separated him- or herself from the community. Whatever we may believe or not believe, all of us have, literally and figuratively, a place at the table.

Two of the Torah's phrases to describe one who has died are *va-yishkav im avotav*—he lay with his fathers, and *va-ye-asef el amav*—he was gathered unto his people. This is why a Jewish cemetery is quite appropriately called *a beit olam*—an eternal home, for as Robert Frost famously said in his poem "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

The pain of burying a loved one can be intense for the family, but it is also a significant loss for the Jewish people. The Hebrew word for funeral—*levayah*—means accompanying, in which all may participate. The words with which we traditionally comfort mourners after the burial of their loved one are "*ha-makom yenachem etchem b'toch sh'ar availai tziyon vee'yerusahalyim*"—may God comfort you

among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. There is a tradition that a small amount of soil from Israel be included in the burial. Even if we have never have actually been to Israel, in death a part of Israel comes to us.

The most important object in our people's tradition is not a person, a building or a place. It is a book, the Torah. We stand in its presence when it is being carried, and we gently touch our *tallit* or prayer book to it and kiss it as it passes us. When we accidentally drop one of our printed sacred books—be it a *siddur* (prayer book) or a volume of the Talmud—our tradition is also to kiss it before setting it down again. And when our sacred books are worn out, as eventually happens to all of the things in life that we cherish, they are not burned or trashed or recycled, but lovingly buried in a special section of our cemetery.

The Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer once said that our life is a book in which the pages only turn in one direction. While we can't turn back to the pages that have already been read, we remain forever bound with them, just as we will always be with those we loved. Every one of them has been, and will always be, not only a part of our individual stories but also a part of our people's story, one that will never end. ♡

“

*The greatness of a
community is most
accurately measured by
the compassionate actions
of its members.*

”

CORETTA SCOTT KING

CHAPTER 3

The Funeral is a Gift for the Living

**RABBI STEPHEN S.
PEARCE**

Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce, DD, Ph.D., served Congregation Emanu-El as the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Senior Rabbi from 1993 to 2013. Ordained at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, he earned his doctorate in counselor psychology at St. John's University. He is a board member of Palo Alto University and an advisory board member of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture. Previously, he served on the board of the Graduate Theological Union and is a past president of the Northern California Board of Rabbis.

Why have a funeral when in some circles today funeral rites or observances are omitted?

Judaism's customs and rituals surrounding death and dying provide sensitive ceremonies that afford closure and peace for mourners. In this regard, a funeral is a final gift for the living, as family members offer the last loving act to a cherished parent, child, sibling or spouse. When there is no funeral, often there is no closure. For example, a man age 70 who lost his father in the Shoah, agreed to have a funeral for his father after many decades in which such closure was lacking. The long-delayed funeral provided this son with peace that enabled him to move on at long last.

In another example, a 42-year-old man whose mother died when he was seven years old was deprived of the mourning experience of attending her funeral.

After many years, he tracked down a rich treasure trove of information about his parent and her funeral. This effort eased his life of hurt, loss and longing with this enriched knowledge that allowed him to draw closer to his mother than he had been in all the years since she was alive.

Another important consideration for a funeral is that a funeral provides the opportunity to recount stories and offer redemption to poorly understood aspects of the deceased's life. For example, a man who was a workaholic might be described as a loving, devoted husband and father who was determined to provide everything necessary for his family to prosper, year after year. That is the humanity of a Jewish funeral, and that is why it is so critical to our sense of wellbeing at such a time of loss and longing.

So, why a funeral? Because we are not just born, die and then disappear without a trace. A funeral is a ritual that sanctifies

The Funeral is a Gift for the Living

life—a funeral makes a life holy. It respects a precious family member in death just as he or she was cherished in life.

Why a funeral? The real question is—Why not a funeral? Surprisingly to many, all Jewish customs, including the funeral, are conducted for the living and not for the deceased! Wishes not to have a funeral may be disregarded because survivors have the right under Jewish Law to disregard such requests, especially if the instructions are offensive or disconnects mourners from their beloved dead. In short, not having a funeral can be damaging on many levels because in the end, it is not possible to divorce death from the mourner.

The operative notion for the celebration of a life is that life must go on. This principle includes joining together at a meal after returning from the cemetery at which time stories from the life of a loved one now missing are recounted. Discussions about God and afterlife often surface as well. A festival *Yom Kippur Yizkor* Sermon service provides people with additional opportunity to remember loved ones and see them through a vale of tears at a worship service—often noticed when the names of loved ones who have passed away during the past year are recited.

Today's Jews often claim to be "spiritual but not religious." They may feel alienated from synagogue and Jewish life, but nevertheless, they still have their clear ideas about what they want at the end of life. Clergy can be teachers by providing people with a variety of options surrounding Jewish rituals of mourning and death that will not only afford them a sense of peace but also prevent families from enduring a period of anguish and indecision. Although cremation followed by a later memorial has become increasingly popular, mourners need to understand how this might or might not meet their need to grieve and find closure, but no matter what arrangements are made, what must always be kept in mind is that a funeral is the intersection of an ending and a beginning—it is a gift that provides peace and healing. ♡

“

*...What I'm saying isn't
for him. If my words
were for him they would
be different; softer, and
more meaningful. They
would be whispered
in his ear instead of
projected to a crowd.*

”

CHEYENNE BERANDI

CHAPTER 4

Ethics of My Father

STUART SCHOFFMAN

*Stuart Schoffman is a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. From 1990 to 2007, he was a columnist for the *Jerusalem Report*, and he now writes about politics and culture for a variety of Jewish publications in the United States. His translations of Hebrew literature include books by the Israeli authors A.B. Yehoshua, David Grossman and Meir Shalev. Before moving to Israel in 1988, he worked as a writer for *Time* magazine and as a Hollywood screenwriter.*

On Purim I went to visit my parent in their Jerusalem apartment.

My father was weak and his hearing was poor. I sat at his bedside and began reading him the Megillah, the Book of Esther. He did not respond until I reached the verse in chapter 2 where the character of Mordecai is introduced as *ish yehudi*, a Jewish man.

Suddenly my father interjected,

"The Kotzker Rebbe asked, Why does it say ish yehudi? Why not just yehudi?"

"Why, Abba?"

"Eyder tsu zayn a yid," he replied in Yiddish, his mother tongue, "darf men zayn a mensh."

Before being a Jew, you have to be a man, a human being. He died at home six weeks later, on the 29th of Nisan. He was 92.

It was the last bit of Torah he ever taught me, and a profoundly pertinent one in our troubled times. Of course he had conveyed this lesson to me over many years, by example. Louis Schoffman—Elazar in Hebrew—was a mensch above all. A gentleman; a gentle man, kind and wise and dignified, who valued the dignity of others no less than his own. He was richly conversant with the entire Talmud, but the tractate he cherished most was Pirkei Avot, "Ethics of the Fathers," which in Chapter 4, Mishnah 1, captures my father in a timeless adage: "Who is respected? He who respects other people."

He was a man of prodigious learning, blessed with an extraordinary memory. He could recite Russian poems by Lermontov and quote Dante in Italian and Virgil in Latin. Well into my fifties, I could count on him to help me with my homework. I would phone and ask, "Abba, what's that great line from Ibn Gabirol? Where does Rashi say such-and-so?" And he would always know.

Yet he was also modest in the extreme. Several years ago I began pressing him to tell me more of his life story. More than

Ethics of My Father

once he responded with an anecdote about Hayyim Nahman Bialik, the greatest modern Hebrew poet. When Bialik published his first poem, “El Hatzippor” (“To the Bird”), in the 1890s, the editor of the literary journal asked him to provide a bio, by way of introduction to the readers. Bialik answered: “I have no biography.”

By which Bialik meant, and my father too: What’s to tell? My story is so common, so typical. But this is the very point. My father was a representative man, a member of the last generation of *maskilim*, Jewish intellectuals of a special time and place: European-born, multi-lingual Hebraists; rationalists devoted to Jewish tradition; liberal humanists with a passion for knowledge and independent thought. In the synagogue on *Shabbat*, in Brooklyn and Jerusalem, he would sit with such men and quietly argue fine points of philology and religion. Few are left, and we won’t see their like again.

Born in a Latvian village called Ape, he grew up in Valka, today a quiet, leafy town on the Estonian border. His strongest memory was of skating on the frozen river and being chased off the ice by his gentile friends’ older brothers, who had come home from university infected with anti-Semitism. He arrived in New York as a boy of 11.

His father, Schneur Zalman, a ritual slaughterer, came from a Hasidic family and wanted his eldest son to be a rabbi. But after two years at Yeshiva University, my father switched to Brooklyn College, where he majored in the polar opposite of rabbinics: classics, Greek and Latin. He received his Ph.D. in Jewish history in 1941, writing his dissertation on the relations between the Church and the Jews in medieval Spain. After serving with the American army in North Africa and Italy in World War II, he became a professor of Hebrew at Brooklyn College. In 1979, he and my mother retired and made *aliyah*.

I asked him once when he first became a Zionist. “I was 7,” he replied.

“Not 6, Abba, or 8?”

“It was 1919,” he said firmly.

“It was after World War I, and everyone around me was getting a country of their own. The Latvians, the Estonians, the Finns. I wanted one, too.”

And I remember a walk we took in Jerusalem years ago, not long before I went off to work in Hollywood. Near the Montefiore Windmill we paused and took in the view of the Old City walls.

“Do you know why the Crusaders failed?” my father asked.

“Why, Abba?”

“Because after 200 years Europe lost interest in them,” he said, pointedly.

"If that ever happens with American Jews, Zionism will fail, too."

Three years ago, my father suffered the first of his strokes. One day we were sitting together on the terrace at the rehab hospital when he began to recite something in English that was unfamiliar to me. At Yeshiva University, he said, his English teacher had required everyone to pick a favorite passage to memorize, and he had picked this one. I jotted down a few words and went home and Googled them and here is what my father recited verbatim, after 70 years, from *Areopagitica*, John Milton's 17th-century tract against censorship:

*"For books are not absolutely dead things,
but do contain a potency of life in them
to be as active as that soul was whose
progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as
in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction
of that living intellect that bred them."*

My father was a bibliophile of the first order. The shelves of his library teemed with volumes that reflected his boundless intellectual curiosity. Those familiar with the modern classics of Jewish historiography know him for his elegant translation from Hebrew into English of Yitzhak Baer's magisterial "History of the Jews in Christian Spain." Apart from that, though he was a gifted stylist, he didn't write books of his own. He was a man who believed in *Torah lishma*, learning for its own sake.

The Kotzker, along with other great teachers of Hasidism, was an exemplar of our oral tradition and also left the writing to others. For decades my father imparted his love of learning to untold numbers of students, many of whom went on to be teachers and scholars themselves, writers of books and articles that are also, as Milton put it, the progeny of my father's soul. On his gravestone are these words, adapted from the very first passage of his beloved "Ethics of the Fathers."

He'emid talmidim harbeh: He raised many disciples. May his memory be a blessing. 

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?

ROZ CHAST

*Roz Chast is an American cartoonist who creates humorous observations about everyday life and childhood. Chast's cartoons are based on her own experiences. She is best known for her work as a staff cartoonist at the New Yorker and for her graphic memoir, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* Chast's work has been exhibited in group and solo shows at the Museum of the City of New York, The New York Academy of Sciences, the Metropolitan Opera House and the Contemporary Jewish Museum of San Francisco. She has received numerous awards, and has been awarded honorary doctorates from Dartmouth College, Lesley University and Pratt Institute.*

CAN'T WE TALK ABOUT SOMETHING MORE PLEASANT?



I was quite aware that my parents had had tough lives - way, way tougher than mine.

You don't know what trouble IS!



I had heard the stories my whole life - about how their parents had come over from Russia at the turn of the century with **NOTHING** ...



...about how my maternal grandfather had been an engineer in Russia, but how, between his inability to speak English and his being Jewish, he wound up barely being able to support five kids and his wife working as a presser in the garment district;

and how bitter and angry he was; and how my grandmother washed clothes for other people;



and how even sadder my father's family was. His mother was one of nine children.



Not only was she the only girl but she was also the only one of her siblings to survive the Russian cholera epidemic.



Then, in a forest, her father had his throat cut "from ear to ear" by "bandits."



I don't know what happened to her mother. But she came to New York, married my paternal grandfather, and had just one child, my father, by Cesarean section, in 1912...

...a horrible ordeal that involved, according to my mother, "opening her up from her neck to her you-know-what."



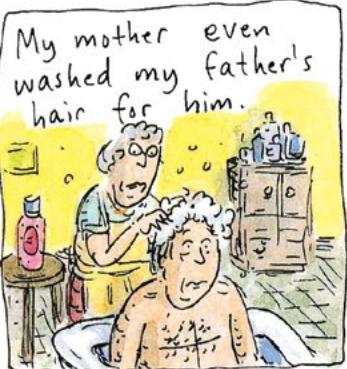
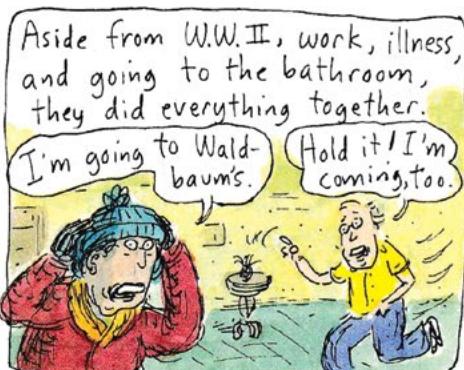
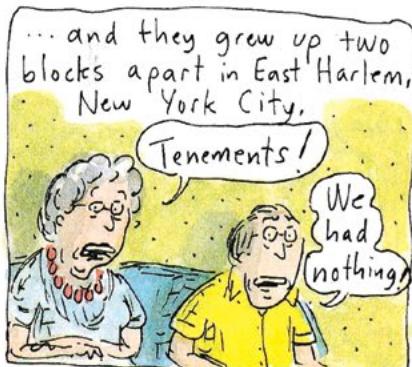
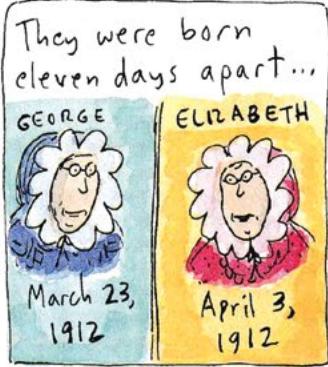
Between their one-bad-thing-after-another lives and the Depression, World War II, and the Holocaust, in which they both lost family —

it was amazing that they weren't crazier than they were.



Who could blame them for not wanting to talk about death?



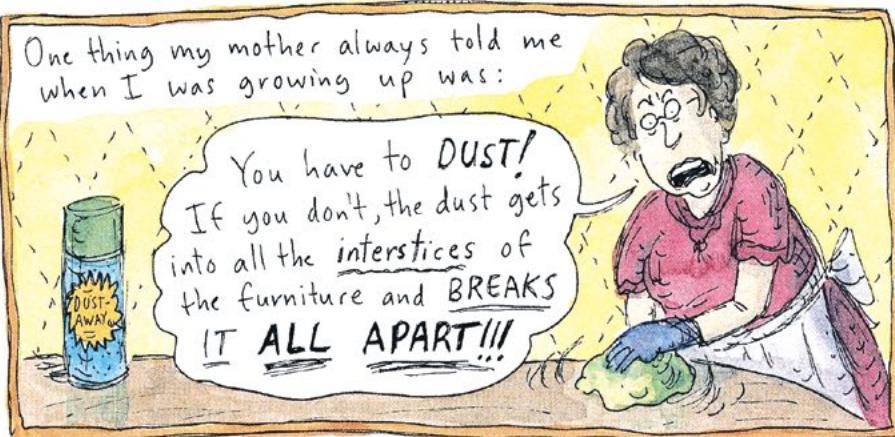


I visited them for the first time in years at their apartment in Brooklyn, where I grew up. What I noticed first was the level of

GRIME

WHAT
IS
GRIME?

It's not ordinary dust, or a greasy stovetop that hasn't been cleaned in a week or two. It's more of a coating - something that happens when people haven't cleaned in a really long time.



It was clear that she had stopped worrying about that.

BUT WHAT
DO YOU
DO?

If you pick up a sponge and start cleaning...



...it will not necessarily be perceived as helpful. The person you're trying to help might even feel insulted, or embarrassed.



I wasn't great as a caretaker, and they weren't great at being taken care of.

By 2002, they were 90. It was hard not to notice that every time I came to see them the grime had grown thicker...



The piles of newspapers, magazines, and junk mail had grown larger...



...and they themselves had grown frazier.



I could see that they were slowly leaving the sphere of TV-commercial old age...

- SPRY!
- TOTALLY INDEPENDENT!
- JUST LIKE A NORMAL ADULT,
- BUT WITH SILVER HAIR!

...and moving into the part of old age that was scarier, harder to talk about, and not a part of this culture.



SOMETHING WAS COMING DOWN THE PIKE.

It's no accident that most consumer ads are pitched to people in their 20s and 30s.



Once you go through that, you can never look at YOUR stuff in the same way.



You start to look at your stuff a little... POSTMORTEMISTICALLY.

One day, my kids...



If you've lived more than two decades as a consumer, you probably have quite the accumulation, even if you're not a hoarder.



An ergonomic garlic press and throw pillows and those stupid sunflower dessert plates and seven travel alarm clocks and eight nail clippers and a colander and a flat iron and three old laptops and barbells and a set of FUCKING BOCCE BALLS, and patio furniture and an autoharp, for God's sake, and your old flute from high school and a zillion books and towels and sheets and a wok you never used...

My parents weren't hoarders, quite. Nevertheless, no one could deny that the Depression had had an effect on their shopping habits:

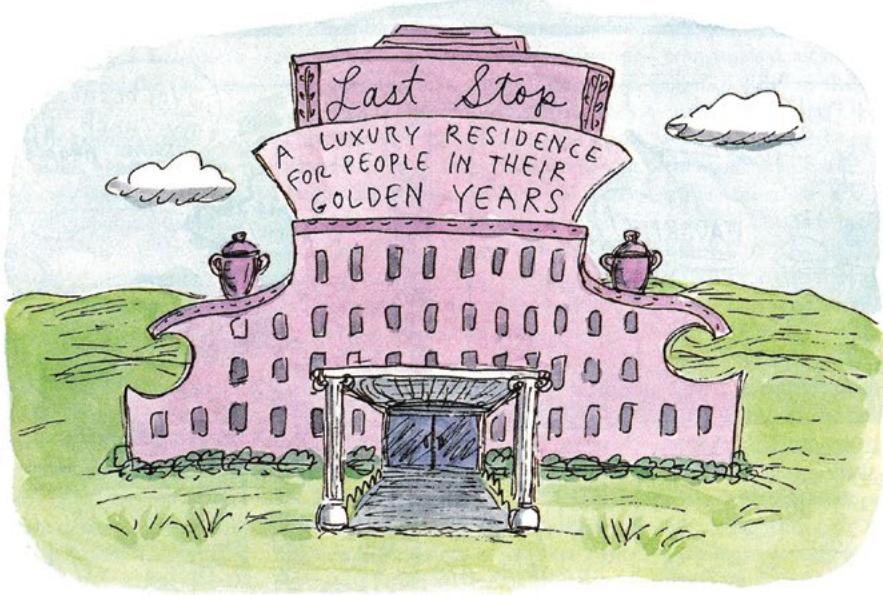




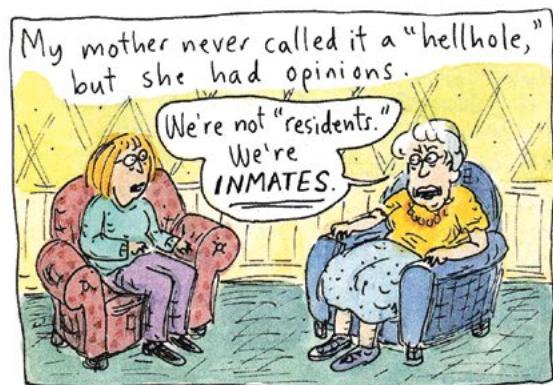
But anytime I mentioned "assisted living" the reaction was extremely negative.



Somehow, they were able to see through the euphemisms.



Finally, I got them to move to a "Place."



A TYPICAL AFTERNOON AT THE PLACE



Here's what I used to think happened at "the end":



What I was starting to understand was that the middle panel was sometimes a lot more painful, humiliating, long-lasting, complicated, and hideously expensive.



A few months after arriving at The Place, my father broke his hip. When he developed painful bedsores that would not heal, he told my mother that he wanted to "pack it in." He was tired of the work of staying alive and tired of the pain. My mother did not care for his defeatist attitude.

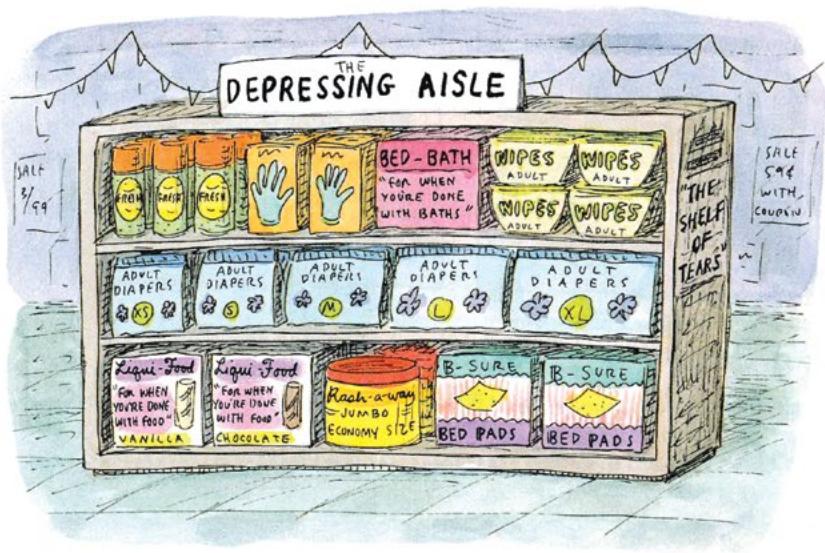
I told Daddy he was coming with me to 100 if I had to drag him
KICKING AND SCREAMING!!!



He entered hospice, which my mother didn't particularly approve of, either.



Shortly after my father died, my mother began a long, slow decline. The Place suggested that I get around-the-clock care, so I hired two nurses. Each would do a twelve-hour shift. My money worries increased. Besides the monthly rent at The Place and the two nurses, there was her medication, and there were all these supplies she needed: bed pads, Depends, extra pads to wear inside the Depends, latex gloves for the nurses, Ensure, baby wipes... ← →



A couple of weeks into the around-the-clock care, hospice, etc., I went to see my mother at The Place, filled with dread and fearing the worst.

Instead, she was sitting on the couch with one of the private nurses, a middle-aged woman from Jamaica named Goodie. She was fully dressed. She was wearing shoes. She was eating a tuna sandwich.



I knew her retreat from the abyss should have filled me with joy, or at least relief. However, what I felt when I saw her was closer to:



I had sort of adjusted to the idea that she was dying, and this was THROWING ME OFF.



On the floor of my closet, along with shoes, old photo albums, wrapping paper, a sewing machine, a shelf of old sleep T-shirts, an iron, a carton of my kids' art work, and some other miscellaneous stuff, are two special boxes.

One holds my father's cremains. The other box holds my mother's.



My father's box is inside a navy-blue velvet drawstring bag, which I placed inside the ancient Channel 13 bag that he took everywhere.

My mother's box is inside a maroon velvet drawstring bag. It is "en plein air."

Until I figure out a better place for them, they're staying in my closet.

R. Chou

“
A caring heart
that listens is often
more valued than an
intelligent mind
that talks.

”

ANONYMOUS

CHAPTER 6

Yom Kippur Yizkor Sermon

RABBI AUBREY L. GLAZER

Rabbi Aubrey L. Glazer, Ph.D. has served as the spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Sholom. He now serves as Senior Rabbi at Shaare Zion Congregation in Montreal, Canada. A native of Toronto, Canada, Rabbi Glazer holds a B.A. in French Language and Literature (University of Toronto, 1994), an M.A. in Jewish Philosophy (Jewish Theological Seminary Graduate School), and a Ph.D. in Hebrew Hermeneutics (University of Toronto, June 2005).

Rabbi Glazer envisions our Jewish tradition as evolving and nimble, designed to sustain and improve the intellectual and spiritual potential within each of us, and to inspire us to act as agents of positive change in the world.

I was recently interviewed for the local Jewish paper, the J., and when I read it in print I was shocked to see the interviewer had added an extra year to my age.

"And yet it reminds me of this time of year when each of us is supposed to ponder the fact that we are one year older, one year closer to our end than we were a year ago."

Therefore, I feel it is important at this time of year to ask ourselves some hard questions about what value we place on life, our own and others, and what we want our lives to mean after they're over.

It's hard to watch the news while contemplating how humanity "values" human life. Were you as ashamed and horrified as I was by those images of the beheadings of James Foley and Steven Sotloff, the American reporters beheaded by ISIS. Did you watch the decapitations or did you turn away? Why, why do these decapitations disturb us so much? After all, didn't the Roman Empire behead citizens and didn't the French revolutionaries employ the guillotine to decapitate opponents, even their queen? Well, this manner of killing re-emerges today within strains of radical Islam that legitimize beheadings of both state and non-state civilian actors. While this may be terrifying, we need to be careful not to paint Islam with the stereotypical brush. Some Islamists who practice decapitation believe that God has ordained them to obliterate their enemies in this manner. I

*Yom Kippur
Yizkor Sermon*

have to say, this disturbs me greatly and has left me sleepless for many nights. And I'm not alone. President Obama is also alarmed. Even if he claims ISIS to be a small group of killers, decapitating their way across Northern Iraq and Syria, their numbers swell to over 20,000 fighters. With an engaged military and a disengaged American public, *can we as Jews afford to be disconnected?*

As American Jews, we all have strong convictions about our ecumenical responsibilities. I pray that important outreach work influences the potential for American Islam that can evolve and integrate the values of democracy and egalitarianism, just as has happened with American Judaism. The issue of beheading, however, is undoubtedly nuanced. The Koran often uses idioms like "*Dab al rikab*," which simply mean "killing." So I was confused and I consulted with our local expert on Islam in Los Angeles, my colleague, Dr. Reuven Firestone, who warned me not to oversimplify by painting the radical as the essence in Islam. Dr. Firestone, as a rabbi, also urged me to be patient, seeing that he's in the midst of writing an entire book on this very subject to clear up many of the misunderstandings which abound. Hopefully, Dr. Firestone will be able to teach us about his fascinating

research, but we need to learn more in a nuanced way about Islam as American Jews. For the time being, translators don't know what to do with this verse, the killing words of "*Dab al rikab*," so they translate it literally as "strike the knife." Yet here the context is one of war. The Koran does not seem to treat beheading as a judicial punishment. If it did, it would certainly seem to be more humane than some of the Toraitic forms of capital punishment, such as stoning or burning, neither of which appear in the Koran. We know however, since rabbinical times, these forms of judgment have been marginalized due to changing the community values, sometimes referred to as *kavod ha'tzibbur*. Even if beheading is only accepted by a radical minority of 20,000 ISIS fighters, still those fading images of decapitations continue to terrify us as sensitive religious beings and compassionate humans.

As we think about this, I'm going to ask you two further questions which you may feel uncomfortable pondering, and if you feel that way, I apologize, but please bear with me. Anyone who takes in, and feasts, on a sermon can get "spiritual indigestion" unless as Rabbi Simon Greenberg taught, they are provided with a religious exercise to implement and to integrate the sermon's message. My goal is to avoid "religious indigestion" by giving you religious exercises for the New Year, at this time of introspection and self-purification, and preparation of Yom Kippur, that liminal

moment of death and dying before we can actually be renewed. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands because I respect your privacy, but how many of you have made your final arrangements? I would guess that many of you have already done so. I would guess that many of you have chosen your burial place and have paid your funeral expenses in advance. Isn't that so? If you have, *kol ha'kavod*, because God should bless you for your foresight because that is a great, good deed that you have done. By doing this, you have spared your loved ones from the burden of having to worry about all such details at their time of loss and pain and confusion. But let me ask another question, if I may. Have you also made arrangements for your *Shmirah*, the devotional guard that will stand duty reciting *Thilim* from the moment until you leave until the moment you are buried? And have you made the arrangements for tahara, the ritual purification, washing and dressing of your body that should be done in preparation for every Jewish funeral? Have you made arrangements for the burial society, the *Chevra Kadisha*, to care for you in advance, as well? I hope that you would do this, too, if you have not done so already. For if you do, you will accomplish two things: One, you will teach your children a lesson about who you are and what you stand for as a Jew; that you value your own life and theirs, even during separation;

and two, you will put yourself on the side of Judaism, Christianity and liberal Islam that is now waging over the battle of whether the body is holy, or whether the body is just a broken down piece of machinery that can be disposed of when it is conquered and no longer of any use. And you will have taken your stand in the battle that is now being waged between Western civilization and ISIS terrorism over whether the body, even of your enemy, is sacred and precious, or whether the body of your enemy can be desecrated and profaned and thrown away. I ask in the name of the war being waged between these two traditions to choose the way of life, a cornerstone Jewish value, both in life and after life.

We must, if we hope to bring blessing to this New Year, to restore the fallen crown of humanity, and to restore the hopefulness of what it means to be truly human in a year that appears to have been so hopelessly inhumane.

We must model a way of life and death for our community and others that celebrates and empowers the power of the mind. This one divine gift, *Betzelem Elohim*, is the distinctive feature of civilized humanity and religion that must be modeled daily. For without it, the Divine presence has lost in this world, the crown of holiness remains bereft. As the blessed memories of our loved ones now fill our minds as we enter into *yizkor*, let us resolve to bring their life lessons into our lives, by bringing to fruition

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Yizkor Sermon

their noble desires still unrealized. *Y'hi ratzon*, may it be the will of the One of Holy Blessing that humanity is not led by its tail, but rather restore the divine gift of using our heads as religious beings this New Year.

And please remember the three religious exercises that I prescribe:

(1). *Shmirah* —arrange for and teach your children about the devotional guard that will stand duty from the moment you die until the moment that you are buried.

(2). *Tahara*—teach and arrange for your children to understand why and how the body is washed and dressed that should be done at your Jewish funeral to prepare for that rite.

(3). Arrange for and teach your children about the burial society, the *Chevra Kadisha*, the burial society that cares for the preparation and transition of your body for burial.

As your rabbi and spiritual leader, please, I ask you one more thing: I know that it's been a long-standing custom for Ashkenazic Jews to leave the room if your parent is still alive and *yizkor* is about to begin. But please, just stay put for the opening communal prayer at this time.

As we are almost ready to begin *yizkor*, don't leave the room until together we have each honored the Jewish martyrs of the *Shoah* and the memories of Daniel Pearl, James Foley and Steven Sotloff.

May we be inspired by all these memories to be living blessings by renewing our commitment to lead with our head, to deepen our Jewish practice for this New Year. May the Divine imprint continue to abide and guide us on our daily paths as we use our heads together.

And let us say, *Amen.* 

“
You can’t
choreograph
death, but you can
choreograph your
funeral.”

”

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

CHAPTER 7

Spirituality in End-of-Life Care

RABBI AMY EILBERG

Rabbi Amy Eilberg is the first woman ordained as a Conservative rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. She currently serves as the director of the Pardes Rodef Shalom (Pursuer of Peace) Communities Program, helping synagogues and Jewish organizations place the pursuit of peace in interpersonal relationships at the center of their communal mission. Rabbi Eilberg also serves as a spiritual director and interfaith activist in the San Francisco Bay area.

My experience as a hospice chaplain taught me much of what I know about life and about the life of the spirit.

Indeed, there is no better classroom than the deathbed when it comes to the bedrock truths of life: that we are fragile beings, here but for a short time; that we often lose perspective; and that what is most important in life is love, compassion and human connection.

That said, I do not believe we can ever map the territory of dying; the landscape is too complex and mysterious for charting. But it is possible to sketch out what one may find when working in the presence of death.

Let's start with grief. Of course, most people facing death find themselves grieving. There's sadness about leaving loved ones behind, pain about coming

to the end of life, regrets about the life one has lived and fear about what death may bring. In some instances, there's also anger about illness, resentments toward caregivers, guilt and relief.

In this territory, it's important to listen deeply, because sharing grief with another can often bring peace. Sometimes there's no consolation, and caregivers must remember that their compassionate presence still makes a difference.

I believe that caregivers rarely succeed in making a person less afraid of death. The fear may be too primal to be soothed. Caregivers serve best by concentrating on being present, in the hope that their caring will offer comfort.

As death approaches, the dying naturally ask whether their lives had meaning. Care providers can be deeply helpful by affirming the meaningfulness of each person's unique life, and to help the dying make peace with unfinished issues in their lives.

The ability to speak words of love and appreciation at the end of life can bring comfort and blessing to both the dying person and to loved ones. This is an

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opportunity to acknowledge the strength of relationships and to complete what is unfinished, to share tears and love together as death approaches. The final days of life are blessed, and the precious words exchanged at this time become part of a legacy of love that survivors can carry with them through their lifetimes.

Not everyone wants to plan his or her own funeral. But for those who wish to, the process can be a way of exerting control while it's still possible, and it can also relieve survivors of the full burden of decision-making when death comes. This can be a remarkable gift to all.

When death is near, connection to that which is larger than oneself really matters, too.

I have often been called to the bedside of a dying person who confessed that he or she had long been estranged from Jewish ritual. Often this is followed by a request—a bit confusing to the patient him or herself—for the recitation of final confessional prayers.

This deep need for connection in the face of death helps explain why the prayer that Jews traditionally recite when the moment of death draws near is the *Shema*. The best known of Jewish prayers, the *Shema* is a profound affirmation of connection to the Jewish community around the world and across time. On a spiritual level, the *Shema* affirms that all is one, that everything is interconnected.

As we all know, dying is rarely beautiful. Most people struggle against death's approach and find this time unspeakably painful. While miraculous moments of transformation do sometimes unfold, people generally die the way they lived. So it's unrealistic, and profoundly disrespectful, to expect people to face the challenges of death in the way that we caregivers—who are newcomers and strangers to this person's life—judge to be healthy, enlightened or wise.

Yet sometimes, there are moments of awesome beauty, times when it seems that blessings are emerging right here in the shadow of death, even that everything will be okay. The dying person feels cared for, feels that life is just as it should be and feels that loved ones are precious.

It takes a person unafraid of death to share these moments with a dying person. And it takes strength to listen quietly and reverently as a person on a deathbed speaks the truth of his or her experience at this sacred time.

When caring for the dying, caregivers find themselves at the mysterious nexus between life and death. No matter how familiar these encounters become to us, they always invite deep reflection on living and dying. These moments touch personal losses, and they remind caregivers of their own mortality and vulnerability. They can also bring us into painful confrontation with the raw face of injustice—especially when

a death is untimely or, in our judgment, preventable. Perhaps most of all, they remind us of our own powerlessness in the face of life and death.

To be sure, there are important lessons to be learned when we're in close contact with the reality of death.

When there is no choice but to recognize that life is finite, that everyone will eventually die, people are often catapulted into an intense experience of the exquisite value of each day and the preciousness of life.

Thus, death can be viewed as a teacher about the beauty of life, about the deep importance of loved ones and treasured values, and about the fact that loss sometimes brings blessing in its wake.

Death is also a teacher about God's presence in the world, about human goodness, compassion and love.

Finally, death is a teacher about courage, hope, trust and faith, about believing in that which is unseen, and about moving through the valley of the shadow until light is visible again.

I wish to God that there were some less painful route to these learnings. But I see over and over again how death and loss teach us things that we might not have learned in any other way. ♡

Staying Connected —The Unbreakable Bonds Between the Living and the Dead

NORMAN FISCHER

A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Norman Fischer has been publishing poetry since 1979. He holds an MFA from the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop and a masters from the Graduate Theological Union at the University of California at Berkeley. Norman has been a Zen Buddhist priest for nearly 30 years, serving as abbot for the San Francisco Zen Center from 1995 to 2000. Founder and teacher of the Everyday Zen Foundation, he is one of the most highly respected Zen teachers in America, regularly leading Zen Buddhist retreats and events.

SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL:

Have you ever thought you were approaching your own death?

NORMAN FISCHER:

Yes, every day for the last 45 years or so.

I've always been from an early age concerned about or sort of obsessed with the idea of death so I thought about it all the time but in a sort of romantic way, I guess. When you are young, death is an idea more than anything and you don't think it might happen unless you think about it in a lurid way as I did.

But ever since I was 40 I thought of death as a reality that was coming soon. Certainly in recent years sometimes I think I might be dying today, so it's very immediate to me. I think this is common for people in religious practice as an occupation and as a daily effort. I think that's why people are given a religion, because of our close relationship with death.

In the *Amidah*, in the introductory section, it says, "Master of Life and Death" and so it's a constant refrain in our daily prayers: death is a reality, it's coming soon and we are alive thanks to God and we're grateful for that. I think gratitude for life and an awareness of death also go hand in hand. So praise of God, thanksgiving and gratitude and all the prayers that relate to that have to do with our understanding of our mortality and the vulnerability and contingency of our lives.

SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL:

You referred to how Jewish daily prayers help us acknowledge the reality of death. Some people practice with this understanding for years, and some come to it later in their life, possibly after a diagnosis. Does it matter when you start?

NORMAN FISCHER: I think it's never too late. The connection with your spiritual life and the connection with the divine is always at your fingertips. And if you don't make that connection until the end of your life, still you make it, you make it at a moment, whether you have a practice or not. But Frank is right that it's more difficult to make that connection if you have no familiarity with it. It's certainly a good idea, if someone is concerned about suffering and mortality, it's certainly a good idea to have a spiritual practice in your life and of course in Judaism the idea is

that you would ALWAYS be engaged in spiritual practice. Traditional Jewish life is a life steeped in spirituality. Every time you eat a meal, every time you get out of bed, every time you go to bed, put on clothes, go to the bathroom, you're referencing the divine so it's designed as a system of built-in reminders of the connection between your life and the divine. So in Judaism the assumption is that there is a spiritual practice that you start when you are a child and you continue throughout your life so there's no question about losing track of it or taking your life for granted. And also Judaism has built into it the reality that we do lose track of ourselves. This is why we have the cycle of holidays. So losing track is part of the process. But in the contemporary world, people lose track entirely of Judaism for an entire lifetime and maybe at some point they have the incentive to go back to it for something. As Rabbi Alan Lew z"l and I always reflected: For most Jews today, Judaism as a spiritual practice is not at all accessible because they have no cultural support for it. They don't have the background knowledge you would have if you had prayed as a kid. You would have knowledge of the prayers and so on. So our answer was meditation practice as a way of

connecting people to Jewish spirituality, which is so immediately accessible. So, I think that when someone thinks about their life and what is meaningful and thinks about mortality, if you follow that thought long enough, you realize that the response to that is some form of spiritual practice, that is real for me and personal and one I can engage. And then when you are connected to some form of spiritual practice you are engaged in your mortality. You are preparing yourself for that time. You're making the pathway in your heart toward the divine. You're clearing way so it's there for you. If you're lucky, you don't need any help at all but sometimes you need a rabbi or teacher to help you.

SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL:

What do you make of Psalm 23?

NORMAN FISCHER: Well it always made perfect sense to me. It references death in one line but it is a psalm of comfort in times of trouble. It mentions the shadow of death and adversity. It mentions God as shepherd, God as comforter and talks about how even when death comes my way, "I'm not worried." Because even

then I feel some confidence and joy knowing that God is supporting me.

If you hear it, really taking it in, you couldn't be afraid and upset. When your heart is broken, God is there. There's a great beauty in grief. Grieving is an antidote to busyness and triviality. You can't mow the lawn when you're really open to this. Psalm 23 is conceivably the most loved piece of literature in history.

SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL:

How do you respond to questions about death and what happens to us after we die?

NORMAN FISCHER: Of course people talk with me about what happens after we die. In Buddhist contexts, people ask about reincarnation. There are no answers to these questions. All the religious teachings are not just wishful fantasies; there is a deeper meaning. For example, the idea of heaven, which is a highly evolved conversation in Christianity. It's a theoretical question. In reality, the reality of dying blows away that question.

Staying Connected

However, it does seem as if these ideas of heaven and rebirth are saying in some way our life doesn't end. Because in a way nothing ends. There is no ending of anything and any ending is just provisional—that's what I feel. There is a sense that in this lifetime, now, at the depth of our living, we can feel that a reasonably material life that we are living is not a full measure of our lives. Death is certainly a huge deal, a huge transition, just as birth is a huge transition. While it's a final ending of this expression of life—this person who looks this way, whose body is this way, whose personality is this way, whose history is this way, whose thoughts and feelings are this way—that person's conditions come together and create that person and those conditions fall away. But the fundamental life force of that person to be a living person doesn't stop existing. So life does go on.

A thrust of life does go on. I think that these teachings in spirituality are what underlie our recognition of how important love and good conduct are. If you feel that there is a mysterious continuity in this life, so that what I'm going to do in this lifetime *matters*, so that the quality of my love in this lifetime matters beyond the end of my life and I really think that's the most important thing. Some religious people say,

"Without God, there's no incentive for good conduct. The world falls apart and anyone can do whatever he or she wants, they can do whatever works for him or her. Then you have a lawless or chaotic world." But I don't think that's true because humanistic arguments have disproved that. But I think that a belief in religious life does have a profound impact on one's conduct and one's heartfelt acts and that belief in religious life are completely wrapped up with death and continuity beyond death. So I think it all works together. It's not that death is an end-of-life issue. Death is a whole life issue. All of our conduct and all of our loving and all of the quality of our hearts is all one thing. And even in the best of cases when people are consistent in denying religious life, even if it seems to me that there is a poverty there, something missing there. Something's lost there. And it's never more apparent than at the end of life. That's when you feel the missing piece more, I would think.

I want to underscore that Jewish people and non-Jewish people should think about when there is a loss, to really think about undertaking Jewish mourning practices in whatever way they can. When I lost my parents, I said *Kaddish*. I couldn't go to *shul* two times a day so I went once a week and said *Kaddish* on my own every day. And even though it's not supposed to work that way and it's probably not kosher to say *Kaddish* on your own, I did it anyway

and it was enormously helpful. So I think people should really consider doing that. And I think that in the past, people have done it as a duty to the one that's lost and it is actually a wonderful thing to do on their behalf. It's also a powerful thing for you. So for people to sit *Shiva*, for people to say *Kaddish*, to light the *Yahrzeit* candle, to realize that, if what I was saying before is true, there is no end, there's only an ongoing life in a radically different form, which means that the relationship that we had with our parents, our siblings, our spouse or partner, is gone, continues. And the continuation of that relationship is a development for us. And so I think that's how you look at every loss. Every loss at each stage of your life, and to mark that stage and make use of it spiritually and psychologically is something that you don't want to miss out on for their benefit and your own. And I think the way you can make that real is to follow the Jewish mourning practices in whatever way you can. I really encourage people to do that. And I even tell my Buddhist friends this who don't have these traditions. I have adapted those same practices for my Buddhist friends and have asked them to chant something every day for their loved one, and on the anniversary of the death, to light incense and chant for them again on that day.

In other words, I have taken those Jewish practices and offered them to Buddhist students because they are so good.

Every loss is a precious treasure to be remembered, to be practiced with, and to be continued on and on. And that's how I have practiced with it. It has filled my life with more memorials and lots of tears, but on the other hand I don't regret it at all. It's also given me a lot more gratitude and a lot more sense of connection to everyone that I meet because I have practiced it. I really want to tell people who are going to read these words that this is something important to do. 

The Value and Power of a Jewish Burial

RABBI STUART
KELMAN

Rabbi Stuart Kelman, Ph.D. is co-founder and dean of the Gamliel Institute, an online academy that examines the gamut of care surrounding death and dying – from hospice to mourning rituals to the burial itself. The Institute is a project of Kavod v'Nichum, a consortium of burial societies, Jewish funeral homes and cemeteries. And he is the founding rabbi of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, California.

We need to re-frame the ongoing Jewish debate between cremation and in-ground burial.

Too often, the argument focuses on the advantages of cremation, and not about the benefits of in-ground burial.

Part of the reason that the proponents of cremation have such a huge collective and public voice, is that there are very few people or organizations in the Jewish community stepping up and making the case for in-ground burial. This is a major error, in my opinion. And I, together with those in our Institute, would like to try to rectify it.

Unfortunately, the economics of cremation seems to be the primary factor that sways people. In America, fully one-third of those who chose cremation in 2010 said cost was a factor, up from 19 percent in 1990, according to a Funeral and Memorial Information Council survey.

And, while it may be true that a traditional Jewish funeral, including the cost of purchasing the plot, is more expensive than cremation, there are additional factors that need to be considered when making the choice—as all of us must.

Dollars and cents should never dictate. To paraphrase liberally what Rabban Gamliel, a leading first-century rabbi, said: A proper burial isn't just a privilege of the rich; funerals should be simple and inexpensive. It is the community's obligation to keep prices low. In death, everyone is equal.

Underlying the easy fixation on price is our society's denial of death. People shy away from the finality that in-ground burial represents. When dirt is shoveled onto the casket of a loved one in a cemetery, there is no escaping the sound of finality.

Despite the shock and pain of the moment, people gain real psychological wisdom and even relief as a result of this experience. Mourners are forced to accept what is, which helps provide them with closure;

The Value and Power of a Jewish Burial

in-ground burial deepens and broadens their understanding of “the end.” In sharp counterpoint, people have come up to me after cremation and said they feel like their loved one has simply disappeared.

I empathize. And I know that, unlike cremation, in-ground burial honors and respects the dead. In fact, returning the body and soul to the soil is really about decomposition, renewal and a reverence for nature. Death is a tear in the universe, and we help repair that tear by giving the body back to the earth. Cremation—or burning—is about total destruction. Cremation obliterates all rather than providing a source for regeneration. Theologically, our tradition teaches that we are a Divine gift—and the thought of totally destroying such a precious gift was anathema to Jews throughout the ages.

We need to push back hard on people who say that in-ground burial lacks environmental integrity and gobbles up precious and much-needed space on the planet. Cremation has severe ecological consequences, because burning uses tremendous amounts of energy while releasing carcinogenic toxins into the air.

Burning also brings to mind the Holocaust and other anti-Semitic atrocities throughout history; so, as Jews today, we have to ask ourselves why we would voluntarily choose to cremate a loved one when throughout the ages Jews were forcibly burned against their will.

Our tradition has always venerated the value and power of in-ground burial; we have always tried to respect the dead and comfort the mourners; and we have always believed that the community must do all it can to remember those who have died.

Our tradition is so strong that if Jewish parents want to be cremated, their children are permitted to violate their wishes and bury them instead—one of the only instances in Jewish law where the parents’ will can be disobeyed. The hovering casket that is lowered into the ground is symbolic of what parents did for their children. They put a blanket on their offspring; now the offspring are doing the same for their mothers and fathers.

There is deep, lasting and heartfelt resonance when this takes place. I’ve never heard children say they were sorry for burying their parents—even if the children live in another far-off city or town. I have, however, seen lingering lament from both sons and daughters after the cremation of their parents.

Cremation blurs the boundaries of mourning. When does *shiva* start, for example? The body sits for a few days

before being burned. And then the ashes are eventually brought out. Some people even argue that *shiva* should be eliminated if there's cremation.

That's totally unthinkable to me; but, then, cremation, itself, is completely unfathomable. With an in-ground burial, on the other hand, there's absolutely no ambiguity. *Shiva* begins immediately after the casket is in the ground.

Looking to the future, we cannot allow the supporters of cremation to turn end-of-life choices and practices into a cut-and-dried mathematical equation or financial decision.

Educating our Jewish community about the richness and meaning of death becomes paramount. And we must explain that death is not about the end of life; it's about how one lives and behaves in this world.

This is a precious Jewish gift. And bestowing it upon our neighbors is a sacred responsibility. 

Being a Shomer— Giving a Gift; Receiving a Gift

HOWARD FEINER

Howard, a San Francisco native, served as a shomer (watcher) at Sinai Memorial Chapel for many years. Sinai served Howard's family for three generations. When reading Psalms and learning Torah in memory of the deceased he was watching, Howard felt a particular connection with his forbearers.

I have been a *shomer* at Sinai Memorial Chapel in San Francisco for the past eight years. Sinai has buried three generations of my family. So, I am a *ba'al tshuvah* —a returner to the traditions.

My Jewish family roots are deep. My grandfather, who came from Russia and migrated to San Francisco after the earthquake in 1906, helped raise me and support me. And the only way to thank him was to become more religious.

I found a *shul* in Palo Alto and started to learn with Rabbi Yitzchok Feldman. I still try to keep a daily study pattern. Part of my spiritual life is being a *shomer* at Sinai.

I watch the soul, but I don't understand exactly what that is. I also try to breathe life into a person after they've died.

Even if I don't know the person that I am watching, I try to get some background information to make them present for me. It's about having a creative mindset and developing techniques to visualize them in life. I hope that this benefits the person I am watching, although the dead cannot respond.

I learn a lot as a *shomer*, and I have become more sensitive, too. It's a humbling experience. When I'm watching over someone, sometimes I hear voices in the hallway at night. It's also a spiritual experience—that's for sure.

Giving back to the community in this way has broadened and deepened me. Taking care of the dead is an important mitzvah. It's really an honor.

Being a Shomer

And I like being reliable. I like being there for the dead—and for the family of the deceased, as raw as their emotions might be.

I have found, through this experience, that there are no shortcuts to peace of mind. If you're going to start and complete the process of healing, there are no shortcuts. Judaism is time-tested. If you want to take a shortcut, or skip or shave a corner, you pay for it in the long run. You might even be committing a sin that you're not aware of.

That's why I view the process of watching over someone as a full-body experience. It has intellectual, emotional and physical aspects to it. And it's difficult at times. It's hard to get rest at night if you're with a body. Sometimes, I'm watching for 12 hours; and sometimes it's around the clock.

Each watch is different, though. And it depends on the hour. But when the phone call comes, and someone has died, I'm ready. It all comes together. It's time to learn.

And I hope to keep learning, learning, learning from my *shomer* experiences in the years to come. ♡

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*Focus on faith and grow
your roots strong and deep so
no one can make you believe in
something that is not good for
your soul.*

”

MOLLY FRIEDENFELD

The Dignified Farewell

ERICA BROWN

*Dr. Erica Brown is a wife and mother of four, and the Scholar-in-Residence at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. Her latest book is *Happy Endings: The Fine Art of Dying Well*.*

It was a late Thursday night, and the funeral home was sandwiched between a furniture store and an expensive car dealership.

We went into the basement and headed straight to the *tahara* room, where the bodies of Jewish men and women are placed for ritual cleaning and preparation for burial. This was my first *tahara*, and I was nervous and squeamish. I had never seen a dead human body up close, let alone been responsible for cleaning one. We all drove together, and I was shocked by the diversity of women in the car. There was a college student, three young mothers and myself. At 45, I was the oldest. Before I got into the car, I thought I'd be the youngest.

This group of women inspired me with their thoughtfulness. They were driven to make the last moments of a person's existence in this world dignified and holy. Before us on a metal table was a woman in her eighties. We treated the body gently, turning it and cleaning it, making sure that all was covered except for the body part being cleaned at the time. One woman prayed. I followed instructions attentively, afraid of making an error. I held in the stress of confronting my own mortality and tried hard only to think the most positive thoughts about the woman lying before me. We poured ritual water over the body and then dried the woman carefully and clothed her in white shrouds. Lovingly, we picked up the body and placed it in the casket. The group leader of the *chevra kadisha*, the burial society, then gathered us around the coffin and asked for the woman's forgiveness lest we did not, even for a moment, treat her with the dignity that she deserved. I felt tears well up in my eyes.

On the car ride home, I was quiet and pensive. If I had any thought of being cremated or buried in any other fashion (which I never did), those were quickly erased. I had been researching death for

The Dignified Farewell

the better part of a year and had studied the process of cremation and all the crazy places that people have scattered their ashes. I cannot say that there is no appeal in becoming part of the ocean or being spread on a mountaintop. There is something even romantic about it. But it was when I learned the technical aspects of cremation that I began to question the procedure and the choice.

Cremation is brutal to the body. A trocar is inserted into a large cut in the stomach and turned so that the appropriate chemicals can be placed in the body for preservation and showing before the actual burning. Some families choose not to display the body. It then gets placed in a box that is easily flammable and put into an oven and burned at extremely high temperatures until it becomes what is called “cremains” in the industry. The process is more industrialized than ritualized. The shell that has served our souls over a lifetime is literally blown up in smoke.

I speak and learn with Jews who mention cremation as the only real option for them after death. I am always surprised by how certain they are and how they arrived at their decision. Often, it's not an intentional and informed decision. It represents what they pick up in our surrounding culture. Since Jessica Mitford's classic book, *The American Way of Death*, came out decades ago, the move from traditional burial to cremation has jumped in popularity. Mitford argued about the high costs of burials today, long before ecological

concerns began to dominate the cultural landscape. Little is mentioned about the violence done to the body. It's all about the scattering and not about the burning.

Tom Jokinin, a young man who interned at a funeral home and then wrote about it in his book, *Curtains: Adventures of an Undertaker-in-Training*, went out to dinner with his wife, having worked for months in the death business. Over dinner, he said to her, “I have seen the future, and it's Jewish.” He said this as a non-Jew after his own immersion in work that involved being one of the very last people to manage and care for a human body that has died. He saw close-up the unpleasantness of death and understood that when it comes to dignity and the Jewish rituals around death, it's hard to beat our 4,000-year tradition.

So, if you are Jewish and considering cremation, think again. Really think. When I sat in that car driving home from my first *tahara*, I thought to myself that I would be deeply touched to have any of the women that night—all strangers but one—prepare me for burial. I would not be able to thank them. They do this ultimate *chesed*—an act of loving kindness for no thanks and money—just for the *mitzvah* of being part of a community. There is no profit for them; it is not a job. It is an act of love that they perform, because in our faith, membership in community means both living as a Jew and dying as one. ♡

“

*All places are alike,
and every earth is
fit for burial.*

”

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

End of Life – Experiencing the Fear and Feeling the Pain

RABBI MENACHEM
CREDITOR

Rabbi Menachem Creditor served as the spiritual leader of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, CA. He now serves as the Pearl and Ira Meyer Scholar-in-Residence at UJA-Federation New York. Named by Newsweek as one of the 50 most influential rabbis in America, he is a published author, musician, teacher and activist who serves on the board of American Jewish World Service, the Social Justice Commission for the International Rabbinical Assembly, and is the chair of The Masorti Center. He blogs at menachemcreditor.org.

Talking about the end of life can be overwhelming and intimidating for many people.

The details and feelings are simply too much, even before we deal with the spiritual issues. Sometimes people just find themselves tied up in emotional knots over this subject.

And so, I look for—and many of us crave—invitations to help care for people who are struggling—or even suffering—at this sacred time. We, caregivers, also struggle. And as Jews, we invest in caring for each other when we are alive and when we die.

In one sense, this is based on self-interest. We are scared and we don't want to be alone when we die. We want someone to hold our hands, and as I learned when I practiced *tahara* for the first time, we want someone to hold our heads.

To be honest, I didn't know what to do that first time. And I rarely feel this way. But I entered the room and there was a dead body in front of me. I wanted to see a person, not a dead body. And through the gift of Jewish wisdom and practice, I eventually did, step by step.

My role, as part of the *tahara* team, was to cradle this person's head, just like a baby. I didn't want to hurt this person. I wanted my care to be as perfect as it could be, and I was hoping that this person would forgive me for any mistakes I might make. There were words offered for me to recite that told me I wasn't the first person with these fears and hopes. My role was to help guide this person to their next place, and I was holding his head. That's all I could do. It's all any of us can do. We do what we can do. And what a gift it is to be called to do just that.

In just over an hour, this person was transformed into a perfectly cared-for and washed and dressed holy being. *Tahara* had made the difference. A transformation that defies explanation. A body was sanctified. An image of God was treated as such, and the team of

*End of Life—
Experiencing the Fear
and Feeling the Pain*

caregivers were able, by only doing what people can do, made that transformation possible. Doing only what we could was somehow enough to achieve that magic.

Going into that room, my first experience with *tahara*, I didn't know anything. And that's how so many of us feel when it comes to Jewish wisdom at the end of life. But we cross that threshold and it's comforting to know that we're being accompanied by other people—many of whom also "know nothing."

My sense of wonderment, my lack of answers, was felt profoundly when I was the chaplain at Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York.

Once again, a door—*another door*.

I stood at the threshold for 25 minutes—unable to knock. I had lost loved ones to cancer, but, in this case, I didn't know what to do—even with the instructions in my hands. And, when I finally knocked on the door, it was painful for my knuckles, for my whole being. I had to will my feet forward.

The ill person saw my trembling hands and said, "I know why you're here; come on in and have a seat."

I held my rabbi's manual in unsure hands, and the ill person said, "You don't need that."

So, there it was. I was being comforted, but I was in the hospital to comfort someone else. It wasn't a rabbi offering comforting wisdom to an ill person. It was two people, sitting together and sharing an experience within time.

What I learned is that comfort at the end of life isn't the exclusive domain of one party, the dying or the living. We're in these relationships together. And we do the best we can. It's all we can do in life—and in death. We hold each other's hands and heads. And things will be okay, somehow.

I have also come to learn that we are all part of the same chaotic, turbulent, unfair and unpredictable world. We are all part of the same community fabric. And no one fully understands. But we all experience the sacred shocks. No one is immune from life.

This became especially clear to me when I buried a stillborn child. I could not run away from this. I had to hold myself still, and the only way to stay still was to draw on Jewish ritual. There was no explanation, no wisdom, no expertise that could undo this sadness, this loss.

I turned to tradition because that's all I could do. And those rituals gave me safety. They were beautiful in their simplicity, in their respect for the unfathomable trauma loss is every time, and the unbearable pain this loss was this time. They helped me realize I wasn't alone. They helped me realize I was part of something meaningful, purposeful. And they helped

me realize that I carried a seed of healing.
I didn't suddenly have answers. But I
was made aware that we all needed
our hands and heads held yet again.

Over the years, I have allowed people to
hear my doubts during end of life. But my
doubts are anchored in the rituals. And
our lives are textured by these rituals.

One of these rituals is the funeral. We need
funerals because we need help, and love,
and people. And we need Jewish funerals
because Judaism guides us to perform
this ritual so beautifully. Everyone should
be loved when they die, and Judaism
offers a wellspring of love when we die.

The pain at end of life takes us
beyond thinking. We feel. And we feel
intensely. The loss of someone we
have loved leaves us with indescribable
pain. It is well beyond words.

And facing this pain, facing death—and
not thinking it away—is what I wish for
all the people I try to comfort and hold. 

Final Touches

Rituals of Remembrance

Reform Judaism Magazine / Spring 2001

**NANCY KALIKOW
MAXWELL**

Nancy Kalikow Maxwell is the library director at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida, and an award-winning writer. Her latest article, "A Feminist Perspective on Jewish Death Rituals," appears in Considering Religious Tradition in Bioethics: Christian and Jewish Voices, published by the University of Scranton Press.

Please put all bodies in head first. Thank you.

The Management

Hanging lopsided on the freezer door, this hand-lettered sign is my introduction to a *tahara*, the Jewish ritual of washing and dressing a corpse before burial. Traditionally, this *mitzvah* is performed by members of the *chevra kadisha*, the community's voluntary burial society. Performing a *tahara* is considered the ultimate *mitzvah* because the recipient can never acknowledge or repay the act.

Right now, *mitzvah* is the furthest thing from my mind. I am shivering in a refrigerated room in a local Jewish funeral home, outfitted with protective surgical garb from cap to shoe covering. My heart is racing, and my stomach lurching. Having washed my hands with a two-

handled cup, I tug at the two layers of plastic gloves I am required to wear. The thought of what I am about to see and do frightens me. I begin to regret asking for this hands-on experience as part of a graduate course on "Death and Dying."

To relieve my fear, I remind myself that as a parent of a young child I have prepared plenty of dead bodies for burial. I have wrapped, boxed, buried and flushed deceased cats, parakeets, frogs and goldfish with only a modicum of squeamishness. Searching for something neutral to focus on, I scan the room, which is filled with a bizarre combination of hospital and kitchen utensils, and, in the center, a body lying on a stretcher. Helen*, an elderly woman, died of natural causes just a few hours earlier. I force my gaze past her to the wall poster of English and Hebrew prayers we will soon recite. Calling on a long-lost skill, I try to read the Hebrew.

The exercise has a strange, calming effect on me. I am transported about 40 years back in time; in an instant I am a child of seven, standing with my grandmother during High Holiday services, attempting to read from the *siddur*. Pleased by my effort,

Bubbe stops her gentle swaying and sends me an encouraging smile. She tenderly brushes my face. I am calmed by her touch.

Suddenly, I feel a hand on my arm. It is time for the ceremony to begin. Naomi*, the handsome middle-aged woman leading the *tahara*, directs me to approach the body. “First,” she explains, “we’ll pour water over the *meta* (corpse). Then we’ll wash her and put her in the *mikveh* (ritual bath). Next, we’ll dry her, anoint and dress her....” Naomi points to a white shroud folded neatly in an open box. “Please try to handle the body with respect and modesty and don’t talk unless absolutely necessary. Any questions?” I shake my head “no” and gulp.

With the directness of a firm but loving teacher, Naomi bids me to lay my hands on the body. Reluctantly, I place my fingers on the soft, cool sheet. The weight of the flesh underneath feels like cold poultry. “Let’s read the first English prayer out loud,” says Naomi. “It begs forgiveness from the deceased for any mistakes or errors we might make.” Since I am pretty sure that thinking about poultry at a time like this counts as a “mistake or error,” I end my prayer with a silent apology.

After pouring water over the body, Naomi hands me a washcloth. “Start at the shoulder and work your way down the arm like this.” Wetting her cloth, she begins washing the head and neck. Every swish of the cloth announces the reverence and respect she feels for this task.

Following Naomi’s lead, I dribble drops of warm water and begin rubbing the skin in wide rhythmic circles. “Just call me the ‘*tahara Kid*,’” I joke with myself, as I wash with the slow brushing strokes of the young acolyte in the movie *The Karate Kid*. Slowly and methodically, I work my way down from the shoulder. Drench and wash, drench and wash, drench and wash. The slow, repeated actions bring me to a peaceful, almost hypnotic state.

From the far reaches of my subconscious, I hear the tune “*Hine Ma Tov Uma Nayim*,” and my hand starts to move in time from Helen’s shoulder to her arm. I see my grandmother’s arms, loose and flabby, preparing a bowl of fresh strawberries. I always marveled how Bubbe could move her massive arms with the grace of an orchestra conductor, lifting a strawberry, removing its stem, putting it down, and taking another—all in one fluid motion.

I wonder if someone washed Bubbe’s arm like this when she died 12 years ago. From Bubbe my thoughts move to her bubbe, and to her bubbe, and then to all the bubes who have washed and been washed by Jewish women just like me. Suddenly, I am part of the permanence of the Jewish people who have performed this ritual for centuries. With an incredible clarity, I now realize how all Jews—past, present and future—were with Moses when he brought the Torah down the mountain. All the generations are here with me now in *tahara*.

My entrance into this surreal world is interrupted by the feel of a bottle of nail polish remover against my skin. Naomi is tapping my arm with it, trying to get my attention. "Take this," she whispers insistently, "and remove all the nail polish." I grasp Helen's gnarled, arthritic hand and prepare to swab the first nail. Suddenly I feel Helen squeezing my hand! I jerk my hand back, and her arm drops with a thud. Naomi pretends not to notice and continues with her own ministration. I take a few deep breaths and struggle to regain my composure. I grasp the hand again, more firmly this time. I tell myself it must have been a postmortem muscle spasm. Or could it be that Helen was trying to communicate with me?

Naomi interrupts again.
"It's time for the *mikveh*."

Unlike the hypnotic motions of washing the body, this task involves the use of elaborate hydraulic equipment to raise the body—stretcher and all—into the *mikveh*. We position ourselves around the stretcher. Naomi pushes the button and elevates the stretcher. Distracted by the thought of Helen communicating with me, I neglect to steady the dangling platform. The end of the stretcher nearest me tilts down. Oh no! The body begins to slide. Naomi lurches forward and grabs my end of the body. With a few quick button pushes, she averts disaster, leveling the suspended stretcher. My embarrassment takes much longer to level off.

After immersing the body in the *mikveh* and reciting the appropriate blessing, the stretcher is raised and returned to the floor. We then pat the body dry with a sheet provided for this purpose. "Now for the dressing," Naomi says as she unfolds a *kittel* (over-shirt) from the *tachrichim*, the set of plain linen garments that constitute a Jew's burial clothes. "Everyone gets this same outfit," she explains, "to show we are all the same in the sight of God. We are also going to anoint her ears, eyes, mouth, navel, and hands with this"—she holds up a dish with a beaten egg mixture—"which symbolizes the perpetual wheel of life. We also sprinkle this earth from Israel on her." I peer into the small pouch she is holding and discover the "earth" is actually sand. "And we cover her eyes with these." She displays what looks like the pieces of a dropped coffee mug. "It is broken pottery to show that the vessel of her soul is now broken.

"Let's get started..."

Once the dressing and anointing are completed, we offer the concluding prayer, another opportunity to request forgiveness for any errors we might have committed in the *tahara*. We wheel the body into the freezer head first, as the sign requests. Though the ceremony has taken less than one hour, I am exhausted, but strangely exhilarated as well. I feel proud, satisfied and more intimately connected to my Jewish roots than ever before. Deep in my *kishkes*, I know I have performed

a *mitzvah* for Helen, for my Bubbe, for all Bubes, and for the Jewish people.

“I’ll do another *tahara* if you need me,” I say to Naomi, surprised at my own words. Naomi does not appear at all surprised; she simply smiles and nods. I return the smile, and as I do, I imagine a similar smile forming on Helen’s face—and then an even wider one cross my Bubbe’s.

THE TAHARA CEREMONY

The biblical basis of *tahara* is found in Ecclesiastes 5:14, which reads, “he must depart, just as he came.” Since one is washed at birth, it is interpreted, so one should be washed at death.

Most of the details of the *tahara* ceremony originated in the Kabbalah around the eleventh to thirteenth century. The sixteenth century *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law) includes instructions such as: “The purification of the body is done as follows: the entire body, including the head, is washed with warm water. The fingers and the toes, as well as all the other parts of the body, should be thoroughly cleansed” (Code of Jewish Law, Annotated Rev. Ed., Vol.4, NY: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1963).

The tradition of using volunteers in burial societies is several centuries old. In Eastern Europe, burial society membership was the highest honor that could be bestowed on a Jew, but the distinction gradually lost its significance around the turn of the century, as most non-Orthodox Jews in America

began to leave the burial preparation of their deceased to funeral directors.

Orthodox Jews still maintain voluntary burial societies in most major metropolitan areas. Several liberal congregations have formed such groups, though, according to Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, director of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) Department of Religious Living, the exact number is not known. Arthur (Asquare) Adintuck, who investigated the matter for Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, MA, found that “four or five Reform congregations in the Boston area alone” have or are planning *chevra kadisha*. Some Reform congregations have performed *tahara*, among them Judea Reform Congregation in Durham, NC; B’nai Sholom Congregation in Bristol, TN; and Adath B’nai Israel in Evansville, IN; but most liberal groups focus on the mourner, providing meals of condolence, *shiva* assistance, and—as Alintuck describes it—“just sitting and talking.” Nancy Luberoff of Judea Reform Congregation says the reason more *taharas* are not performed is ignorance. “It was one of the babies that was thrown out with the bath water,” she says. “Now we are sifting through that bath water and picking out the important pieces.” As she sees it, “*tahara* is just one example of a tradition, like so many others, being reclaimed by Reform Jews.” 

*All the names in the article have been changed to ensure anonymity.

“
*The end of life
deserves as much
beauty, care and
respect as the
beginning.*

”

ANONYMOUS

Practicing Tahara: Giving a Blessing, Receiving a Blessing

MYRTLE “MICHELE”
JOSHUA

Michele Joshua served as the leader of Sinai Memorial Chapel's San Francisco women's Tahara group for over 30 years. A native of Rangoon, Burma, she brings a deeply spiritual connection to the work. She follows in the footsteps of her father-in-law, Moses Joshua, who served with Sinai Memorial Chapel's men's Tahara group 56 years ago.

I arrived in San Francisco in 1958 from India, and I became a nurse. I had seen older women doing *tahara* in India.

The catalyst for my *tahara* work took place in a hospital. And I started this in 1984. I had gone to visit a friend. She died quickly. There was no one to do *tahara*, so the rabbi asked if I wanted the job. I said I would read and learn how to do it. And I did.

One of the first things I learned was that you have to respect the deceased. And you have to ask for forgiveness before starting. You also need to remain silent. You just don't talk. Finally, you can't expect the dead to say thank you

for what you've done. But you know what you've done. And that's what truly matters.

This work has brought me closer to God. And it's made me realize that material things are not important. When we die, we don't take anything material with us —regardless of how rich or poor we are.

I dream about my work. And I get messages from my dreams.

When there's a big disaster, I get the dream. Or I see a dream about people getting sick. Sometimes, I can't do anything about this. I can only pray. Sometimes, I can help.

I often light a candle to get answers about life and death from my deceased parents.

And then there are days when I'll decide not to go in to work. But then I'll see a moth on the windowsill, and I know I must go in to help.

*Practicing Tahara: Giving a
Blessing, Receiving a Blessing*

Seeing sick people on *Shabbat* is so important, and that's why I try not to miss a single *Shabbat* service.

You have to pay attention to people until the very end. You must ask for forgiveness of the deceased by saying "*mechilah*" three times. You have to hear their last wish. Then they become still. And they'll often wait until you leave the room before they die.

I like to bless people. I would like to believe I am doing a good deed. I also like my blessings to be answered. And, as strong as I bless, I cannot hurt or hate. I forgive. God wants us to forgive —both the living and the dead. ♡

“

*Each of us has a
unique part to play
in the healing of the
world.*

”

MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

CHAPTER 15

A Calling

THOMAS V. HALLORAN

Tom Halloran was a long-serving staff member at Sinai Memorial Chapel. A San Francisco native and graduate of the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science, Tom is an “old school” mortician who upholds the sacred traditions of Judaism and the dignity of funeral services.

SHARON BRUSMAN

As a professional trained in the Mortuary Sciences, how are the rituals of Jewish burial unique?

These three aspects are handed down generation to generation over the centuries and are based upon time-honored repetitive actions.

In many religious organizations or groups of people who adhere to a spiritual way of life, their way of burying their dead has changed or adapted to the regions of the world. They have acclimated themselves to the changing times, new locations and various places where they now live. The rituals of the Jewish burial are unique based upon the primary fact that all three facets in the burial have not changed in the passage of time, nor have the people of the faith acclimated themselves to anything other than the Jewish burial rites as practiced. A Jewish burial incorporates the culture, the personal desires which are set in Jewish tradition, and the religious rites which are the same as they were centuries ago.

Each traditional Jewish burial is unique to the professionally trained mortician, though the tradition is not unique. The Jewish community, rich and poor alike, steps forward at the time of need, does

THOMAS V. HALLORAN

From the very beginning, communities and people have buried their dead based upon cultural, personal and religious customs.

what needs to be done, and then returns to daily life only to once again return to be of service in the same honorable way passed from generation to generation.

SHARON BRUSMAN

*As a non-Jew,
how did you come to
learn, to understand these
unique Jewish practices?*

Was it difficult?

THOMAS V. HALLORAN: A professionally trained mortician working in a non-denominational funeral service facility is well aware of the burial traditions of each religious denomination. It is part of the professional schooling, part of the business to know what each religion's ritual is. The basic fundamentals of each religious group's burial rites are taught and basic reasons of why. It is technically not important to understand the ritual or to believe in it, only to provide the means, venues, staff and equipment to accomplish the objective. That is the business side of the funeral industry.

As a non-Jew, my understanding and respect of the practices has expanded over the decades based upon the repetitive nature of being at a funeral service facility that is of assistance to one religious group. It is not the written ritual for us to learn, but in the actions of the individuals who practice the rituals which bring the Jewish burial rites to life. The individuals committed to the purpose of the Jewish burial are the ones who continually teach me. Only when it is not a job, only when it is a professional calling, and only when one is willing to be continually taught does one understand and respect why it is done.

SHARON BRUSMAN

*How does the work for
Sinai Memorial Chapel
and the Jewish Community
impact your life? How does
it make you feel?*

THOMAS V. HALLORAN: My work at Sinai Memorial Chapel is a continual expression of my personal spirituality and my professional calling. I am able to practice my art, my profession, my calling in a facility that prides itself on community and purpose. The purpose is to be of assistance to those in need, those less fortunate, those alone and those who have lost their way. No other organization sets its primary purpose

and goal on that. It is not good business, yet for over 100 years Sinai has been there doing just that. At the end of the day, I feel that my contribution to the funeral industry and to the Jewish community as a whole has impacted my life more so than any one person could hope; a purpose, a goal, a calling that is definitely being served at the right location and place. It makes me feel good to be part of the process, Jewish or not. 

The Comfort and Compassion of Jewish Mourning

RABBI JOSEPH S.
OZAROWSKI

Rabbi Joseph S. Ozarowski is Rabbinic Counselor and Chaplain for Jewish Child and Family Services of Chicago, co-leader of the Jewish Healing Network of Chicago and Jewish Chaplain at Skokie Hospital. Rabbi Ozarowski is Board Certified by the National Association of Jewish Chaplains. A prolific author and member of the editorial board of the Journal of Jewish Spiritual Care, his volume, To Walk in God's Ways—Jewish Pastoral Perspectives on Illness and Bereavement, is a standard in the field of Judaism and Pastoral Care.

The Torah commands us to heal, but it also teaches us that life doesn't last forever.

I internalized this in the most powerful and personal way possible when my father became ill. As his health declined, I asked him what he wanted. He said that he wanted to die with his family with him; he didn't want to suffer; and he wanted the dignity and respect the Nazis denied him as a Polish Holocaust survivor.

In the end, I think we gave him a good amount of the compassion, comfort and connection he requested before he died at 96.

And this feeling of community carried over into our mourning.

Indeed, *shiva*—the weeklong mourning period in Judaism during which family members traditionally gather in one home (preferably the home of the deceased)

and receive visitors—reminds us that we are not the only ones in mourning and in pain, and that we are needed to help assuage the grief of others.

I think this feeling is especially embodied in the first *shiva* meal after the funeral; it is called the meal of comfort and is usually served by friends and neighbors. That says it all in terms of community for me. How warm; how caring; and how connected.

In this sense, *shiva* is an unexpected blessing associated with our loss. People can sit *shiva* by themselves; there's certainly value in that, because it is a time to grieve and reflect introspectively. But *shiva*, at its best, teaches the community, as a whole, to show enormous and heart-felt compassion. And comforting the bereaved is a truly human and humane act.

It goes beyond this, and enters the religious realm. When we are present for the bereaved, we become God-like, in much the same way that God was present when He confirmed the covenant with Isaac after his father Abraham's death. That is why visiting mourners during *shiva* are considered a *mitzvah*, and a good deed.

The Comfort and Compassion of Jewish Mourning

And a large part of this is about good listening. Above all else, we must hear the mourners; we must let them talk.

If they are angry, the compassionate thing is to let the anger flow.

If they are full of sorrow, the compassionate thing is to let the sorrow spill out.

And if they are full of joy, the compassionate thing is to let the joy float free.

Whatever the mourner's emotion, the *shiva* visitor must always focus on the bereaved, because *shiva* gives the mourner structure after death has ripped the structure of life away.

Shiva is not a party; and it is not a wake. It centers on feelings, and makes sure the mourner's soul is bared and uncovered. And one of the most beautiful aspects of this seven-day mourning period is that it is so different from daily life—and this permits a real opportunity for people to openly express the feelings that are bubbling up, or right on the surface.

I can speak here with sincerity and conviction, because I felt this inner connectivity during my own *shiva* that followed my father's death.

Jewish tradition remains solid and steadfast in the face of our changing modern life—a life where, too often, people fail to mourn, or simply do not have (or make) the time to mourn.

Part of this emotional distance and detachment stems from the fact that we are increasingly becoming a community-less society. For many Jews, this may be the result of tenuous or lapsed synagogue membership. Whatever the cause, it is usually quite hard to mourn without connectivity.

And speaking of connectivity, I appreciate technology. Even though virtual condolence is not the same as a face-to-face *shiva* call, I see the wired merits. Emails or Facebook postings can be comforting, for example, and they do count. I know that my many out-of-town friends and colleagues through their emails and phone calls (and they came from all over the country and overseas) made a huge difference for me during my *shiva*. The key is in the compassion and personal touch with which the high-tech condolence call is made. Thus, I do think that rabbis must become conversant with the digital channels of compassion today.

But, regardless of whether it's high-tech or high-touch, we must never forget that the Jewish way of mourning offers the bereaved the greatest opportunity for comfort and the fullest expression of grief—and that means everything after a searing or scarring death has taken place. ♡

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*When you're down and troubled
And you need a helping hand
And nothing, oh, nothing is going right
Just close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night
You just call out my name
And, you know, wherever I am
I'll come running (oh yeah, baby)
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you've got to do is call
And I'll be there, (yeah yeah yeah)
You've got a friend.*

”

JAMES TAYLOR

Shiva: Being Present With Loss

ERIN HYMAN, Z”L

Erin Hyman, z”l passed away in September 2014 at age 42. Erin earned a B.A. at University of California, Berkeley, a doctorate degree in comparative literature at UCLA and was a post-doctoral fellow at Cornell University. Erin was a writer and editor. In 2012, after being diagnosed with cancer, Erin created the incredibly insightful and eloquent blog, B’Matzav, for “reflection on healing, thriving, and parenting with breast cancer, from a Jewish perspective.”

I was 28 years old when I attended my first *shiva*.

I pulled up outside the house, a typical suburban house in Encino, now transformed, as though a giant neon arrow were blazing forth “House of Mourning!” or as if the figure of Death, in full noir regalia and holding a sickle, were poised on the roof like a Halloween decoration. I sat in my car a long time, trying to work up the nerve to go in. I couldn’t do it alone. Wasn’t I intruding on the intimate life of a family in their most vulnerable moment of loss? How should I behave? What could I possibly say?

The house belonged to the parents of my friend, Joel. His brother, Jordan, a shy, funny, recent graduate of dental school, with whom Joel had waged the most intense Scrabble showdowns I have even seen—replete with chess timer and multiple 7-letter words—was the person who had died. He had committed suicide.

While the home was indeed a scene of unimaginable grief—Joel’s mother crying “my baby! my baby!”—the experience of *shiva*, both that night and for the several following that I persisted in attending, was nothing less than life changing. The house was full to overflowing with people. Platters of food balanced precariously on every available surface. The family, their eyes hollowed out by pain, were not expected in any way to host or to do anything to receive their guests. Joel seemed buoyed by the crowd, but when I hugged him, he was shaking with tears inside. Friends sat together for hours, talking and remembering Jordan, regretting his suffering as he struggled with depression, and laughing through tears at funny memories. It was transformative because it taught me that being present with people in their pain is not some caricature of utter darkness, it opens you to extremes of tenderness, love, rage—an all-embracing panorama of emotions. The whole cosmos in a tear.

Shiva: Being Present with Loss

Shiva means “seven”—a period of seven days of mourning following the burial of a loved one—and in Judaism seven always recalls Creation, from the abyss of nothing arise light, life, substance. Seven days after the birth of a boy is the *bris*. Seven circles of a bride around the groom marks the creation of a new entity—the unity of two as one. These days, some people cut *shiva* short, observing it for only two or three days, sometimes because a holiday, like *Sukkot*, will intervene, but often out of a sense that we must move on, as if seven days is too long for the community to be asked to attend to mourning. Perhaps it feels archaic, or imposing. But, as one friend who lost her mother a couple of years ago, said to me recently, when you are the mourner, *shiva* “gives you permission to withdraw, for a set amount of time, and there is great relief in that.” The beauty of it, I might add, is that *shiva* allows you to withdraw from everyday responsibilities, but also surrounds you with people, so that you are not alone.

Earlier this year, I witnessed a woman who had just lost her husband appear at her child’s soccer practice only three or four days after the funeral. I knew that she was using every fiber of her being to give her son a sense of normalcy and structure.

But I had a visceral reaction; I wanted to shout, “No! no! no!” Not because she had transgressed some rule —for precisely the opposite reason, because I wanted her to have the protection that *shiva* affords, not to have to do anything whatsoever.

To my eyes, she was as vulnerable as someone arising from a hospital bed immediately after surgery, with no time even to begin to heal.

I also have recently been a part of some conversations with people from a diversity of backgrounds who are working to develop instructions for “how to help people when they are ill or suffering a loss.” I think these kinds of things can be immensely useful, because we have all been in the situation of not knowing what to say or how to help, not wanting to impose, but not wanting to be indifferent either. Yet these efforts also make me feel that in contemporary culture we have run so far away from “organized religion” that we’ve essentially forgotten what it’s there for, what it can offer us.

Judaism (and this is true of many faiths and deep cultural traditions, but I am only speaking from the point of view of the one I am most familiar with) has been honing these guidelines around how to visit the sick, how to comfort the mourner, how to follow a path away from devastation back towards life, for three thousand years. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel.

The power of having a community that is familiar with these guidelines means that when loss happens to you, you do not have to organize; the people around you spring into action—they know what to do.

What to say to a mourner? Shiva is very clear about it: nothing. You don't need to say anything at all. Don't make the person in their grief have to explain or comfort you. Just be present. Show them by being there that they are not alone.

You cover the mirrors in a house of mourning. It seems so minor, and yet it is such a powerful message; they are completely inside themselves, they should not have to make themselves beautiful in any way for others. You bring food (always too much) so that basic needs are covered. For those for whom every other thing in existence has been blotted out, the community comes in to offer a tether holding them to this world.

Thirteen years ago, after that first *shiva*, I wrote about it, comparing it to my (non-Jewish) grandmother's passing, which had taken place only weeks earlier. “My grandfather received hundreds of sympathy cards, beautifully handwritten, with warm memories of her —her voice, how she laughed through her words, how she lit up a party—but no one came by the house, no one brought food over.

And I compared that stack of cards in the entry hall to all the people milling about Joel's mother's house: filling plates, patting shoulders, embracing. This community surging up around the family from everywhere, filling the house with life in the face of the gaping abyss of loss.”

And *shiva* is only the first ring of concentric circles of time that Jewish tradition prescribes for both memorializing a loss and recovering from it: there are rituals for the 30-day mark, over the course of the first year, and each year following. But the most important thing you can do, at the moment when you most want to avert your eyes and walk the other way, is the one thing that *shiva* asks of you: just show up. 

Shloshim: Thirty (Days)

SHERYL SANDBERG

*Sheryl received her B.A. in economics from Harvard. She worked at the World Bank, then attended Harvard Business School. She worked in the U.S. Department of the Treasury during the Clinton administration and then in November 2000, moved to Silicon Valley and worked for Google for seven years. She then moved to Facebook, where she has been COO since 2008. Sandberg is the author of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, which has sold more than a million copies.*

Today is the end of *shloshim* for my beloved husband— the first 30 days.

Judaism calls for a period of intense mourning known as *shiva* that lasts seven days after a loved one is buried. After *shiva*, most normal activities can be resumed, but it is the end of *shloshim* that marks the completion of religious mourning for a spouse.

A childhood friend of mine, who is now a rabbi, recently told me that the most powerful one-line prayer he has ever read is: “Let me not die while I am still alive.” I would have never understood that prayer before losing Dave. Now I do.

I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning. These past 30 days, I have spent many of my moments lost in that void.

And I know that many future moments will be consumed by the vast emptiness as well.

But when I can, I want to choose life and meaning.

And this is why I am writing: to mark the end of *shloshim* and to give back some of what others have given to me. While the experience of grief is profoundly personal, the bravery of those who have shared their own experiences has helped pull me through. Some who opened their hearts were my closest friends. Others were total strangers who have shared wisdom and advice publicly. So I am sharing what I have learned in the hope that it helps someone else. In the hope that there can be some meaning from this tragedy.

I have lived 30 years in these 30 days. I am 30 years sadder. I feel like I am 30 years wiser.

I have gained a more profound understanding of what it is to be a mother, both through the depth of the agony I feel when my children scream and cry and from the connection my mother has to my pain. She has tried to fill the empty space in my bed, holding me each night

Shloshim:
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until I cry myself to sleep. She has fought to hold back her own tears to make room for mine. She has explained to me that the anguish I am feeling is both my own and my children's, and I understood that she was right as I saw the pain in her own eyes.

I have learned that I never really knew what to say to others in need. I think I got this all wrong before; I tried to assure people that it would be okay, thinking that hope was the most comforting thing I could offer. A friend of mine with late-stage cancer told me that the worst thing people could say to him was "It is going to be okay." That voice in his head would scream, "How do you know it is going to be okay? Do you not understand that I might die?" I learned this past month what he was trying to teach me. Real empathy is sometimes not insisting that it will be okay but acknowledging that it is not. When people say to me, "You and your children will find happiness again," my heart tells me, "Yes, I believe that, but I know I will never feel pure joy again". Those who have said, "You will find a new normal, but it will never be as good" comfort me more because they know and speak the truth. Even a simple "How are you?"—almost always asked with the best of intentions—is better replaced with "How are you today?"

When I am asked "How are you?" I stop myself from shouting, "My husband died a month ago, how do you think I am?" When I hear "How are you today?" I realize the person knows that the best I can do right now is to get through each day. I have learned some practical stuff that matters. Although we now know that Dave died immediately, I didn't know that in the ambulance. The trip to the hospital was unbearably slow. I still hate every car that did not move to the side, every person who cared more about arriving at their destination a few minutes earlier than making room for us to pass. I have noticed this while driving in many countries and cities. Let's all move out of the way. Someone's parent or partner or child might depend on it.

I have learned how ephemeral everything can feel—and maybe everything is. That whatever rug you are standing on can be pulled right out from under you with absolutely no warning. In the last 30 days, I have heard from too many women who lost a spouse and then had multiple rugs pulled out from under them. Some lack support networks and struggle alone as they face emotional distress and financial insecurity. It seems so wrong to me that we abandon these women and their families when they are in greatest need.

I have learned to ask for help—and I have learned how much help I need. Until now, I have been the older sister, the COO, the

doer and the planner. I did not plan this, and when it happened, I was not capable of doing much of anything. Those closest to me took over. They planned. They arranged. They told me where to sit and reminded me to eat. They are still doing so much to support me and my children.

I have learned that resilience can be learned. Adam M. Grant taught me that three things are critical to resilience and that I can work on all three. Personalization—realizing it is not my fault. He told me to ban the word “sorry.” To tell myself over and over, This is not my fault. Permanence—remembering that I won’t feel like this forever. This will get better. Pervasiveness—this does not have to affect every area of my life; the ability to compartmentalize is healthy.

For me, starting the transition back to work has been a savior, a chance to feel useful and connected. But I quickly discovered that even those connections had changed. Many of my co-workers had a look of fear in their eyes as I approached. I knew why—they wanted to help but weren’t sure how. Should I mention it? Should I not mention it? If I mention it, what the hell do I say? I realized that to restore that closeness with my colleagues that has always been so important to me, I needed to let them in. And that meant being more open and vulnerable than I ever wanted to be. I told those I work with most closely that they could ask me their honest questions and

I would answer. I also said it was okay for them to talk about how they felt. One colleague admitted she’d been driving by my house frequently, not sure if she should come in. Another said he was paralyzed when I was around, worried he might say the wrong thing. Speaking openly replaced the fear of doing and saying the wrong thing. One of my favorite cartoons of all time has an elephant in a room answering the phone, saying, “It’s the elephant.” Once I addressed the elephant, we were able to kick him out of the room.

At the same time, there are moments when I can’t let people in. I went to Portfolio Night at school where kids show their parents around the classroom to look at their work hung on the walls. So many of the parents—all of whom have been so kind—tried to make eye contact or say something they thought would be comforting. I looked down the entire time so no one could catch my eye for fear of breaking down. I hope they understood.

I have learned gratitude. Real gratitude for the things I took for granted before—like life. As heartbroken as I am, I look at my children each day and rejoice that they are alive. I appreciate every smile, every hug. I no longer take each day for granted.

Shloshim:
Thirty (Days)

When a friend told me that he hates birthdays and so he was not celebrating his, I looked at him and said through tears, “Celebrate your birthday, goddammit. You are lucky to have each one.” My next birthday will be depressing as hell, but I am determined to celebrate it in my heart more than I have ever celebrated a birthday before.

I am truly grateful to the many who have offered their sympathy. A colleague told me that his wife, whom I have never met, decided to show her support by going back to school to get her degree—something she had been putting off for years. Yes! When the circumstances allow, I believe as much as ever in leaning in. And so many men—from those I know well to those I will likely never know—are honoring Dave’s life by spending more time with their families.

I can’t even express the gratitude I feel to my family and friends who have done so much and reassured me that they will continue to be there. In the brutal moments when I am overtaken by the void, when the months and years stretch out in front of me endless and empty, only their faces pull me out of the isolation and fear. My appreciation for them knows no bounds.

I was talking to one of these friends about a father-child activity that Dave is not here to do. We came up with a plan to fill in

for Dave. I cried to him, “But I want Dave. I want option A.” He put his arm around me and said, “Option A is not available. So let’s just kick the shit out of option B.”

Dave, to honor your memory and raise your children as they deserve to be raised, I promise to do all I can to kick the shit out of option B. And even though *shloshim* has ended, I still mourn for option A. I will always mourn for option A. As Bono sang, “There is no end to grief ... and there is no end to love.” I love you, Dave.

*Posted by Sheryl Sandberg on
Wednesday, June 3, 2015* 

“

*You had
underestimated your
ability to survive. If there
is darkness when you turn
back, there is still enough
light to go forward.*

”

EARL A. GROLLMAN

A Spiritual Journey Based on Life and Learning

SHELLEY S. HÉBERT

Shelley Hébert has had a long and distinguished career in the Bay Area's Jewish community. In addition to serving as the Executive Director for development of the Taube Koret Campus for Jewish Life, Palo Alto, CA, she has been a passionate and deeply involved community volunteer leader on numerous Jewish organization boards and advisory boards. She has served on the board of Hillel at Stanford for nine years and is currently past-president and chair of the Half-Century Anniversary Celebration. She has also held significant professional roles as Executive Director for Public Affairs at Stanford Hospital & Clinics; Director of Business Development at Stanford University; and Director of External Affairs Communications for Lucile Packard Children's Hospital.

My life-changing spiritual journey began when I was in the process of helping to create a new home for our Jewish community at the Taube Koret Campus for Jewish Life in Palo Alto, CA.

I was preparing for a board meeting one afternoon when I received a call I will never forget. The 21-year-old son of our project architect had died in a terrible accident. It was a shattering moment.

A few days later during a *shiva minyan*, the boy's uncle spoke to stricken friends and family. Tom Steinberg began by telling us that it is a Jewish tradition to study in the memory of someone who

has died. He then led us in the study of a beautiful passage from *Pirkei Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers), a compilation of wisdom from early rabbinic sages.

Pirkei Avot 4.1 asks four questions: Who is wise? Who is strong? Who is rich? Who is honored? It gives deeply meaningful answers to those questions based on the Jewish understanding of what these concepts are really about.

I was moved by the idea of studying in a person's memory and by seeing someone with the inner strength to teach amidst tragedy. So at the end of the teaching, when Tom said we could help the soul of his nephew on its journey by continuing to study in his memory, I wanted to try.

A few weeks later, a package arrived for me with a copy of *Pirkei Avot*. I took my commitment to study in the young man's memory seriously and began reading portions of the book regularly, going back to passage 4.1 over and over again.

Five years went by and although I had no further contact with Tom, *Pirkei Avot* became part of my life. Through the enormous challenges of creating an intergenerational Jewish community campus, it was an enduring source of wisdom and strength.

A Spiritual Journey Based on Life and Learning

As the huge project moved toward construction, I rewarded myself with a long overdue trip to Israel. While in Jerusalem, I had an opportunity to visit Tom at his home there and thank him for introducing me to *Pirkei Avot*. Over lunch, he told me about an organization he had co-founded so that American Jewish college students could learn to study classical Jewish texts and deepen their own connections to Judaism at a time of life when so many critical choices are made.

The conversation soon continued in Palo Alto and then over many subsequent phone calls. Sharing a dedication to the future of the Jewish people, we found ourselves discussing the true nature of giving and receiving, a topic of particular interest to me. Tom commented that I sounded like Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, someone I had never heard of before. I learned online that Rav Dessler was a leading 20th century Jewish thinker associated with a movement called “mussar,” which focuses on continuous personal growth through strengthening of character traits.

Soon a translated collection of Rabbi Dessler’s writings appeared on my doorstep. Called “Strive for Truth,” it introduced me to Jewish ideas I did not know existed. Thanks to Google, I quickly found a class about Rabbi Dessler posted online, and so the next chapter in my journey began.

Learning about Rabbi Dessler blew open the door to a new world for me. Having been raised in a Reform setting in New Orleans, I was discovering Jewish learning at a level of depth and sophistication way beyond Sunday school.

For the next 18 months, I immersed myself in personal exploration of Jewish writers and thinkers spanning centuries, encouraged by someone who had started the journey decades ahead of me. Checking out armloads of books from the vast Judaica collection at Stanford became my favorite pastime.

By the next year, I was ready to go further. Searching for Jewish learning led me to a weekly Talmud study class at a local synagogue. The side-by-side English/Hebrew Schottenstein edition of the Talmud made it possible for beginners to participate and the group was very supportive and welcoming.

The more I learned, the more I realized how little I knew about my own heritage. I came to see Jewish study as a spiritual practice that fully engages the intellect. It opens both our hearts and our minds. It is the journey of a lifetime, with layer upon layer of meaning that can only be encountered through continuous exploration. Reflections of Torah scholars link one generation to the next and connect us in a dialogue about the most important questions in life. Our texts mirror and shape Jewish experience for individuals, for families and for a timeless people.

Recently I returned to Israel and was able to spend precious moments with a dear friend and former board president of the Palo Alto JCC during the last days of his life. Jewish learning brought me to experience a deeper connection with Alex Joffe and his family. Through my studies, I had learned the concept that each of us has a unique mission in life and that we are here to fulfill it. As I sat at Alex's bedside in a Tel Aviv hospital, we spoke about his personal mission, how he came to recognize it and what it had meant to him.

Alex died at a rare convergence on the Jewish calendar, when the ending of *Shabbat* became the beginning of *Shavuot*. Grief stricken, I sensed that there was meaning in that special timing and began another search. My broken heart soared when I found that King David had also died in the transition from *Shabbat* to *Shavuot* and I was able to share this with his family. Alex's wife decided to engrave this significant timing of death on her husband's headstone as a testament to his life. Knowing that my Jewish learning brought meaning to others was truly a blessing for me.

I have come to recognize that within all endings are beginnings, and within all beginnings are endings. The gift of Jewish learning came into my life at a moment of grief and loss. I am so grateful to have received it and for being able to share it with others. ♡

CHAPTER 20

The Memory Garden at Eternal Home Cemetery

JENNIFER H.
KAUFMAN

Jennifer Kaufman has a B.A. in Studio Art from Wellesley College and an M.F.A. in Drawing and Painting from California College of the Arts. She has developed exhibits for The San Francisco Exploratorium Museum of Art and Science, taught in the MFA program at California College of the Arts and was an artist in residence at the Vermont Studio Center. Jennifer worked as a Mourner Care Counselor at Sinai Memorial Chapel for many years, and has staffed the Grief & Growing Weekend, run in cooperation with The Bay Area Jewish Healing Center.

Typically a mourner needs to talk about their dying loved one, or where they were when the death occurred.

"In the bedroom, I was lying next to him and it was just about 6:30 in the morning – I remember I could hear the street sweeper moving down the street and there was this motion, this fluttering just under his skin. I put my hand there."

Similarly, any woman who labors and delivers will describe the details of the birth: what day it was, the time, who helped her, perhaps something funny and unexpected.

Rarely does anyone ask a woman who delivers a stillborn to describe her labor. No one asks her what happened minute by minute or whose hair, whose nose the baby had. There is no *shiva minyan* or culturally appropriate context to share these stories.

As a grief counselor, I have too little to say when a perinatal loss occurs. Language fails me. Better to just be still together without talking.

The Memory Garden was conceived of by two Jewish moms, Abby Michelson Porth and Debbie Findling, who suffered pregnancy losses. Jewish tradition prescribes that no formal burial or funeral is required if an infant dies before reaching the age of 30 days, nor is the traditional seven-day mourning period of *shiva* observed. Given the high infant-mortality rate of generations past, families would have been in mourning almost constantly without these proscriptions. While we recognize that these customs were created to nurture and protect families, today many people who experience miscarriage, stillbirth, infertility and other fertility losses would find comfort and strength in a physical space designated for honoring and memorializing fertility loss, while still observing Jewish custom.

The Memory Garden design is anchored in concept and in earth by two poems: Dana Gioia's *Planting a Sequoia* and Stanley Kunitz's *The Round*. Both United States Poet Laureates, the poems address death and creation, ambiguity and action.

The Memory Garden at Eternal Home Cemetery

Our everyday collective work to care for the dead begins with respect and love. Our effort to build the Memory Garden has made me realize that becoming and being born are perhaps even more bewildering than death. There is no beginning, middle or end to share with you except that it begins and begins again with love and is extended through tender, loving care or *chesed*.

The finest line between life and death is met in many places throughout Jewish texts. In the Torah portion, Tazria-Metzorah, we see the line travel into the holy time and space of childbirth. Rarely, if ever, is it acknowledged that a woman in labor or her pregnancy are in jeopardy. In this liminal time, her name hovers between the Book of Life and the Book of Death. The Torah knows this but we babble over the utterances and margins. After a child is born, the woman, presumably now a mother, can recite *Birkat Hagomel*, a blessing one makes when one's life is sustained despite the real threat of danger. The birthing process is included among these situations of danger, and tradition directs the woman who is alive and well after giving birth to recite this blessing. She thanks God for God's kindness to her. She thanks God that she did not die while giving birth. Commenting on Tazria-Metzorah, Jewish Theological Seminary Chancellor Emeritus Ismar Schorsch writes, "Every delivery skirts the borders of death."

For each and every woman who loses a pregnancy for whatever reason at whatever stage, she leaves the hospital or doctor's office, or her own office or her own bed, and is left with unanswerable questions and pain. Her husband or partner feels helpless and is rendered powerless. There is little to do. Nothing to say. Possibly nothing to bury and nothing to name. The founders of Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha, living in a world that was far more traditional, understood that our tradition and legal framework could and would evolve as needed to address the pain of the loss suffered in these families. Sinai, a central communal institution, understood that while the loss may be unnamed, a responsibility to *Chesed Shel Emet* or the truest acts of kindness and *K'vod Hamet* or honoring the dead was what would bind us to each other and to those who came before us. The founders' vision was clear, "You are part of a community. Your loss is our loss and our responsibility and we will take care of you. As a holy burial society, we affirm *Kol Yisroel Aveirim Zeh Bazeh*, "All Jews are responsible for one another."

What makes our tradition so profoundly useful is that it points us to what we must do when we meet the unknown and uncontrollable. Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha does the same and this is precisely why we are responsible for accompanying the living through these places of wilderness.

We know how to do this—how to live this part of our individual and communal lives so at the end, there is a name we can recite and a life to remember. And if the end comes so soon that a potential life, an un-named beginning is lost, never seen or even heard, we have a clear though uncanny map before us, too.

The Memory Garden honors life in the grayest of terms: At times, Sinai is responsible for burying the body of a stillborn child who may or may not have a name. At times, there are no remains to bury. Regardless of how *halacha*, Jewish law, rules on what constitutes a life, Sinai assures responsibility for caring for what has been lost and for the parents who are the source of that potential life. Someone, someone Jewish, needs to provide the outstretched arm over the waters. For many women grappling with fertility treatment and carrying “multiples,” the mother’s body itself is simultaneously a kind of *mikveh* growing one twin, and a kind of grave for the other(s). Her body is the *makom*, the holy place and one of hidden contradictions and painful ambiguities.

So much of what mourners bring forth hangs in the twilight of language. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously claimed in the preface to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that “what can be said at all must be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.” Sinai promotes both: Our burial traditions

identify what must be done for the grieving parents, while the Memory Garden gives us a place for the silence. In the Garden we can raise our eyes to the mountains to be beyond what can be said and dwell there.

The landscape architect Michael Painter and his firm have been engaged to design this *makom* of dwelling. His designs include an opportunity for the mourner to enter the garden and arrive at a circle of water where one can bend low toward the earth and put a stone down in gentle shallow flowing water. The design is anchored to three places: the Round, a horizontal passage of flowing water; the Sequoia trees vertically linking ground and sky; and, in a movement across the garden in which our eyes are raised up to Mount San Bruno, a sacred burial site for Ohlone people. All three make one gesture, an integrated question none of us can engage alone.

There is very little in life that Judaism, a deeply practical religion, hasn’t mapped or considered in words, ink and actions. It is up to us, Kol Yisroel to make a Garden for the mourner, to make the place, the *makom*, for consolation to emerge and be received. This is true even when there is nothing to bury.

The Memory Garden at Eternal Home Cemetery

The population of mourners served by the Memory Garden is perhaps the least visible kind of mourner in our community and often their grief makes them the most vulnerable to higher rates of depression and suicide. One reason for this invisibility is the very fact that what dies was literally a part of another person, as opposed to a separate person. In childbirth there is no separation between mother and child. The same is true in peri-natal loss. How do we support their connection in grief? In memory? How do we acknowledge their holy connection, the undeniable trace of love's intentions?

What is one of the greatest achievements of the Memory Garden concept is its ability to take something that is so abstract as human hope, human yearning, absence, namelessness and give it a place, a status, a trace on what Gilles Deleuze describes as a "floating white surface of indetermination." While there may be indetermination within cultural, societal and traditional frameworks, Sinai's Chevra Kadisha has always met that indetermination with compassionate and practical ways to honor life and support the living in grief. 

PLANTING A SEQUOIA
BY DANA GIOIA

All afternoon my brothers and I have worked in the orchard,
Digging this hole, laying you into it, carefully packing the soil.
Rain blackened the horizon, but cold winds kept it over the Pacific,
And the sky above us stayed the dull gray
Of an old year coming to an end.

In Sicily a father plants a tree to celebrate his first son's birth—
An olive or a fig tree—a sign that the earth has one more life to bear.
I would have done the same, proudly laying new stock into my father's orchard,
A green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs,
A promise of new fruit in other autumns.

But today we kneel in the cold planting you, our native giant,
Defying the practical custom of our fathers,
Wrapping in your roots a lock of hair,
a piece of an infant's birth cord,
All that remains above earth of a first-born son,
A few stray atoms brought back to the elements.

We will give you what we can—
our labor and our soil,

Water drawn from the earth
when the skies fail,

Nights scented with the ocean fog,
days softened by the circuit of bees.

We plant you in the corner of the
grove, bathed in western light,

A slender shoot against the sunset.

And when our family is no more,
all of his unborn brothers dead,

Every niece and nephew scattered,
the house torn down,

His mother's beauty ashes in the air,

I want you to stand among strangers,
all young and ephemeral to you,

Silently keeping the secret of your birth.

"Planting a Sequoia" by Dana Gioia from The
Gods of Winter. © Graywolf Press, 1991.

THE ROUND
BY STANLEY KUNITZ

Light splashed this morning,
on the shell-pink anemones
swaying on their tall stems; down blue-
spiked veronica
light flowed in rivulets
over the humps of the honeybees;
this morning I saw light kiss
the silk of the roses
in their second flowering,
my late bloomers
flushed with their brandy.
A curious gladness shook me.

So I have shut the doors of my house,
so I have trudged downstairs to my cell,
so I am sitting in semi-dark
hunched over my desk
with nothing for a view
to tempt me
but a bloated compost heap,
steamy old stinkpile,
under my window;
and I pick my notebook up
and I start to read aloud
the still-wet words I scribbled
on the blotted page:
"Light splashed . . ."

I can scarcely wait till tomorrow
when a new life begins for me,
as it does each day,
as it does each day.

Copyright © 1995 by Stanley Kunitz from
Passing Through: The Later Poems, New
and Selected (W. W. Norton, 1995). 

Passing on the Richness of Our Jewish Experience

**SANDER “SANDY” I.
STADTLER, CPA**

Sandy Stadtler is Past President of Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha, San Francisco. Sandy was a principal at the accounting firm of Rothstein Kass. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Columbia University, a Bachelor of Hebrew Literature from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and a Master in Business Administration from New York University.

PART I

A Century of Caring and Compassion

We are an accumulation of experiences at Sinai Memorial Chapel. Over the past 100 years, we've served thousands and thousands of families at Sinai. While the circumstances and situations of each may have been different, the feelings of loss and pain each demand our singular attention—time after time, and over and over again.

**But we are all, also,
much more than a
mere accumulation of
our life experiences.**

In fact, it's the transmission of these experiences, which have been handed down to us with loving insight and understanding woven into our own lives, that makes them so rich and valuable.

It's this transmission from generation to generation—*m'dor l'dor*—that makes me think specifically of the *Chevra Kadisha*, the sacred society. The *Chevra Kadisha* has always been responsible, with the family of the deceased, for all necessary preparations to ensure a proper Jewish funeral. For me, it's been a great honor to participate in the *Chevra Kadisha*. This has been made much more so as friends and others before us were members and showed you/us—as the next generation—the way forward. This is even more so for those whose parents were members of the *Chevra Kadisha*.

That's what I mean by the transmission of experiences. And, believe me, I have benefitted hugely from this process.

I'm in my early '60s, and I've served on the Sinai board for over three decades, for almost a decade as the youngest member. Each year, I've learned things

Passing on the Richness of Our Jewish Experience

of great and lasting importance from the many wise people who have actively led our organization and helped a multitude of people in need.

These meaningful relationships and what I have learned from the “elders”—those before me—have helped shape me as a person and as a Jew. To a very great degree, those who came before me have given me the confidence and strength to navigate all aspects of my life in the past, now and, I am sure, in the future.

In essence, I was imbued with knowledge and trust by those who preceded me; and I am now working every day to transmit that knowledge and trust to those who are with me and to those who will follow me. This goes beyond our *Chevra Kadisha* because much of what we do, much of what I have learned, are lessons of life, not of death.

So my leadership role in *Chevra Kadisha* isn’t just making sure we adhere to tradition; isn’t just reinforcing our values; and isn’t just keeping us on sound financial and spiritual footing. It’s also very much about continuity and perpetuation. It’s about life.

PART II

Respect, Love and the Jewish End-of-Life

It’s also very much about making sure the comfort and compassion we extend to families at Sinai never cease and never end. We have big hearts, because we see the end-of-life in personal, individual and communal terms, rather than corporate ones.

So—whether it’s burial or *shiva*; parents passing, spouses passing, children passing or close loved ones, respected ones passing; we do our best to help families and our greater community of those who live in the San Francisco Bay Area or families from out of town—to be fully present for any of those people who are both loving and hurting.

We also know that there’s no single way to mourn, even though there’s a Jewish mourning process that we truly believe in.

And this openness is crucial when we’re trying to help someone.

Indeed, sometimes we help create a special end-of-life ritual that will provide sensitive and caring closure for mourners.

For example, a funeral director might

go to the hospital and sit for hours, comforting a mother as she holds her stillborn baby before a burial. After all, the Hebrew word for funeral, *levayah*, means “to accompany.”

History has given us this kind of deep wisdom, the kind we need to help mourners. It was the rabbis in the past who really understood; who knew all too well that people coping with the current or recent death of a loved one were too pained to go forward without support.

So they offered guidance, assistance and rituals to help those grieving to make their way back to life. A framework to help mourners get back to the life of the living—their lives.

And they also offered time—time to mourn, and time to accept loss. That’s one of the reasons that *shiva* is so valuable. It’s a way to help mourners, with the support of their community, get through a very hard time. It’s a way to comfort people, so they’re not alone with their hurt and pain. And, unlike burial, which is for both the living and deceased, *shiva* provides time as a way of helping the living remember the deceased. *Shiva* also makes clear that death is serious and final, and that’s why this weeklong ritual signals that life cannot go on normally.

Unfortunately, many Jews today don’t recognize the full extent to which their faith offers end-of-life wisdom.

But my hope is that this will change, and that more Jews will connect and come to realize that the treasured Jewish traditions at the time of death and beyond are rich, relevant, spiritually and emotionally valuable.

In the end, it’s all about respect, love and continuity—for the deceased, for the mourners, the community and for sensitive and thoughtful lives well lived and bound up in the bonds of our ongoing lives as we say in the *el malay rachamim*.

PART III

Sensitive and Thoughtful Lives Well-Lived

When I consider the phrase “sensitive and thoughtful lives well-lived,” lives of the deceased bound up in the bonds of our lives, I think about many of the board members—past and present—at Sinai.

Indeed, Sinai has a board of interested and concerned people who are far from transactional in their collective and individual philosophies. This is a board that is emblematic of what I discussed above—a circle of life that goes on.

And that’s because Sinai is a community life organization.

Passing on the Richness of Our Jewish Experience

Several of our board members are very learned, and several are true icons. But each one has determined they have a responsibility to play a significant role in the communal Jewish life of San Francisco. They're on the Sinai board to help people, to help influence ethical lives through mentorship. And, to a person, they believe that being Jewish and living Jewish values is important; they know that living, teaching and transmitting Jewish values is absolutely essential.

For me, the personification of all this can be found in all the past presidents and, specifically, in the life of Dr. Abraham Bernstein, MD, a former leader at Sinai. Abe was singularly the most learned lay person I have ever met. And he didn't go to Yeshiva. He grew up in San Francisco and spent his life learning, often on his own. Abe died on Rosh Hashanah, and tradition says that those who die on Rosh Hashanah are closest to God. Even when Abe was in deteriorating health he laid *tefillin* every day in the hospital. Being a pallbearer for him was one of the greatest honors I have felt bestowed upon me.

So, despite the challenges posed by growing interest in cremation and the decline of synagogue affiliation, Sinai and its special and sensitive board goes on. We are different; and what we do is different.

But we need to keep doing it; and we need to keep providing our services forever.

Because we—alone—are the anchor.

Because we can't be replaced.

And because death—itself—is forever.

But also, because life goes on and we need to support it.

PART IV

Modeling the Best Jewish Values

Much of this was familiar to me. Growing up in Cleveland, we lived in a Jewish neighborhood, with an Orthodox *shul*, Jewish funeral home, Hebrew school and kosher butcher all very close by.

I guess I've come a long way, because I remember as a kid having some wicked snowball fights in the parking lot of the Jewish funeral home.

I have always been fortunate to have good modeling, too. My mother was a Jewish educator, and my father was a synagogue president. I draw on their wisdom almost every day, and I believe they passed on the richness of their experiences to me. The bonds of their lives are surely bound up in my life and my family's life.

They kept a kosher home. We were home Friday night, and we went to *shul* on Saturday morning. I considered becoming a rabbi. But I realized that I didn’t want a life in the public eye. That said, I continued in Jewish education, youth work, teaching and ran a Jewish summer camp.

As I went on with my professional life as a C.P.A., I eventually got involved in the Jewish community in San Francisco and became active on a number of boards. I met people like Bernie Reiner, Irving Rabin, Marty Bergman, Harold Dobbs and Art Zimmerman, and they invited me to join the Sinai board. I was the young guy—actually, the youngest guy—on the board. I was surrounded by some of the real luminaries in the Jewish community, the elders.

all, many of the board members were self-made men (and now women); they understood how to construct something that was important and substantial. And they were on the board to enrich the community, as well as our Jewish infrastructure. To provide continuity for the community.

These board members had their priorities very much in order. They put their family first; Sinai second; and their businesses third. I have tried to embrace their real commitments, their real responsibilities and their real generosity.

Like them, I also want to continue to do important things in the community; and I want to help the next generation of leadership get involved. If you don’t take the time to be with people, there won’t be any dialogue or learning. And we definitely need this sort of dialogue between the generations.

One of the educational conversations we need to keep having is with rabbis. We need to deepen understanding of how working with Sinai helps strengthen the Jewish community, and why not using Sinai weakens the Jewish community.

To quote Marcel Proust “When we stop to remember, it’s not just the past that’s at stake—it’s everything we are.” We’re talking about our Jewish traditions here, and, as all those who have come before me have said, these traditions are larger than any one person. In the end, they may even be larger than life itself. ♡

PART V

Giving Back Today and Tomorrow

After joining the Sinai board, I immediately felt the strong sense of pride that the board members felt. They were especially proud, for example, of the fact that Sinai was a not-for-profit.

And we still are.

I also felt the strong sense of giving back to the community, of building something loving and lasting. After

Time in Time

**EVA M.
HAGENHOFER**

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There is a layer of coolness beneath the otherwise sun-warmed air.

Among the tall stemmed grasses of the prairie are cornflowers, purple asters, black-eyed susans, compass plants, Queen Anne's lace, pink cone flowers. The tips of the sumac leaves are reddish, and here and there one can spot some gold flashing from the maple trees. Ribbons of geese fly across the sky and sandhill cranes, paired-up for life, are making their way southward, too. I think of the sweaters that I should now take out of hiding and the butternut squash that waits to be cooked.

It is the start of fall in this part of the American Midwest that I now call home. It is a time of turning, of reflecting on the season behind us, of *teshuva*. It is, as Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe explained a "season of our rejoicing."

Soon we will gather together, make a simple shelter, and in our reading be reminded that "There is a time for everything, and a season for every purpose under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die."

And above that structure, opened to the sky, we will see the heavenly bodies that have regulated Earthly lives since life began: the seasons "turn, turn, turn" as the Earth rotates on its axis tilting away and then toward the sun's direct rays. Our nights wax and wane from light to dark as our moon turns around us. We measure the hours according to the revolution of our planet in its perpetual orbit around our sun. We are bound to celestial time, time keeping. Time keepers were our first technology. We noticed the ebb and flow of the tides, the cycles of a woman's body, the length and precise location of the sun's shadows and began living accordingly; we needed to know when to plant, when to harvest, when to celebrate, when to make love; so, we created stone circles, pyramids and instruments of metal, then glass, to help us in our timekeeping.

Alan Lightman explores the human relationship between time and timekeeping in his lovely and profound novel, *Einstein's Dreams*:

Time is visible in all places. Clock towers, wristwatches, church bells divide years into months, months into days, days into hours, hours into seconds. And beyond any particular clock, a vast scaffold of time, stretching across the universe, lays down the law of time equally for all.... Time passes forward with exquisite regularity. Time is an infinite ruler. (p.26)

Ah, yes! We try but cannot control our most basic unit of measurement. We make attempts to hurry it, dismiss it, even slow it down, but time—even though we live by it—continues without human agency. The best we can do is measure it, calculate it, surrender to it and, in a most human way, sanctify it by stepping out of quotidian time into time that is distinct, *kodesh*, holy. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us:

"There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.... It is impossible for man to shirk the problem of time.....We can only master time in time." (The Sabbath).

Transitions are special times; they give us time to become. When I was pregnant with my first child I realized the miracle of my nine-month wait: I needed time to become a mother no less than my daughter needed time to develop into the 8 lb. 6 oz. newborn I took into my arms. And, nature gave it to me! It took time to gestate, to prepare a crib, knit a blanket, imagine future scenarios. It was a private time, an anticipatory time, a transition from living for myself to living for another.

On the other side of life, there is the letting go of it. Sometimes we can prepare for it; at other times dying is too sudden for that. In either case, the real transition time lies ahead; unlike birth, when we can look forward to a new beginning, death is an end. Life does not become fuller; it is emptied – of dreams, of helpful companionship, of shared memories, of loving caresses, of a counterweight during waking and sleeping hours.

When my partner, David, very suddenly slipped away from his and my life in the middle of the first day of spring, I entered that transition time without guidance and with no time-tested, much less spiritual, community that would sit with me, embrace me, patiently let me share my sorrow. Since only a year earlier I had moved away from my family, that is to say my grown children, to live with the man with whom I expected to grow old, I did not have a ready-made circle of friends.

Nonetheless, a few good people knocked and entered my life. We became friends - “friends by fire” we say to each other. They walked and talked with me, filled some of the suddenly vacant time, listened to my first attempts to single-handedly tell a story that belonged to two people. But there was no gathering of mourners, no occasion to spend some hours together remembering the precious life that had just left a gaping hole in our midst. There was no time for me, my grief, my longing for David and the life that would now never be. There were only arrangements to be made, accounts to be settled, material assets to be counted and reclaimed by family members much too soon.

What I needed most of all was to tell my stories, over and over again so that their truth could emerge as in each telling I dug deeper into them; I needed willing listeners who understood the sacredness of this time and their important role as comforters, who didn’t mind a little repetition, who could kindly check my revisions and remind me to stay away from making myth of story. I needed, through these stories, to keep David alive; I needed to preserve my memories of our life together by entering them into the collective memory of the people he held dear.

Alan Lightman understands that while time is linear and inexorably so, it is also recursive:

Time is like a flow of water, occasionally displaced by a bit of debris, a passing breeze. Now and then, some cosmic disturbance will cause a rivulet of time to turn away from the mainstream, to make connection backstream. When this happens birds, soil, people caught in the branching tributary find themselves suddenly carried to the past.

We don’t always want to get caught in that current by ourselves. But, except for one dear friend, my memories went unshared and the community of friends who had surrounded David and me while he was living, turned away. What I needed was to be held within a cocoon of care, but instead I had the feeling of becoming more and more invisible, and with that the life I had shared with David felt less and less real. Because there was no *shloshim*, no separate and book-ended time, my mourning just rolled out in an endless, incomplete, amorphous way, like a shallow sigh or an unsatisfying yawn. I moved on, but didn’t transition. Months later I realized the fullness of what had gone wrong.

Rabbi Heschel, speaking of the *Sabbath* as holy time, again explains:

"A special consciousness is required to recognize the ultimate significance of time. We all live it and are so close to being identical with it that we fail to notice it. It is only within time that there is fellowship and togetherness of all beings...through my living in time, I am a contemporary of all other beings." (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p.96–99)

What I have learned from this, my story, is that when we act outside of time, treating the times that change our lives as any other, not stopping to honor transition times, moving ahead as if these times don't actually rule us, we pay dearly... and end up having to catch up with the time we did not take. If we don't move slowly and intentionally through grief, catching how it twists and turns us and how it changes with time and aspect, it becomes an emotion that is frozen, belonging to a particular time in spite of time having, as it does, moved on.

When we lose someone we love, our mind does not ask permission before we relive the last kiss, the mistake, the words we wish we hadn't said...But those who grieve with us, hold our hands, share our air when we speak and do not go away when we repeat, revise, review our story, they are like a lubricant in the gears of time, helping us slide into our new reality. ♡

“
*Transitions
themselves are not
the issue, but how
well you respond to
their challenges!*

”

JIM GEORGE

DEDICATION

This compilation of essays is dedicated to my parents, Herman J. and Harriet Mermelstein Salkin, z”l, whose values and examples unwittingly brought me to this calling.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I arrived at Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha as its new executive director in 2010, I concluded that its singular challenge was the continued organizational strength, vitality and sustainability of this unique institution. With an eye toward the future, I asked myself, why a Jewish funeral?

This collection of essays is intended to address the question and by inference to encourage conversations that engage people in the beauty, wisdom and simplicity of Jewish traditions concerning death, funerals, burial and bereavement.

My sincere appreciation to the Board of Directors of Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha, whose engagement, support and appreciation means so much to me; my wife, Alix Derby Salkin who has been a stalwart support through the entire project; Steven Gottlieb for his consistent encouragement from the initial thought through today; my daughters, Sarah and Leah Whitman-Salkin, who each helped influence and refine the collection; my colleagues at Sinai, particularly Sharon Brusman, for whom no detail was too small, while always holding the big picture; Kim Baer and Jean Pongsai, who provided design counsel; The Milton and Sophie Meyer Fund; and all of our contributors, whose thoughtful work and life experiences combined to weave this tapestry.

Errors and omissions are entirely my own.

Samuel J. Salkin, San Francisco
2018 5779

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Samuel J. Salkin serves as the executive director of Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha in the United States, the only nonprofit Jewish funeral home and Chevra Kadisha serving the entire spectrum of the Jewish community. For over a century, it has assured the dignified burial of all its community members, irrespective of means.

Sam's career has been at the intersection of community development, service and enterprise. He previously served as the CEO of the Alaska Commercial Company, Anchorage, Alaska; Peet's Coffee & Tea, Berkeley, California; and the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, The Peninsula, Marin & Sonoma Counties, San Francisco, California. He has taught at several colleges and universities and served on the boards of directors of communal and business organizations.



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FD 262

Death and mourning are complicated life experiences that every one of us will go through.

Jewish tradition offers a roadmap for navigating the challenges of the moment, from actionable steps to tools for thoughtful reflection. Collected here for the first time are twenty-three original essays from a range of contemporary Jewish thinkers, offering new and engaging perspectives on approaching the end of life.

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