

The Afterlife

An exploration of Jewish death and bereavement rituals is helping baby boomers face their own mortality.

By Stacia Friedman

Shortly after my father died, my mother asked, "Where is he now?" At first, I thought she meant in which cemetery. But, no, Mom knew Dad was buried at Mount Sharon. She was asking me in what realm her husband of 54 years existed, now that he was no longer among the living.

I looked at the petite woman who had packed Hershey bars in my school lunch bag, who had bought me my first bra two years before I needed one and who had spent more time on the phone resolving relationship problems than Dr. Ruth. I took it for granted that she knew more about life and death than I did. She was the one who lit the yahrzeit candles that filled the kitchen with flickering light. She was the one who went mysteriously off to Yizkor services. She was the one who had lost a baby brother and kept his photo hidden away in a drawer. Suddenly, the balance had shifted. I wasn't coming to her with impossible questions. She was coming to me.

For an instant, I wished I was a Christian, a Hindu, anything but a Jew. Then I could describe a paradise as luxurious as a Catskill Mountains resort. But heaven? Angels? Being reunited with one's ancestors? That's for gentiles, I thought. And yet, the finality of a Jewish death, the sound of earth falling on a casket, does not answer my mother's question. Nor does it answer the many questions that have arisen in my own heart since that day. What really happens to us when we die? Why do we say Kaddish? Is there an afterlife?

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According to an article published in *Tikkun* (Sept/Oct '95), I am not alone in my concerns. "Seventy-seven million Americans, the baby boomers, will turn 50 years old before the end of the year 2015. Just as they took control of the childbirth experience in the '70s, so will they demand more meaningful closures in the 2000s."

A Toronto newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, uses even stronger language to make the same point. "The biggest, most presumptuous and most controlling of age groups isn't taking death lying down," writes Salem Alaton. "They find that the millennium is racing toward them and that Jerry Garcia is dead. . . . They are getting nervous. Those advancing into their 50s have not only buried parents but members of their peer group as well, notably friends killed by AIDS. We are reluctant to put death on the agenda, but it is insinuating itself there anyway."

"Many people have lost touch with the psychological and spiritual wisdom inherent in the Jewish approach to death, dying and bereavement."

"The new intimacy isn't sex," says Mt. Airy psychologist Simcha Paull Raphael, "it's death, the last taboo." Author of *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Jason Aronson Publishers, 1994), Raphael has offered death-awareness workshops in Canada, the United States and Israel for over 15 years. (He'll be offering a two-part workshop "Death, Bereavement and Spirituality: Walking the Mourner's Path" at the Germantown Jewish Centre in Mt. Airy on Oct. 27 and Nov 3. and a six-session course in the fall at Beth Am Israel in Penn Valley.) He also teaches in the graduate religion and pastoral counseling programs at La Salle University.

"Living in a death-denying society, many people have lost touch with the psychological and spiritual wisdom inherent in the Jewish approach to death, dying and bereavement," says Raphael. "People long for an opportunity to talk

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about death in an open way." That is exactly what Raphael provides in his workshop, "Therefore Choose Life: Exploring Jewish Wisdom about Death and Bereavement."

Last winter, I was one of eight participants who met weekly in a gracious Mt. Airy home for Raphael's guided tour of the Jewish afterlife. Some were there because, like me, they had lost a parent and were still looking for answers. Others were there because they worked in Jewish health-care facilities and wanted to be more responsive to dying patients and their families. One participant, Amy, a shy woman in her late 30s, said, "My father just found out he has a terminal illness, and I want to learn how to help him and myself." I admired her courage. When I was in Amy's position, I, too, wanted to make things easier for my father, but I didn't know where to

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begin. I had been instructed not to cry in front of him and not to say anything that would upset him. Yet, looking into his eyes, I saw it all there: the grief, the pain, the helplessness. I am a writer, someone who juggles words for a living, but I did not know how to comfort my father or how to say goodbye.

Then there was Karen. Within one year, the 48-year-old woman had lost two childhood friends to AIDS, an aunt to cancer and her father to what was to have been a routine surgical procedure. "I never had a chance to recover from one death before another knocked me over," Karen explained. "It felt like being hit by tidal waves."

Even those among us not yet dealing with the loss of a loved one were beginning to worry about our own mortality. Susan, 50, put it this way: "I never thought about it until my ex-husband told me he might remarry. Suddenly, I realized that I won't be buried next to him. So, where will I go? What will hap-

pen to me?" We single boomers face an equally puzzling dilemma. Do we join our parents in the family plot and risk moving back in with them for eternity? And what about the inscription on a single woman's tombstone? I am increasingly concerned that mine will read, "Beloved daughter, sister and blind date."

Raphael explained that the intention of the workshop was not to market any particular belief but "to motivate people to think more about the meaning of the afterlife in the face of grief and loss." Raphael knows how to speak our language. A baby boomer himself at 45, he draws upon the many cultural influences of our time, including Buddhist and Hindu teachings and contemporary psychology.

"Grab my hand," he instructed a workshop member. "Now try to let go." Raphael held on tight, locking his partner with a steel grip and a smile. They struggled back and forth, unable to separate. "That's what Kaddish is about, learning to let go," he explained. According to Raphael, the traditional purpose of Jewish rituals, such as *shiva*, Kaddish, *yahrzeit* and *Yizkor*, is to help the departed soul along its journey. The contemporary, psychological value of these rituals is to help us deal with our bereavement.

Raphael, who is trained in Jungian psychology and specializes in bereavement counseling, described the Jewish way of preparing for death, mixing Hasidic tales with postmodern philosophy. He explained how the Jewish view of death in each historic period always reflected the worldview and cultural experience of that age. As unlikely as it may seem, the idea of an afterlife is not foreign to Judaism. "Jews have always believed in life after death," Raphael told us. But over four millennia, our beliefs have been influenced by the larger world in which we live. With the advent of

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rationalism, Freud and the Holocaust came our contemporary, secular point of view: Life after death! Who are you kidding? Dead is dead!

Each week we traveled further into the vast legacy of Jewish beliefs about the afterlife. We were given charts that clearly marked the postmortem journey of the soul to Hibbut Ha-kever (Pangs of the Grave), Gehenna (Purgatory), Gan Eden (Garden of Eden) and Gilgul (Rebirth). These terms are derived from words found in the Torah and came into Jewish afterlife writings during the Rabbinic period, around the second century. Each stage lifts the soul to a higher level, and depending on how one has lived on earth, the afterlife offers many options. Those who lived ethical lives can expect a luxury suite with an ocean view. And those who opted for personal gain at the expense of their fellow human beings will have to suffer the heat of the boiler room.

"I encourage families to let children take an active part in funerals."

Our workbook described the Jewish heaven: "Gan Eden has two gates . . . where 60 myriads of ministering angels keep watch. When the righteous person approaches, angels remove his burial garments, clothe him with eight robes of the clouds of glory, and place upon his head two crowns, one of precious stones and pearls, the other of gold." Angels? Yes, not only do Jews have angels, but it seems we had them before anyone else did! In the Bible, an angel appears to escort Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, to wrestle with Jacob and to tell Sarah that she is going to have a child. It is only in modern times, following rationalism, that angels ceased being an important element of Jewish belief and were reduced to the status of a metaphor. Coincidentally, Philadelphia's expert on the subject of Jewish angels is none other than Simcha Paull Raphael's wife, Reconstructionist rabbi Rayzel Raphael. "Compared to the Christian image of cherubs, Jewish angels have a far greater range of scope and power," Rabbi Raphael explains.

During the workshop, Raphael cross-referenced Jewish deathbed rituals with research about contemporary near-death experiences and the work of Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, psychiatry's grand shaman of death and dying. It seems that the current bestseller *Embraced by the Light*, by Betty J. Eadie (Bantam), and medieval Jewish texts agree. At the moment of death, there is no pain, not even for those who have been long-suffering. There might have been pain up to that point, but at the final juncture, there is peace. (That certainly was the case with my father. When he died, after a six-month battle with pancreatic cancer, my mother described his face as "radiant, peaceful at last.")

Many Jewish customs relating to death can be traced to law, but others reside in myth and folklore. In *The Holy and the Profane: Evolution of Jewish Folkways*, by Theodore H. Gaster, we learn that many of these customs have two interpretations: spiritual and practical. For instance, the opening and closing of a window immediately following a death is said to allow the departing soul to exit. It was also thought to prevent contagion of disease. What about covering mirrors, overturning chairs and breaking pots? This was supposedly to discourage the soul from returning home. In Talmudic times, it was the custom to place keys and pens in the coffins of Jewish scholars. Starting in the 12th century, Jews threw a few blades of grass behind them as they left the cemetery. And among my favorite idiosyncrasies, it seems Algerian Jews wear black gloves as a sign of mourning and the Indian Jews of Cochin dress in white.

Perhaps the most startling fact is that many of our Jewish customs have counterparts in the non-Jewish world. The Greeks and the Russian Orthodox also pour out all standing water immediately following a death. Again, there are spiritual and practical considerations. Standing water, before the advent of refrigeration, was subject to contamination and associated with the spread of disease. It also had spiritual connotations for both Jews and Christians, as in the mikveh and baptism. While we place a stick in the hand of the deceased so they may dig their way to Jerusalem, in England and Wales they substitute a hammer so the deceased can knock on the celestial doors. And the Jewish custom of serving hard-boiled eggs and lentils to the bereaved was also shared by the

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Greeks and Romans. Eggs symbolize fertility, life itself, and lentils symbolize the roundness, or wholeness, of life.

As the weeks progressed, I felt increasingly comfortable with the subject of death and dying and closer to the other members of the group. Then, one night, I noticed that Amy was missing. We were told that her father had died, much sooner than expected, and that she was sitting shiva. I hesitated. My experience with shiva was limited to my own family's eat-and-run routine, where the idea was to get it all over with as fast as possible. I had known Amy for only three weeks and was unsure if my presence would be appreciated. I didn't know what to say, what to do. But as soon as I entered her house, overflowing with family and friends, I understood what Raphael had been teaching us all along. Everywhere I looked, people were

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engaged in animated conversation, telling stories about Amy's father, sharing memories and even laughter. Death has the power to isolate, to make us feel separate and alone. Through rituals such as shiva, we can create a sense of belonging, a feeling of community, and thus comfort the bereaved.

One week, I arrived at the workshop a few minutes late. Raphael was holding up what seemed to be an extra-large pair of unbleached muslin pajamas. "This is a Jewish shroud," he said. My heart jumped. I knew that shrouds had existed, but I had thought they went out of style during the Middle Ages. He went on to describe the preparation of the body, as practiced by our ancestors for centuries and by Orthodox Jews today. The first step is *tahara*, the ritual washing of the body. In all, 24 quarts of water are continuously poured over the body while prayers are recited. The process is considered to be sacred, and the deceased is treated with dignity and respect. Performing *tahara* is considered the highest mitzvah because in all other acts of

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charity one might be thanked by the recipient. Here, one receives nothing in return, and all payment is donated to charity.

After the ritual washing, the body is dressed in a muslin shroud devoid of knots or bows. The idea is that nothing should inhibit the body's return to the earth and that everyone, regardless of his or her station in life, should be equal in death. Until the time of burial, the body is never left alone and is watched over by a *shomer* (guard), who reads Jewish psalms. In ancient times and in some parts of the world today, the body is buried without a coffin so that the deceased might speedily return "dust unto dust." In most cases, a simple wooden coffin without nails is used, and nothing may be placed inside it except the body and a satchel of earth from Israel. According to medieval Jewish texts, the soil is to be from the Mount of Olives, the place where resurrection is supposed to begin. Placing holy earth in the coffin supposedly allows the deceased to be included in the resurrection, no matter where in the Diaspora they are buried.

The idea of a simple wooden coffin has its appeal, especially when I compare it to the caskets previously selected by members of my family. Considering the expense, the metallic finish and the lush padding, they could have just as easily been buried in a Lexus. I knew I could count on my generation to come up with a more organic solution to this problem, so I wasn't surprised when Raphael passed out flyers advertising kosher caskets from an Oregon company. It read like an Ikea instruction manual: "Assemble in 20 minutes . . . no screws, no nails, no fasteners." For \$369, this was a bargain. But it couldn't compete with a brochure from a Massachusetts-based manufacturer offering "a life coffin which, until your funeral, can be used as a bookcase or for wine storage." Not bad at \$365. The brochure went on to promise that "seeing your coffin every day will act as a catalyst for discussion with your family and friends." Sure. I can hear my Aunt Ruth now: "A coffin in your living room? On second thought, let's have the party at my place."

A traditional funeral does not permit viewing the body following tahara, applying cosmetics to the deceased or adding other secular elements, such as flowers, to the funeral. It is important to remember that until the 18th century, most Jewish deaths occurred in the home, not in the hospital or nursing

home. Back then, there was ample time to view the deceased and say goodbye before the ritual washing began. Funerals were immediate. No one had to fly in from Los Angeles or Miami. The concept of a viewing, even for immediate family, is part of the secularization of Jewish funerals and reflects the culture in which we live.

With the popularization of viewings, many American Jews have accepted embalming, a practice forbidden by Jewish law. Some Jews mistakenly believe that embalming is required by the state. As for the notion that embalming allows for a "more natural appearance" for the deceased, I don't see anything "natural" about a process that even funeral directors describe as a "surgical procedure." The attempt to cosmetically make the deceased appear "healthy" is probably rooted in our contemporary need to deny our own mortality.

Elliot Rosen, funeral director of Joseph Levine & Son, says, "No Pennsylvania law requires embalming, and it is against Jewish law. If the family wishes to see the deceased, in some cases embalming achieves the most desirable effect. But in many other cases, a body that has been refrigerated may look just as good."

As Raphael explains it, a traditional Jewish funeral forces you to deal with the reality of death and the pain of loss. In secular funerals, the spadeful of earth on the coffin is symbolic, as is the cutting of the mourner's ribbon. But in the traditional funeral, family and friends do not leave until they have filled in the grave with their own hands. No hired workers with machines. Mourners do not wear black ribbons but actually tear their garments to express their sorrow.

If you have never witnessed a traditional Jewish funeral, it is a powerful experience and one that is undergoing a resurgence of interest among baby boomers. "People from nontraditional backgrounds are choosing some or all of the traditional elements, such as tahara, the shomer, the wooden casket," says Rosen. The funeral director also sees a trend toward graveside services, which he credits to society's "fast-food mentality." Although he believes graveside services are appropriate in certain instances, Rosen thinks that too often the goal is expediency, with something lost in the process. But he also senses a move toward greater personal involvement, people wanting to participate directly in funerals and unveilings rather than handing over total authority

to a rabbi or funeral director.

Until two years ago, it was difficult, if not impossible, to mix and match traditional Jewish funeral elements. If you wanted tahara in Philadelphia, there was only one *chevra kadisha* (sacred society) that could provide the ritual washing. Being an Orthodox organization, it will not participate in any funeral that is not strictly kosher. That means no viewing, having a shomer, a wooden casket, a shroud and so on.

These requirements present a problem for many Jews who want some, but not all, traditional elements. For instance, the woman who has worn a tallit all her life and wants to be buried in it. Or the family who wants tahara for their loved one but wants to view the body before the casket is closed. Or the parents who have lost a child and want flowers at the funeral.

Thanks to Rabbi Linda Holtzman, director of the Reconstructionist Chevra Kadisha of Philadelphia, there is an alternative. Since 1994, her group has been responding to the needs of Jews who do not wish to conform to the strict Orthodox rules, but who want some of the traditional elements. "We have women who want tahara but who want to be buried in a dress that has special meaning for them. Or people who want to place personal items in the casket, such as a teddy bear of a deceased child."

Rabbi Holtzman, who is director of Practical Rabbis (counseling and community relations training) at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, says that the members of the group who perform tahara range in age from 20 to 60. "Half are rabbinic students from the college and the rest are members of Reconstructionist congregations," she says. So far, the Reconstructionist Chevra Kadisha of Philadelphia has had only 12 requests a year but is looking forward to greater involvement.

As difficult as it is to discuss tahara and other funeral arrangements amongst ourselves, it is even harder to know when and how to talk to our children about death and dying. "I encourage families to let children take an active part in funerals," says Eileen Norman-Perice, funeral director at Goldsteins' Rosenberg's Raphael-Sacks. A nationally certified grief facilitator, Norman-Perice believes strongly in death education for children and conducts educational programs in coordination with local Hebrew schools. "I offer to take children during funerals to what we call a 'safe room' that contains

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books, toys, television, videos, arts and crafts. I talk to them about their feelings, about grief, and what their parents are experiencing. The service is piped in so they are not missing anything."

Norman-Perice believes this provides an opportunity for parents to be alone with the deceased and for children to find a level of comfort and not be overwhelmed by the event. "It also gives the child a chance to write a special letter or make a drawing to place in the casket. This allows the child to carry a positive memory of a relative's death, and parents are grateful." Norman-Perice also offers the After Care Program, counseling families 30 days after their loss. "People used to learn how to survive. Now we're helping them learn how to live again."

To live again. This is the theme inherent in the Jewish view of bereavement. Mourning is necessary, but it does not go on forever. There is a time to return to the joy of life, to focus on the future and to grow. For some, this is a difficult process and requires the assistance of support groups or private counseling. Jewish Family and Children's Services (JFCS) offers support groups and bereavement counseling services in Center City, the Northeast, Blue Bell, the Main Line, Bucks County and Elkins Park, for a variety of age groups and those with special needs. Says Sara Wenger, JFCS bereavement counseling coordinator, "We have groups for young widows and widowers, for parents who have lost children and for adults between 30 and 50 who have lost parents."

For most of us, talking about death, especially with loved ones, is not easy. It's a subject we avoid until absolutely necessary, and even then, we don't know what to say. Within the Reform movement, there has been an effort to establish "caring community models." To achieve this goal, Rabbi Richard Address, director of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations' Committee on Older Adults & Bioethics, helped prepare and edit a workbook to guide individuals through end-of-life choices and funerals.

Titled *A Time to Prepare*, it covers bioethical decisions, ethical wills, financial arrangements and everything you need to know to make an informed choice for your own funeral or for a loved one's. Far too often, husbands and wives are left not knowing what their spouse really wanted, besides being in a state of confusion regarding financial arrangements. In the foreword of the guidebook,

a widow suggests, "You can give your loved ones this gift of freedom and time to work through the grieving process if you arrange your affairs by completing the enclosed workbook." Says Address, "I'm very proud of this project and the people involved in my committees. We know that the need is out there."

Raphael agrees. "We need more resources, tools to help people face their own death and the death of family members. We are beginning to recognize that talking about death is not morbid and unhealthy. In fact, it can be an important way to develop a healthier attitude," he states. He suggests that congregations move beyond the mitzvah committee that sends shiva platters. "We need to train para-chaplains to be available to support the bereaved." He also foresees the training of "guides" to assist the dying in the same way that midwives help in the birthing process. Meanwhile, he is writing a new book, tentatively titled *Afterlife and the Renewal of Jewish Death Rituals*.

"Jewish tradition has recognized that the living and the dead continue to interact in important and intimate ways," writes Raphael in *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*. Before I attended the workshop, deceased relatives had visited me in dreams, saying, "Don't worry. Everything is okay. I love you." The same message came from each relative and even from Edna, my cat of 19 years. But when my father appeared in my dreams, he never spoke. Several weeks after completing the workshop, I dreamed again about my father. He was standing in a crowd, smiling and silent. His hair was thick and black. There wasn't a line on his face. He was in perfect health. As I approached, he held up four fingers, but I didn't know what he meant. He moved his lips and mouthed the word "forty." Suddenly, I understood. I realized that my father, who died at the age of 78, was telling me that he is now 40 years old forever, while I, to my growing amazement, am racing toward 50.

Is there really an afterlife? And if there is a resurrection, do I get to choose at what age I come back? Some questions will remain unanswered. But the next time my mother asks, "Where is Dad now?" I will quote Simcha Paull Raphael's book, "Between the world of the living and the world of the dead, there is a window and not a wall." ■

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In addition to teaching classes and workshops, he is available for referrals for bereavement counseling and spiritually-oriented psychotherapy with individuals, couples and families.

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