

The Next Frontier-Bereavement Support Services

By Simcha Steven Paull, Ph.D.

When I was twenty-one years old, my closest friend was killed in a car accident. His sudden death was a shock to me, and to his family and friends.

As one quite close to my family, I went through all the experiences associated with the funeral. There was a certain power in the whole experience that seemed to soothe my shock and pain. Yet that feeling of being soothed and comforted was very short lived.

The remainder of the year, and indeed the next few years, were very difficult personally, and for those of us who were close to this young man. What I didn't understand at that time was that I was going through a normal process of grief; intense, no doubt, but certainly normal. How I longed for someone to talk to, someone who could help me understand the confused emotions that were part of my daily life.

Time, I guess, healed much of my grief. I resolved to learn more about the experience of grief and loss, and went on to become a psychologist trained to work with the dying and the grieving. But what about the many other people who are in the place I was over ten years ago? What about the thousands and thousands of people who live to see a child, spouse, parent or other close loved one die? How do the people we meet in the funeral arrangement process cope with their grief in the weeks, months and years after a funeral?

It was this exact question which led to the creation of The Benjamin Institute For Community Education and Referral. Michael Benjamin, owner of Benjamin's Park Memorial Chapel, in Toronto, has been for years, aware that the needs of families and individuals for care and support continue long after the funeral comes to an end. Occasionally there have been telephone calls: from a lonely widow asking for guidelines on how to cope; from a family with

problems with a teenage child six months after his mother's death; or from a bereaved parent. Every person expressed a need for someone to talk with, and for help in understanding just what they were experiencing.

In response to calls such as these, and out of a commitment to pioneering new directions in the funeral industry, Michael Benjamin has taken the initiative to create an institute designed to address the whole issue of death education and bereavement support services within the Jewish community of Toronto. The Benjamin Institute For Community Education and Referral has been founded with

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the following three goals:

1. To provide high-quality educational programs on death and bereavement awareness to members of the Toronto Jewish community.
2. To offer staff training and professional development seminars on death and bereavement to community workers, nurses, clergy, helping professionals, and other care-givers.
3. To offer bereavement support services to individuals and families.

The vision of The Benjamin Institute for Community Education and Referral is a broad one. It is based upon the belief that the funeral director and his staff are not uniquely functionaries at the time of death, but also have a responsibility to educate the wider community about the many facets of death, burial and mourning. The intention of the Institute's program is not only to act as a friendly voice on the telephone for people in emotional turmoil; nor simply to provide a support group for widows; or a bereavement seminar for clergy.

All of these are but a part of the activities of The Benjamin Institute. But the broader vision

of the institute is to help people begin developing an understanding of the human experience of bereavement, even prior to an encounter with the death of a beloved one. And furthermore, in the aftermath of an encounter with death, the program of the institute is designed to help people find within themselves, and within the community, the kinds of resources required for coping with grief and loss.

To inaugurate The Benjamin Institute, a monthly public lecture series has been established entitled: "From Darkness to Light: Understanding the Experience of Grief and Loss". Sessions will be presented by social workers, psychiatrists, rabbis, and even a trust officer from an investment company. Topics include: the experiences of bereaved parents; widows and widowers; a spiritual approach to bereavement; wills and estates; Judaism's psychology of mourning; bereavement and the family; etc.

The second explicit goal of The Benjamin Institute involves outreach work to professionals in the community. Here, it is apparent that many nurses, social workers, psychologists, and rabbis recognize the need to upgrade their own skills in working with the bereaved. Professionals are eager to learn new ways of relating to the people they serve. The institute intends to sponsor professional development seminars both at our own facility, and within institutional settings where it will be even easier for staff to participate. (Presently, plans are being drawn up for a special program oriented for principals and teachers within the Hebrew school systems in Toronto.)

Finally, The Benjamin Institute has been founded to serve the needs of bereaved individuals and families. Specific outreach is being directed towards those who use the services of Benjamin's Park Memorial

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Chapel. Within the first month after a funeral, families are contacted first by mail, then with a follow-up telephone call. "Hello! This is The Benjamin Institute. Can we be of help to you?", can lead to many different options for any individual. A personal appointment with our resident psychologist and bereavement counselor; an invitation to one of our upcoming lectures; a resource pamphlet on topics such as grief, or the death of a child forwarded by mail; or perhaps a referral to one of the varied bereavement resources already functioning in this city - all of these are among the services provided.

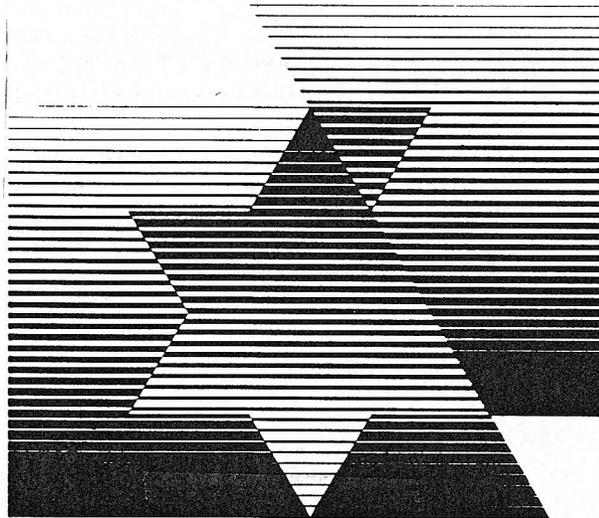
At this point, The Benjamin Institute is working in collaboration with the hospitals and social services agencies which are offering bereavement groups. If we can guide people into such groups in a way that will meet their needs, we will be helping them tremendously. However, also planned for The Benjamin Institute is the creation of our

own bereavement groups which will draw from both contemporary psychological approaches to grief, as well as traditional Jewish perspectives.

The Benjamin Institute for Community Education and Referral has already attracted attention in this community. People have called saying that over ten years have passed since the death of their loved one - is it too late for us to help? No, ten years is not too late. Unresolved

grief does not go away. But through compassionate support, we can help those people who are still struggling with the pain of loss.

There is little doubt that the services we are beginning to provide are much needed today. We are pioneering new directions in service delivery in the funeral industry, and as our program evolves we will continue to find more ways to be of help to those who are in need. ♣



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