

# Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

*Our Traditions Reimagined*



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# Transformation of Jewish Death Rituals in Times of Crisis, Pandemic, and Cultural Dislocation

Simcha Paull Raphael

The essays in this volume demonstrate how Judaism is adapting practical approaches to end-of-life care to meet new demands necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Spiritual caregivers are companioning the sick and old as they die alone with no family around; rituals of funeral and shiva are livestreamed; and synagogue services for saying *Kaddish* and *Yizkor* are offered exclusively online. Clearly, we are living through a period unlike anything in the history of Jewish life. As Simkha Weintraub writes in his essay, we are being exiled to Cyberia!

Dealing with crisis, pandemic, cultural dislocation, and historical trauma is not new to Judaism, or the Jewish people. The tenacious continuity of Jewish life in the 21st century is a living testament to the creative resilience of Jews and Judaism. Jewish religious practice is characterized by an inherent adaptability in the face of change. During a challenging historical voyage of more than three millennia, Judaism has been able to continually revise traditional forms of ritual practice and invent new ones in response to the demands of the changing social and religious context. Over the ages, the traumas of virulent anti-Semitism, forced conversion, and exile inexorably spawned cultural creativity.

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

My intention in this essay is to demonstrate that epochs of crisis, pandemic, and cultural dislocation in Jewish history—specifically the Crusades, Black Death, and Expulsion from Spain—led to the creation of profoundly innovative and lasting new rituals and approaches to end-of-life care. And I believe this is what we are seeing at this time. Judaism is not only adapting to these challenging times—but as the robust and diverse content of this book demonstrates—reinvigorating and strengthening our age-old capacity to care for needs of the dying and bereaved in times of sickness, death and loss.

### *Judaism in Evolution—*

#### *From Mount Sinai to Yavneh to the Cyber Synagogue*

According to Talmudic legend, when Moses entered the celestial spheres of Mount Sinai to receive the revelation of Torah, he saw the Holy Blessed One adorning letters of Torah with “crowns”—embellishments upon each and every word. “Master of the Universe,” inquired Moses, “who is preventing You from giving the Torah without these additions?” In response, God explained:

There is a man who is destined to be born after several generations, and Akiva ben Yosef [a first-century rabbi] is his name; he is destined to derive from each and every thorn of these crowns mounds upon mounds of *halakhot* [Jewish legal decisions]. It is for his sake that the crowns must be added to the letters of the Torah.<sup>1</sup>

To satisfy Moses’ curiosity, God transported Moses to the study house of Rabbi Akiva, a leading contributor to revitalization of Judaism after the Holy Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. Moses quietly took a back row seat in Rabbi Akiva’s academy, said to be at Yavneh, in Roman Palestine. Attentively, he listened to a student and teacher

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

debating intricate interpretations of Jewish law. To his chagrin, Moses was utterly confused; he could not understand a word of what was being said. His strength waned, as he believed he was lacking in Torah knowledge. And then:

When Rabbi Akiva arrived at the discussion of one matter, his students said to him: “My teacher, from where do you derive this?” Rabbi Akiva said to them: “It is a *halachah* transmitted to Moses from Sinai.” When Moses heard this, his mind was put at ease, as this too was part of the Torah that he was to receive.<sup>2</sup>

This frequently cited *Aggadah* —Rabbinic legend— rationalizes and validates the transformation of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple. The Judaism of the scholarly Mishnaic and Talmudic rabbis (2nd and 5th centuries C.E. respectively), looked nothing like the Judaism of Moses, a man of the mountain and the desert. This legend grounded the rabbis’ audacious metamorphosis of Judaism in the original Torah revelation at Sinai. On one hand, they *were* boldly adapting Judaism in response to the crisis of the destruction of the Temple, its sacrificial cult, and priestly leadership. On the other hand, those “crowns” on the letters, interpretative innovations which came to be known as Oral Torah, had really been there from the very beginning—so they claimed! As they pioneered new traditions of prayer, study and leadership, the rabbis rooted their authenticity and continuity in ancient traditions and prooftexts of the Torah that Moses brought to the people of Israel from Mount Sinai.

Using this legend as a springboard into the contemporary context of this book, in the tradition of midrash, I imagine:

Rabbi Akiva has a dream in which the windows are opened to the Divine realms. Rabbi Akiva asks God what will

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

happen to the Torah that he had studied so assiduously in the academies of first- and second- century Palestine.

Instantly, Rabbi Akiva is transported in time to 2020, that fateful year of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a panoramic vision, Rabbi Akiva perceives household after household of individuals and families staring at some kind of metallic, illuminated devices, featuring small rows of squares filled with individual faces. In between the conversation he cannot comprehend, he hears singing, words, sounding like Hebrew. Occasionally he recognizes a sentence from Psalms.

Then, to his amazement, Rabbi Akiva notices a parchment being unrolled. Looking closer, he can make out a scroll with Hebrew writing on it! In a few moments, first a man, then a woman—a woman!—reads from the scroll. And all the individuals gathered in front of their devices are simultaneously following along. More Hebrew, and as Rabbi Akiva continues observing he is totally mystified; those words are familiar, but what in the world is happening?

Next, he sees the scroll being raised aloft, and to his astonishment, Rabbi Akiva hears these words chanted aloud: “*Vezot haTorah asher saam Moshe lifnei benei Israel al pi Adonai, beyad Moshe*”—“This is the Torah that Moses set before the people Israel; the Torah given by God, through Moses.”

As the dream ends, Rabbi Akiva awakens and realizes he is back in the academy of study at Yavneh. But the resonant melody of the chant continues in his mind: *Vezot haTorah asher saam Moshe lifnei b’nei Israel al pi Adonai, beyad Moshe*, “This is the Torah that Moses set before the people Israel; the Torah given by God, through Moses.” Remembering the dream, Rabbi Akiva smiles, and his mind is at ease, knowing this too is part of the Torah of Moses that he has worked so hard to keep alive.

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

And they say as Rabbi Akiva prayed that morning, his prayers of Halleluyah echoed in the far reaches of the celestial heavens.

As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan writes in *Judaism as a Civilization*, throughout time and history Judaism has been in a dynamic process of continual evolution.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of three millennia, Judaism adapted tradition and practices to changing historical, social, and cultural realities. The contemporary midrash above depicts the unique process of evolutionary transformation Judaism is currently undergoing. The catastrophe of the Temple's destruction led to the promulgation of new versions of Jewish practice in the first centuries of the Common Era that were foreign to Moses. And similarly, the current COVID-19 crisis is generating new approaches to spiritual care and traditional Jewish death rituals, using state-of-the-art internet technology.

Undeniably Rabbi Akiva and his contemporaries—let alone my great-grandparents and yours—would be totally baffled by the social media platforms and video-conferencing now being used for communal religious practice, pastoral care, ritual, and the celebration of Jewish life. While certain ritual and spiritual care adaptations are specific to this moment, undeniably some of these novel innovations will be integrated into the deathbed and mourning practices of future Jewish life. And, like Rabbi Akiva and the rabbis reimagining and refashioning Judaism in the first centuries of the Common Era, the spiritual caregivers, teachers, and rabbis who have authored essays in this book, are all committed to authentically grounding pioneering innovations in the traditions of Moses, Torah and the Jewish historical legacy.

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

### *Yizkor Emerges—Crusades, Trauma and Sacred Memorialization*

To highlight how certain Jewish historical events influenced and generated new Jewish death traditions, we shall first travel back in time to the early medieval period, and the emergence of the *Yizkor* ritual.

Today it is traditional to recite *Yizkor*, *Hazkarat Neshamot*, memorial prayers for deceased family members, four times a year—at Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the last days of Passover, and Shavuot. Throughout the centuries, these prayers have been centered in the synagogue. However, as Elyse Goldstein notes in her contribution to this book, the pandemic quarantine has necessitated migrating this practice of memorialization to the virtual realm.

Because *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur is synonymous with celebration of the High Holy Day season when we speak of “who shall live, and who shall die,” many often assume *Yizkor* is an ancient prayer. But when did this practice develop, and what exactly are its origins? Modern scholarship indicates *Yizkor*, or *Hazkarat Neshamot*, as it is traditionally called, was an entirely new liturgical innovation developed progressively, over the course of centuries, in response to, first, the Crusades and then, the Black Death.<sup>4</sup>

The First Crusade took place in 1096, after Pope Urban II called upon European Christians to rise up and reclaim the Holy Land from Muslims. By the spring of that year, marauding bands of German peasants passed through nearby Jewish communities, inflicting spontaneous violence against the Jews of Northern France and the Rhineland. Upwards of ten thousand men, women, and children were massacred and important communities were destroyed. This was the most widespread outbreak of anti-Jewish persecution since the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans; it devastated the Jewish communities of the Rhineland.<sup>5</sup>

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

The trauma of this event left an indelible mark on the religious psyche of Ashkenazi Jewry. Almost immediately, a profound need arose “to soothe the emotional needs of a people that had lost its community, its revered rabbis, its close friends and dear relatives.”<sup>6</sup> Witnesses of the 1096 massacre, and subsequent generations, wrote liturgical poetry to memorialize and honor martyrs of the Rhineland massacres. In addition, *Memorbuchen*, (Hebrew: *Sifrei Zikharon*) containing lists of names of the dead from each specific community were compiled and distributed. These *Memorbuchen*, along with liturgical reflections and other historical chronicles from this era, left behind a palpable collective memory, which then found formal ritual expression in Jewish synagogue life.<sup>7</sup>

Since the slaughter of Jews of the Rhineland had taken place close to the festival of Shavuot, the Shabbat prior to Shavuot soon became known as a “Martyrs’ Shabbat.” In one of the *Memorbuchen* from this era, we find the following: “Therefore the whole house of Israel is duty bound to memorialize them between Passover and Shavuot, on the Sabbath nearest to Shavuot.”<sup>8</sup>

Recitation of names of the dead from the *Memorbuchen* and chanting of a prayer called *Av HaRachamim*, which was written in this era<sup>9</sup>—“a mixture of tender recollection of the martyred victims and bitter denunciation of those who perpetuate the massacres”<sup>10</sup>—became the template for the original *Yizkor* liturgy. What emerged at this point was essentially a much-needed ritualized response to trauma. Although nothing like the *Yizkor* of today, the Jewish communal experience following the Crusades undoubtedly established the paradigm for subsequent centuries, during which time *Hazkarat Neshamot*, the *Yizkor* ritual and liturgy, continued to evolve.

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

### *Yizkor Expands – Black Death Pandemic and Memorialization of Martyrs*

Continuing our historical journey: the next stage in development of the *Yizkor* service again occurred in response to crisis. The Black Death, or bubonic plague, the deadliest pandemic recorded in human history, killed more than 50 million people in Europe between 1347 to 1351, an estimated 50 to 60 percent of Europe's population. Unprecedented catastrophe spread through the cities and countryside; sickness, death, helplessness, despair and fear permeated communal life.<sup>11</sup> Under such conditions, age-old Christian hostility towards the Jews reared its ugly head. Rumors swept across Europe that the Jews had poisoned the wells. An outbreak of killings, expulsions, and vigilante desecrations spread from Spain to France, Germany, as far as Poland-Lithuania.<sup>12</sup> Pope Clement VI issued a Papal Bull denouncing these lies – but to no avail.<sup>13</sup> The fury of the masses was unleashed, leaving in its wake an orgy of bloodshed, communal devastation, and thousands upon thousands of Jewish martyrs. The status of Jews in Southern and Central Europe remained precarious for subsequent centuries.<sup>14</sup>

As Jews began reconstituting their lives, name lists inscribed in the communal *Memorbuch* served again to memorialize and honor deceased martyrs. Further exploration of the complex subsequent stages in the evolution of the *Yizkor* prayer service is beyond our task here. Suffice it to say, the process of memorializing the dead, and creation of the *Yizkor* prayer service, which began in reaction to crises of the Crusades and Black Death, continued throughout the Middle Ages. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, *Hazkarat Neshamot* expanded from a memorialization for dead martyrs, to what Solomon Freehof has called a “communal family liturgical memorial” for all deceased family members. During this time, days for remembering the dead migrated on the liturgical calendar to Yom Kippur<sup>15</sup> and then, additionally, only in the 1800s, to the three pilgrimage festivals.<sup>16</sup>

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

Interestingly, with Jewish migration to America after the Russian pogroms of the 1880s, the *Hazkarat Neshamot* service became far more liturgically complex than what had been in place in earlier generations. The elaborate *Yizkor* service that was created then and is observed to this day is a “family bereavement ritual,”<sup>17</sup> to honor all deceased family members. This emerged as a direct result of a need for worshippers to be cleansed of guilt for having left behind parents and other family in Europe. In other words, *Yizkor* once again evolved in response to cultural dislocation, this time from the Old World to the New World. Memorializing dead parents and relatives through many prayers and readings served as a *kapparah*, a redemption between the generations, assuaging guilt for having abandoned the Old World.<sup>18</sup>

### *Kaddish and the Needs of Orphans*

Another unique ritual by-product of the medieval era is the tradition of recitation of the Mourners’ *Kaddish*. The *Kaddish* is an ancient Aramaic prayer dating from Geonic times, the 7th century C.E. This prayer, which affirms God’s greatness and does not mention death at all, was recited following Talmudic study in the Babylonian academies. The minor Talmudic Tractate *Soferim*, c. 8th century CE, has the first reference connecting *Kaddish* to mourning:

After the Mussaf (Additional Service) it is customary for the cantor to go behind the synagogue’s door, or to the corner of the synagogue, where he joins the mourners and their relatives to offer a blessing. He then recites *Kaddish*.<sup>19</sup>

However, here *Kaddish* is recited by the cantor, not mourners, and there is no indication of a unique version of Mourners’ *Kaddish* as it exists today. Even centuries later, in *Mahzor Vitry*, an early 12th century collection of prayers for holy days and the life cycle, *Kaddish* is not included with other mourning liturgy.<sup>20</sup>

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

The earliest reference to *Kaddish* as a memorial prayer for orphaned children is found in *Or Zarua*, a legal compendium authored by Rabbi Yitzhak ben Moshe of Vienna (1180-1250):

It is our custom in the land of Canaan [Bohemia], and it is the custom of the communities of Rhineland, for an orphan to rise and recite the *Kaddish* after worshippers have finished reciting *Ein Kelohenu*.<sup>21</sup>

Undeniably, the devastation following the Crusades left behind many orphaned children, and over subsequent years this ritual emerged as a way for orphans to honor their deceased parents. By the 13th century, *Kaddish* became a standardized prayer for mourning in medieval Germanic lands.<sup>22</sup> And by the end of the 16th century, we find quite clearly in Rabbi Moses Isserles' gloss to the *Shulchan Aruch*<sup>23</sup> that recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish* had become accepted communal practice in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities.

Once again, in face of cultural crisis and widespread death, new rituals for memorializing departed loved ones emerged by transforming liturgical pathways already present in Jewish life. Certainly, *Kaddish* was perfectly suited to become a mourners' prayer. As Dalia Marx notes:

In a catastrophic time, when the situation is uncertain and unstable, the desire for just rule and for the presence of God's hand in the world may be felt as especially necessary... [And since] death, in and of itself, is a highly traumatic experience for the survivors of the deceased... the unnatural death of so many Jews... required a special religious response.<sup>24</sup>

The words of the *Kaddish* served as the perfect religious response in times of collective grief. Declaring the sanctification of God's name, and establishment of God's divine kingdom

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

on earth, “Magnified and sanctified be God’s Great Name, in the world created according to God’s will...” provided potent metaphysical, spiritual comfort in a traumatized, wounded world.<sup>25</sup>

Again we see that practices that were adaptive and psychologically and spiritually urgent in an era of crisis evolved over time and found a place within standard liturgical practice. Today, like *Yizkor*, *Kaddish* is an efficacious bereavement. This remnant of the past has become a mainstay of Judaism’s comfort for all who are actively mourning a loved one.

### *Expulsion from Spain and Origins of the Chevra Kadisha*

Another Jewish death care tradition, or in this case institution, that emerged out of historical crisis is the *chevra kadisha*, literally “Fellowship of the Holy,” the Jewish burial society—a term derived from the German *Heilige Bruderschaft*, ascribed to Catholic confraternities (monastic brotherhoods) providing charitable communal support.<sup>26</sup> In the 16th century, the *chevra kadisha* evolved to become a fully established communal organization within medieval Jewish life, responsible for the care, ritual preparation, and burial of dead bodies. As we shall see, this a direct outgrowth of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.

Care for the sick and respectful burial of the dead has been a longstanding religious value in Judaism. Although the value of communal obligation to the dead is evident in a variety of classical Jewish sources,<sup>27</sup> there are no historical or textual records of an established Jewish social form for death care and burial in either the Geonic period (6th-11th centuries) or early medieval times. This begins to change in medieval Spain.

According to Jacob Marcus, Jewish Brotherhoods patterned on the Catholic burial fraternities began offering care for the sick, mutual aid, funds for the poor, and burial of the dead in

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

13th-15th century Spain.<sup>28</sup> Then in 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled the entire 200,000 member Spanish Jewish community. Subsequently, Jewish fraternal institutions caring for the dead, patterned after those established in Spain, began to appear throughout Germanic lands. Essentially, the Jews of Spain brought with them the template that formed the basis for the flowering of *chevra kadisha* practices throughout Central and later Eastern Europe.

Prior to the 16th century, German-Jewish villages and hamlets cared for their dead without any specifically dedicated burial organizations.<sup>29</sup> Community needs were not always met. In fact, throughout Germanic lands, and beyond, the paucity of what today we call “end-of-life care” resources created a vacuum and a need that Jews exiled from Spain were able to fulfill. The blessing wrested from the trauma of 1492 was that Spanish Jewish social welfare practices for care of the dying and dead were successfully transplanted in Central and Southern Europe. Once again, the experience of crisis generated innovative approaches to Jewish death care traditions.

In 1564, a Jewish philanthropic organization was established in Prague under the leadership of Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi dedicated to caring for the burial needs of the poor and maintenance of the local cemetery. The paradigm of this organization, a blend of the confraternities of Catholic Spain, and the craft and merchant guilds of Germany, simultaneously spread elsewhere throughout the Ashkenazic world, and to other countries along the Mediterranean.<sup>30</sup>

Another cultural impact of the Spanish Exile on Jewish death care practices took place in Italy, during the 16th century. At this time, two simultaneous consequences of exile were unfolding on the historical stage. First, Spanish exiles imported into Jewish Italian society the institution of death and burial fraternities. Secondly and concurrently, other Spanish exiles had migrated to Palestine, and inspired by Isaac Luria, Moses Cordovero and Hayyim Vital participated in a major flowering of Kabbalistic

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

thought and practice in the Galilean town of Safed.<sup>31</sup> Lurianic Kabbalah placed great emphasis on the mystical dimensions of life, with extensive teachings on the creation of worlds, birth of the soul, the spiritual meaning of death, and the journey of the soul before and after departure from the physical body.

Over time, many of the Spanish exiles continued their migration, this time from Safed to Italy, bringing with them cutting-edge spiritual ideas of Kabbalah. Italy in the 17th and early 18th century was a hotbed of spiritual originality. The merger of Kabbalistic philosophy and the institution of *chevra kadisha* produced a “concentration on spiritual care of the dying and of the dead [which] expressed itself in special classical forms for the deathbed.”<sup>32</sup> This integration of communal death care organization and mystical understanding of the soul and its destiny yielded a proliferation of books on deathbed care and liturgies for dying and mourning. Among these texts is the classical *chevra kadisha* manual, *Maavor Yabok*, literally “Crossing the Yabok [River]” compiled by Aaron Berechiah of Modena, published 1626. *Maavor Yabok* uses teachings from Kabbalah to explain rituals associated with visiting the sick, caring for the dying and burying the dead. These teachings have inspired Jewish burial societies throughout the ages, and as Richard A. Light notes in his essay in this volume, it serves as a source of inspiration in 21st century contemporary *chevra kadisha* practice. The legacy of the Spanish Exile lives on.

### *Living and Dying in Uncertain Times*

Having explored the pathways of history that led to the creation of *Yizkor* liturgies; establishment of *Kaddish* as a sacred mourning prayer; and the birth and growth of the *chevra kadisha* organization, we now return to the present time. What follows in this book are eleven essays by clergy and spiritual care professionals making sense of how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting contemporary Jewish life. And as the generations

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

of Jews who lived through Crusades, Black Death and Spanish Exile had no idea of what would eventually emerge, we who are living through these turbulent times have no real idea where this will ultimately lead us over time. That being said, here are some closing thoughts on the longer term implications of our times.

### *We Are Witnessing Increased Globalization of Jewish Life*

The Jewish people has always been diverse; now it is becoming globalized. Throughout history, Jewish communities have existed on every continent of the planet; there are even Jewish scientists who gather together for prayer in Antarctica.<sup>33</sup> Experiencing that global reality through video-conferencing is now becoming an everyday occurrence. Recently, I taught an online class with students participating from three different continents. We have come a long way from the Babylonian Exile when we helplessly yearned for an utterly inaccessible Jerusalem; all it took was a good internet connection and a willingness to stay up very late for Jerusalemites to join our class.

In the past, one could choose to attend services at one or two neighborhood congregations, or a half dozen for those willing to drive across town. Today, the sanctuary, the synagogue building, is not the home of our congregations and community. Without ever leaving the house, or even changing out of pyjamas, we can attend scores of streaming Shabbat services of multiple styles, varying denominations, and different time zones. And similarly, many Jews are finding they are learning more Torah than ever before in an array of online class offerings. And as authors Mark Biller and Anne Brener attest in this book, people from across the country and around the world are able to join in a video conference funeral or *shiva*. Funerals, *shiva*, saying *Kaddish* and *Yizkor* are no longer just local events. This phenomenon will undoubtedly be integrated into Jewish ritual practice long after we have ended our days of quarantine. All of this leads Jewish

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

leaders to wonder—and worry—about the future of the local synagogue as an institution.

### *We Are Witnessing the Increased Democratization of Jewish Life*

Alongside the expansion of virtual Jewish life, there is at the same time a greater sense of communal democratization taking place. In Biblical times, it was the hereditary priestly class of the Jerusalem Temple who held power in the realm of religious practice. At Yavneh and other academies, the students would sit at the feet of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yehuda, and other rabbinical leaders. There was a mutual exchange, but this was clearly a hierarchical relationship; the rabbis were the promulgators of knowledge. This has continued throughout the ages. In traditional communities the Rav discerns and determines behavioral guidelines for the community; in Hasidism, the Rebbe teaches from the head of the table. Certainly, this has changed over the years with more participatory involvement of community in *Havurot*, and in Reconstructionist and Renewal communities. But I maintain that today, on video conference, when any participant can be featured as the main focus for the moment, anyone and everyone is a teacher. In the virtual classroom, we are learning with and from each other, in totally new ways. The source of power and authority is shifting in the cyber-community, sometimes in subtle ways. I believe this dynamic is changing Judaism in ways that we cannot yet fathom.

### *We Are Being Called into Authenticity and Creativity*

There is a very clear underbelly to the “virtualization” of Jewish life. From so many of my colleagues, I am hearing the sense of exhaustion due to online meetings, teaching, worship leading, ritual facilitation, counseling and spiritual care, and more. The work never seems to end; it is taxing both physically

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

and emotionally. However, in response to this, there is a deep yearning, and I believe a collective calling to both authenticity and creativity.

For clergy and spiritual caregivers, sitting in front of a computer or tablet may make it harder to feel the emotion of our client, patient or congregant. Empathy is the capacity to feel what it might be like to walk in another's shoes; the technology we are working with can inhibit that process. One of the challenges of this era is to listen more deeply, to bring the fullness of our heart and spirit, not our professional role persona, but our *neshamah*, our heart and soul, our genuine authenticity of presence to the virtual, but very real encounter via the internet.

Additionally, for me personally, for the authors of this book, and even more broadly for our colleagues, online spiritual care and ritual facilitation for others can get tiring, dulling the heart and mind, unless and until we reach within ourselves to keep finding new and imaginative ways to be present to others. Beneath the overwhelm of virtual Jewish life, a rich stream of ingenuity is emerging. Spiritual leaders are being challenged to harness new dimensions of their creative selves, to use technology in original ways, and to redesign and renew older ways of teaching and preaching. The essays in this book tell us of some of these successes, there is a lot more to be discovered.

*The Technology is Evolving,  
Much More is Yet to Come*

Such extensive use of video-conferencing technology and livestreaming social media platforms for religious life is relatively new. Although the various interfaces being used have been around for a while, we are still in the early stages of cyber-Jewish life. Nascent technological innovations such as quantum computing, 3D interactive virtual reality, and robotics will no doubt further transform our practice. At this point, it is hard to

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

say just how virtual modalities will evolve, but clearly, they are here to stay. So, while our current engagement via the internet is new and innovative, perhaps the best is yet to come.

### *Ultimately, We Do Not Know*

We are in the early stages of the evolution of the technological transformation of Jewish end-of-life care practices. I am reminded of what C.G. Jung wrote in his memoir:

We do not know how far the process of coming to consciousness can extend, or where it will lead. It is a new element in the story of creation and there are no parallels we can look to. We therefore cannot know what potentialities are inherent in it. Neither can we know the prospects for the species homo sapiens.<sup>34</sup>

A collective transformation of consciousness is occurring in our times. New pathways are being forged as creative adaptations of Jewish death rituals and spiritual care emerge. But as our ancestors of the medieval ages could not and did not see the future manifestation and adaptations of their innovations, similarly, we cannot see around the corner into the unknown future to know how Judaism and Jewish ritual traditions will be transformed in our times, and in the future. We are being called into an attitude of humility to admit that we do not know. All we can do is keep doing what we are doing, searching for authenticity, connecting with tradition, and honoring the individuals, families and communities we are called to serve.

I imagine both Moses and Rabbi Akiva are watching and smiling.

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

### Notes

1. BT Men. 29b.
2. Ibid.
3. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).
4. Solomon B. Freehof, "Hazkarath Neshamoth" *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 36 (1965), pp. 179-189.
5. See Robert Chazan, *In the Year 1096: The First Crusade and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996).
6. Abraham Gross, "Liturgy as Personal Memorial for the Victims in 1096" in Stefan C. Reif, Andreas Lehnardt, and Ariel Bar-Levav, eds. *Death in Jewish Life: Burial and Mourning Customs Among Jews of Europe and Nearby Communities* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), p. 156.
7. Ivan Marcus, "A Jewish-Christian Symbiosis: The Culture of Early Ashkenaz," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale, vol. 2 (New York: Schocken, 2002), p. 463.
8. Salfeld, "Martyrologium" p. 81 cited by Freehof, p. 179. On the Memor-Book see: A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995; originally published 1932) pp. 374-375, ft. nt. 48; and "Memor-Book" in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII (New York: Funk and Wagnall's Company, 1904) p. 456-458.
9. *Av HaRachamim* first appears in a Siddur dating from 1290 CE. "Av HaRachamim," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Keter Publications, 1972), p. 954.
10. Abraham Milgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), p. 460.
11. Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 36ff.
12. Samuel H. Cohn, Jr. "The Black Death and the Burning of the Jews" *Past and Present*, No. 196 (August 2007), pp. 3-36.
13. *Quamvis Perfidiam*, Papal Bull issued by Pope Clement VI, September 26, 1348, cited by Abba Eban, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), p. 170.
14. H.H. Ben-Sasson, "Black Death" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Keter Publications, 1972), pp. 1063-1067.
15. *Midrash Tanhuma*, 9th century CE, had established a connection

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

between Yom Kippur and remembering the dead. (*Tanhuma*, on Deut. 3:21).

16. Freehof, “*Hazkarath Neshamoth*.”

17. *Ibid*, p. 185.

18. Eric L. Friedland, “The Atonement Memorial Service in the American Mahzor,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 55 (1984) pp. 243-282.

19. *Soferim*, 19:12.

20. Sylvie-Anne Goldberg, *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth through Nineteenth Century Prague*. trans. Carol Cossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) , p. 39.

21. Or Zarua, Shabbat 50. Cited by Dalia Marx, “From the Rhine Valley to Jezreel Valley: Innovative Versions of the Mourner’s *Kaddish* in the Kibbutz Movement,” in Michael Meyer and David A. Myers, eds., *Between Tradition and Modernity: Rethinking Old Opposition, Essays in Honor of David Ellenson* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), p. 125. See also Solomon B. Freehof, “Ceremonial Creativity among the Ashkenazim,” *The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review*, edited by Abraham A. Neuman and Solomon Zeitlin (Philadelphia: *JQR*, 1967), pp. 210-224; and Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), pp. 46ff.

22. Goldberg, p. 39.

23. *Yoreh Deah* 376:4.

24. Marx, p. 126. See also David I. Shyovitz, “You Have Saved Me from the Judgment of Gehenna”: The Origins of the Mourner’s *Kaddish* in Medieval Ashkenaz” *AJS Review* 39:1 (April 2015), 49-73 who argues against *Kaddish* as a response to the Crusades. He asserts that since *Kaddish* is understood within Jewish tradition to function to redeem souls from postmortem punishment, since those martyred in God’s name require no redemption, then, theologically, there would be no need for *Kaddish* for those murdered in the Crusades. That being said, I do not think Shyovitz gives sufficient credence to the emotional and psychological needs of orphans to memorialize deceased parents through recitation of the prayers that paved the way for the fully developed Mourners’ *Kaddish*.

25. Marx, p. 126.

## Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age

26. Jacob R. Marcus, *Communal Sick-Care in the German Ghetto* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1947), p. 55.

27. For example, *Semahot*, a 4th-5th century Rabbinic text delineating laws of death, burial, and mourning refers to specific associations, *havurot*, caring for the dead and participating in ossilegium, collection of bones of a deceased person for placement in an ossuary after decomposition of the soft tissue. See *Semahot*, XII, 5. See Dov Zlotnick, trans. and ed., *The Tractate 'Mourning'—Semahot*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) and Eric Meyers, *Jewish Ossuaries: Reburial and Rebirth* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971). Similarly, the Talmudic tractate *Moed Katan* dating from 450-550 CE, mentions societal groups dedicated to caring for the dead. (MK 27b) Elsewhere, Talmud indicates that community members shared financial responsibility for burial of the poor and indigent. And in his commentary on *Ketubot* 8b, the medieval French rabbi and scholar, Rashi (1040-1105) contends that the synagogue beadle attended to communal burial needs.

28. Marcus, pp. 61-62.

29. Ibid, p. 64.

30. Ibid, p. 69.

31. See Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and his Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

32. Jacob R. Marcus, p. 66.

33. Kenneth V. Iserson, "A Chilling Rosh HaShanah Experience," *The Jewish Magazine*, (September 2010) [http://www.jewishmag.com/147mag/rosh\\_hashanah\\_antarctica/rosh\\_hashanah\\_antarctica.htm](http://www.jewishmag.com/147mag/rosh_hashanah_antarctica/rosh_hashanah_antarctica.htm) (accessed 8.27.20).

34. C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961) p. 323.

## Recommended Resources

Goldberg, Sylvie-Anne. *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth through Nineteenth Century Prague*. Trans. Carol Cossman. University of California Press, 1996. Print.

Marcus, Jacob Rader. *Communal Sick-Care in the German Ghetto*.

## *Our Traditions Reimagined*

Cincinnati : Hebrew Union College Press, 1947. Print.

Raphael, Simcha Paull. *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. Print.

Reif, Stefan C., Andreas Lehnardt, and Avriel Bar-Levav. *Death in Jewish Life: Burial and Mourning Customs Among Jews of Europe and Nearby Communities*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 2017. Print.