

Book Review

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Friedman, Dayle A., David, Levin and Simcha, Paull Raphael (Eds.). *Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age: Our Traditions Reimagined*. Boulder, Colorado: Albion-Andalus Book, 2021, 189 pages.
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The essays in *Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age* demonstrate how Jewish communities are adapting spiritual end-of-life care in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its contributors offer ways to overcome the restrictive limitations imposed by the pandemic by using virtual technology. But the book is much more than a user manual. It offers a glimpse into the historical development of core rituals and practices. It offers new and modified rituals, and it articulates contemporary conversations about traditional and non-traditional approaches to end-of-life support.

The challenges wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic are not unique to the Jewish world. The themes of continuity and change in light of the pandemic will be familiar to adherents of many other spiritual communities and faiths.

Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age begins and ends with chapters that will resonate with many communities of care and with spiritual care professionals of diverse backgrounds. The opening chapters provide a historical context of the evolution of Jewish ritual as a response to crisis and circumstance and examine the role of spiritual care providers in bridging social distance. The central chapters focus on particular end-of-life rituals and practices in Jewish tradition, and the closing chapters deal with communal mobilization and self-care for the caregiver. The book's contributors are well known in the Jewish community for their leadership and creative use of tradition to offer relevant and practical spiritual care.

In the first chapter, "Historical Context," Simcha Paull Raphael presents a historic overview of dynamic changes in Jewish tradition related to death and dying. He explores the origin and development of *Yizkor* memorial liturgies, which are recited four times during the year. He examines the most well-known Hebrew memorial prayer, the *Mourners' Kaddish*, positing how the *Kaddish* has provided both psychological and

spiritual comfort for a millennium and serves as a response to both collective and individual grief. Raphael also examines the development of the communal *chevra kaddisha* organization, which assumes responsibility for the care, ritual preparation, and burial of dead bodies. Finally, Raphael sets the stage for the remainder of the book, pointing to increased globalization and democratization within most Jewish communities, supported by technological advances that bring us into a virtual age.

Mychal Springer, Karen Bender, and Malka Mittelman focus on the role of the spiritual caregiver in Chapter two, "In the Front Lines of Pastoral Care." Springer discusses ways of meeting the challenge of isolation and separation in acute care settings and views the spiritual care provider as an intermediary—supporting and connecting staff, families, and patients, and providing creative access to tradition. Bender and Mittelman agree that "the spiritual caregiver, more than ever, is the virtual bridge and conduit of connection with family." (p.44) Both essays recognize the power of meaning-making, describing ways to foster meaningful and purposeful Jewish life at a distance.

The central chapters of the book describe specific traditions around death and dying reimagined and reinvented.

In cases where physical proximity to a body is a health risk, Richard A. Light outlines an innovative ritual of *taharah*—preparing a body for burial—that is performed online using video technology. Physical acts of washing and dressing of the body are imagined through visualizations, and new rituals are added to represent rubrics of the traditional ceremony. It remains to be seen if these virtual alternatives will take root, since much of the spiritual power of the traditional *taharah* lies in the gentle and intentional contact with the body, and since vaccines and adequate supplies of PPE have reduced risks of infection.

Mark Biller recounts moving adaptations of funerals and burial rituals when social distancing restricts gatherings of family and friends. He cites useful examples of how to provide traditional funeral rites in new ways when circumstances preclude familiar rituals. Anne Brener explains theological approaches and offers practical guidance for "sitting *shiva*" without physically gathering as a community. In discussing ways to conduct this bereavement ritual virtually, she applies ancient understandings of sacred spaces and holy places.

Adam Zeff describes the history of the *kaddish* memorial prayer and why it is considered so essential to Jewish mourning practices. In doing so, he sheds light on the many faces of the *kaddish*, and how mourners draw spiritual, psychosocial, or psychological comfort from its mantra-like intonation. Specifically, he explores challenges of reciting the *kaddish* prayer online in a remote virtual *minyan*, or congregation, since tradition requires the actual presence of 10 participants for a *minyan*. Looking ahead, Zeff discusses the emerging trend among many congregations to conduct a hybrid *minyan*, which allows for in-person contact while providing remote online access at the same time.

Elyse Goldstein insightfully introduces the *Yizkor* memorial service as an important vehicle for meaning-making and affirmation of continuing bonds. She writes, "when

we say *Yizkor*, we translate a memory into a ritual which evokes our experiences of our deceased loved ones, not the objective truth of who they were.” (p.89) She outlines innovative models for virtual *Yizkor* services and offers practical guidance.

In Chapter five, Jason Weiner and David Teutsch offer cogent overviews of two approaches to “Bioethical Dilemmas in Pandemic Times,” such as equitable distribution of scarce medical resources and treatments. Weiner offers a basic introduction to the complex world of *halachic* decision-making involving interpretations of Jewish law and applications of traditional values. Anyone wishing to delve deeper into this area would be well-advised to explore the substantial footnotes that Weiner offers. David Teutsch provides a useful, step-by-step guide to values-based decision-making from a contemporary perspective, citing practical examples throughout. Teutsch speaks of seven steps in this approach, then lists eight, which creates some confusion. Regardless of the number, however, the essay by Teutsch sets forth a valuable tool for professionals, communities, and ethics committees to ensure the integrity of ethical decision-making.

Joshua Lesser provides a model for collaboration among community leadership and stakeholders in “Mobilizing Religious Communities in Times of Quarantine.”

Community leaders will agree with Lesser that “effective mobilization of religious communities during quarantine can provide the stability, care, sense of belonging and the framework for creating meaning in an uncertain world.” (p.134)

The final chapter, “Self-Care for the Caregiver,” is worth savoring. Simkha Weintraub offers 10 modalities for nurturing and nourishing the soul of the caregiver. Although the chapter is subtitled “Self-Care for the Jewish Spiritual Care Provider,” most modalities are equally valuable for anyone in need of emotional and spiritual replenishment, and for everyone who experiences compassion fatigue. These offerings are useful for professional, volunteer, and family caregivers alike.

The book closes with a collection of contemporary poetry, blessings, and prayers. The readings are thoughtfully crafted, though their usefulness will depend on the reader’s literary and liturgical tastes.

Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age alludes to adaptations of Jewish tradition throughout millennia of history. At the same time, it is a valuable snapshot of the current and ongoing evolution of tradition in this era of COVID-19, whose variant progeny are likely to remain a part of our world for some time to come.

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