

# Mourning in a Virtual Age: Tradition, Innovation, & Beyond the Pandemic

*In Memory of Elizabeth Laurie Zedeck, daughter of Marti and Shelly Zedeck*

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The 7th of Adar, which this year falls on Friday Feb. 19, is the birthday and yahrzeit of Moshe Rabbeinu, and has traditionally been a date for members of a Chevra Kadisha (burial society) to join together to honor as well as reflect upon the group's holy work. This year, our Chevra members will gather virtually to focus on issues pertaining to loss and mourning in the age of Covid19. As in past years, our Shabbat services will be dedicated in honor of CBI's Chevra and in memory of Elizabeth Laurie Zedeck z"l.

In preparation for this year's annual meeting of CBI's Chevra Kadisha, I read a book titled "Jewish End-of-Life Care in a Virtual Age." The recently published book offers a rich collection of resources for clergy, helping professionals, and caring volunteers confronting death and mourning in unprecedented times. It provides guidelines for online spiritual care and grieving rituals for a time of social distancing. It also includes important discussions outlining bioethical dilemmas.

In the study guide below, I've included several quotes from the book which I plan to focus on with our Chevra Kadisha. I hope to generate greater discussion by sharing these reflections more widely. In "Funerals and Burials in a Time of Pandemic Quarantine," R. Mark Biller affirms the power of tradition in a time of unprecedented crisis compounded by profound personal loss. In "*Taharah Ruchanit – How to Midwife a Soul Without Being Near the Body*," Richard A. Light offers innovative insights about the ritual of *Tahara* when actual physical access is limited. Though the outlined ritual does not necessarily fit the needs of our CBI community, I believe that the suggestion is certainly generative and worth further exploration. Finally, in "Sitting Shiva at a Distance," R. Anne Brener begins to explore the role that technology might play beyond the pandemic.

At this time, I wanted to thank our entire community for collectively being a Chevra Kadisha, a truly holy community. This year, in the face of unfathomable loss, each of you, through love and creativity, resilience and care, have allowed us to confront death with sanctity. May the Lord be our everlasting light and may our days of mourning come to an end (see Isaiah 60).

## 1. Tradition

### R. Mark Biller, "Funerals and Burials in a Time of Pandemic Quarantine"

Comfort came when I proposed that we do what was most traditional. Familiarity and tradition would meet new technology. Spouses and children showed visible relief when we planned the use of traditional Psalms and funeral prayers, we planned the use of traditional Psalms and funeral prayers, when they heard there would be a traditional eulogy, and when the plan included creating some kind of shivah to help them through the unfolding loss.

In a world of "no" – no hospital visits, no funeral home attendance, no traditional washing of infected bodies, no traditional meeting with the rabbi, no car ride, even, to the funeral, and no attendance at the funeral, these benchmarks of tradition were of great comfort.

When I stated, "we will say all the traditional prayers, even though on screens," it seemed a Jewish funeral was happening after all. When I said, "I will give a eulogy," mourners told me they felt a rabbi was taking them in hand, even though we were not in physical proximity. When I added, "we will create some kind of shivah" (it was all so new we were making it up as we went along), they knew only that in some way they would connect with community after the virtual burial. Technology would separate, but also stitch us and our ancient ways together.

The brilliance of Jewish death customs – shrouds to remind us we take nothing with us, a quick burial to show the dead body the same respect we gave the living person, and communal gatherings of love and care through shivah – lay out a familiar and beautiful pathway for mourners.

In a time of infection (no handlings, washing, or dressing of bodies) and in the face of new technology (when we could see each other, without sharing space), we figured out how to adapt, and to reconnect mourners to our inherited Jewish wisdom and age-old values. [...]

I would urge allowing ample time to share with mourners the ways in which death customs may need to change in the current situation. Some of my most difficult moments were spent slowly breaking it to family members that there would be no ritual washing of a COVID-19 infected body, no *chevra kadisha*/burial society to dress, care for and talk to the body of their loved one.

This must be shared gently. God prepared Abraham in steps that he would be asked to sacrifice his son. "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there." (Genesis 22:2). In a sacred text about which the rabbis tell us every word counts, God models a slow, deliberate telling. Caregivers, take note.

In pre-pandemic times, pre-funeral visit and phone calls were a time to gather information about the deceased, but also helped family members begin their mourning process. Your calls and time will become more important during a pandemic, when infection has kept mourners apart and physically disconnected from departed loved ones.

## 2. Innovation

**Richard A. Light, "Taharah Ruchanit – How to Midwife a Soul Without Being Near the Body"**

*Taharah Ruchanit* (spiritual *taharah*) is a new ritual that employs all of the traditional liturgy, including those specific pieces read for washing the deceased, purifying the spirit, dressing the body, casketing, and afterwards. What is novel in this new form of *taharah* is the means and structure of the procedure, in this case performed online using video technology. The new procedure includes some elements normally performed at the funeral home, such as washing hands.

*Taharah Ruchanit* also includes creative elements not found in traditional in-person *taharah*. The *Taharah Ruchanit* sacred space is defined by a circle of candles to call forth the archangels Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, and the holy *Shechinah* – feminine aspect of the Divine – to cradle the soul of the deceased. Water is then poured into a bowl in the center of this circle to represent the pouring of the *taharah* water (normally poured over the body of the deceased) to purify the soul for its journey. Visualization techniques are employed to help the team focus on the various elements of *taharah* and the actions performed when the body is present.

It is particularly exceptional to hear that those who have used such new approaches to perform *taharot* over the past few months report that they have experienced heightened *kavanah*, intensified connection with the deceased, and with each other, and a feeling of profound sanctity. Some have even reported feeling more involved and connected doing this kind of *taharah* than they did during in-person *taharot*, because they did not have to focus so intently on the physical aspects of this procedure.

## 3. Beyond the Pandemic

**R. Anne Brener, "Sitting Shiva at a Distance"**

The unexpected effectiveness of virtual Shiva minyanim has prompted several leaders who officiated at them to say, "In the future, I will suggest that at least one night of Shiva take place online. [In many ways], the virtual room can be more effective than the real room." Indeed, virtual Shiva seems likely to emerge as a treasured component of Jewish mourning for the foreseeable future.

In some ways, ever since the destruction of the Temple the Jewish community has been a virtual community. We spread across the world, yet kept contact through a shared calendar and shared text and rituals. Our portable Torah and international communications have adapted to the media of the times so that we respond as one community to issues of *halachah* and history. A virtual Shiva allows us to maintain our community with the tools of the digital age.

In addition, the greatest challenge of mourning is to transform a physical relationship with a person who has died into a personal one. Because the virtual connection of an online Shiva has the ability to affirm that we do not have to be physically present in order to feel connected with those about whom we care, it can facilitate that healing process and provide a model that can lead mourners to accept that relationships can transcend the limits of physical space.