

## **The Jewish Way of Death**

by Harriet Eisenkraft and Elise Eisenkraft Klein

*How pale is the sky that brings forth the rain  
As the changing of seasons prepares me again.*

*I've been to the mountain left my tracks in the snow  
Where souls have been lost and the walking wounded go.  
I've taken the pain that no girl should endure  
But faith can move mountains of that I am sure  
Faith can move mountains of that I am sure*

*Get me through December  
A promise I'll remember  
Just get me through December  
So I can start again.*

From: "Get Me Through December," Song

### ***HARRIET:***

That was one of the songs that Elise played for us at the funeral of my brother, Gary Eisenkraft, who died last December at the age of 59. When he was still just a teenager, my brother helped out in the civil rights movement. He then ran a series of coffee houses in Montreal that attracted musicians—both those who would become legendary and those who already were. Later, he embraced a back-to-the-land lifestyle, working hard to protect the environment and living simply with his partner, Elizabeth. He died on December 20<sup>th</sup>, the day before winter solstice, at his home among the redwoods and mountains of northern California. Ever since, I've been trying to figure out why ancient rituals have affected me so much, and why they make a difference.

Why are we talking about this today, on Rosh Hashanah? We tell the kids downstairs that this is "the birthday of the world"—a joyful occasion. But the Hebrew words *Yamim Nora-im*, often translated as High Holy Days, describe a time when we reflect on the world's duality -- the beautiful, the horrible. Since we confront both, our sages say, we are filled with awe. Perhaps that is one reason why so many visit the graves of their loved ones only during this time. As we look ahead to what the year may bring, we also tend to look back to those we have lost.

As I sat in the Toronto airport waiting for the plane that would take my two sisters and me to Montreal to break the news of our brother's death to our mother, I heard from a municipal official in Eureka, California. A real *mensch*, and steeped in his own deep faith, he referred me to the "nice lady from the local synagogue," indeed the only synagogue in the area. Nicole and her group of volunteers there are part of the small Chevra Kadish, sometimes known as a burial society. They offered to do so much for us and for a man unknown to them, a fellow Jew who had lived in the woods miles away in relative obscurity.

**In the days and months after my brother died, I learned that Judaism doesn't discriminate when it comes to the rituals of death. According to our tradition, all are deserving of proper care and regard at this time.**

**For thousands of years, every Jew has been entitled to the same simple and respectful treatment after death, whether in life that person was disaffected or practicing, wealthy or poor.**

**Historically, the Chevra Kedisha was often known as the Sacred Society whose specialty originates from the Talmudic passage that says, "Torah begins and ends with acts of kindness." Worldwide, as Jewish communities formed, it would be one of the first groups to be organized. Originally, its work – which involved it in the full spectrum of burial services – had special status. These practices include *tahara*, the care of the body; *shemira*, watching and praying over the body until burial; and *levia*, continuing to accompany the deceased by following behind the family on the way to burial. After the funeral comes the *shiva*, a week during which the community comforts and cares for the mourners. At each stage, these practices reflect some basic tenets of Judaism, such as respect for human dignity.**

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest and involvement among less orthodox communities in caring for their own. There are now dozens and dozens of these types of chevras in the U.S. and in what I can only think was a type of *besheret* for my family, one

exists in the somewhat counter cultural setting where my brother lived and then died. Home-grown as they seem, however, the members of these groups adhere to the traditional process and the credentials are impeccable as we found out when the funeral home in Montreal checked this particular one out. Indeed, showing great patience and wisdom, Nicole stayed in touch every step of the way. Even in my mother's deep grief, it was a true comfort for her to know that the chevra was looking after Gary so well.

The duty to help out each other during difficult times is so deeply ingrained that mourners have come to expect their community's solace.

In the days that followed my brother's death, I became attuned to many gestures of common decency, not all of them inspired by Jewish obligation. On the day of his funeral, I was moved by many of these acts: my daughter comforting us all with her music during the funeral; my fourteen-year-old son standing straight and tall as one of his uncle's pallbearers; my brother's old gang of hipsters and musicians appearing in the family room at the funeral home decades after Gary had touched their lives; one of them – a troubled but colourful character wearing native garb, whom my uncle called "Shmohawk," helped my mother-in-law up the hill to the burial site.

She later encouraged him to record his recollections of times past.

At the cemetery, our mother had to stay in the car, so our family and friends—some unknown to each other—all joined hands to form a chain linking my mother to her son's gravesite. The final link was my husband, who held my mother's hand and recited *Kaddish* with her and with us all. Those sweet acts so touched me that I started to fall, until Aviva literally caught me.

Afterward, a friend who is not Jewish but who had done her research brought beautifully arranged food to the *shiva* and insisted on serving it as well. Other friends sent meals to my mother for weeks afterwards. Members of this congregation whom I see only once or twice a year offered condolences and compassion and often some cake, too. Some of the street people who annually attend the *Ve'ahavta* Seder with us have unimaginable pain in their lives, yet they were still able to tell me how sorry they were for my loss. At the big

synagogue near my house--a convenient spot for *Kaddish*—it was like a gift when a stranger asked me about my loved one and then said, “May his memory be a blessing.” On a beautiful day at the end of the summer, my family attended a small Native pow-wow in southern Ontario. Toward the end of the event, a man rose and stood before us. With his teenage daughters by his side he made a sacred offering of tobacco in memory of his sister, who had died a few days before. He asked us for a moment’s silence in her honour. At once, we all rose from our seats, and many of us filed past the mourners and embraced them. Then, the drumming started--a sombre, relentless beat--and the three mourners began to lead us in a slow, steady circle around the musicians. As we travelled in this new temporary community, it didn’t matter that many of us were total strangers to the mourners; we understood each other. I moved in this circle carrying my own memories of loss, and as I did, something lifted within me, finally.

**Judaism sets out our responsibilities and rites around death: they are hard-wired so despite our reluctance to participate and be vulnerable, we do. Indeed, a few years ago, when we conducted an informal survey of people who had attended Shir Libeynu’s services, and asked them what more they wanted from the congregation, a majority asked for a chevra kadesh. Grief has its stages, and it’s possible our sages knew just what we need in order to keep going – whether we are believers or not. As I found out when I took part in that mourning dance this summer, sometimes it really helps just to go through the motions, especially when others are helping you along.**

***ELISE:***

I was asked to join my mother in doing a Rosh Hashanah sermon because of one small comment I made. In the past year, I have been to several funerals and the accompanying *shivas*. Throughout them all, I noticed that in the weeks and months after someone has died there is an outpouring of love and kindness to, and from, those left behind. It did seem as though death often inspires people to act very compassionately. The way I see it, both “shiva-mode” and the time around Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a glimpse at how we could potentially behave all the time- letting go of small, insignificant things that

often get us very upset; showing more respect towards and kindness to others, being less angry. It is a time when we try to communicate more with those close to us; about the things we wish we could during the rest of the year. And, of course, it is a time for forgiveness.

“Why must it take death to bring out this kind of openness and integrity in people?” I asked my mother recently. “Wouldn’t it be better if we could do that all the time?” And that’s the remark that landed me up here this morning.

When it came time for me to write my part of this speech, I started to feel reluctant and questioned whether I should do this at all. I felt that going up in front of more than two hundred people and preaching about being nice to each other would be incredibly hypocritical (of me). I readily admit that I am NOT always as open, compassionate, forgiving or all around “shiva-modish” as I could be. I have, in fact, been known to lose my temper and can be petty on occasion. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are supposed to contemplate the past year and think about we would like to do better or more in the coming one. An important aspect of these Days of Awe is walking the walk, not just talking the talk. In other words, you can do all the praying you want during that time, but if you treat people badly, God will not be listening. Perhaps one aspect of Rosh Hashanah is attempting, more concretely than usual, to behave in a more open, compassionate way, just as the experience around death may cause us to see more clearly and behave more humanely. However, I also believe that perhaps part of what’s important at this time of year is an acceptance of this non-perfection. After, all, no one is entirely perfect all the time; that is part of what makes us human and, indeed, the process is often as important as the destination itself.

Harriet:

*Chesed shel emet*, or ultimate kindness, is the term for what the chevra does because the one receiving the *taharah* and *shemira* cannot reciprocate or thank those who perform the deeds. Whenever I thanked her, Nicole responded it was an honour for her and her group to do these tasks for my brother and for my family. Many people who have participated in such rituals speak about them as a privilege and comment that the work deepens their

understanding of life. “Thank us if you need to,” Nicole said, “but (know) we are just fellow weavers, engaged in mending our torn world. May your brother’s memory be a blessing and a reminder to continue mending all that is broken in our lives. And honour him,” she entreated, “by loving each other more.”

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