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## Introduction: Contemplating Death

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# Introduction: Contemplating Death

*Laura Limonic and Tahneer Oksman*

In an interview published in the *New York Times* in March 2020, titled “What Judaism Teaches Us about the Fear of Death,” philosopher George Yancy describes the ways traditional Judaism generally focuses more on life than on death. Alternatively, he explains, it could sometimes be said to focus more on death than on life, depending on what texts, traditions, and interpretations one examines. Using the *Akedab*, or the story of the binding of Isaac, as an example, he states, “Different Jewish interpretations of [the story] . . . reflect this range between an emphasis on life, on the one hand, and the spiritual possibilities presented by death on the other hand.”<sup>1</sup> When we titled this special issue of *Shofar* “What’s Jewish about Death?,” it was with this very ambivalence—what we see as a central and productive tension running through Jewish tradition and culture—in mind. This collection is made up of a series of creative and critical responses to our question, confirmation of how an ironically categorical inquiry can liberate if we remain open to where it may take us.

There is, of course, nothing particularly Jewish about death, that ultimate universalizing force. But today, several years following the 2018 Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh, and in the midst of the 2020 swelling of support for Black Lives Matter, a worldwide activist movement driven by grief, alongside the devastating and still in-progress global Coronavirus pandemic, the puzzles of what Jewishness and Judaism, in their many configurations and iterations, can teach us about death, and what attending closely to death, as well as its close companions, mourning and grief, can teach us about Jewishness and Judaism, have particular urgency. As numerous historians and scholars recognize, it was in times of great upheaval, including around the Crusades and the Black Death, and its attendant massacres, that various now widely recognized Jewish customs and rituals surrounding death, mourning, and memorialization were crystallized.<sup>2</sup> This contemporary moment, then, seems like the right time to rethink what death—and its economic, material, social, ideological, and emotional contexts and circumstances—can mean for Jews and the world around us.

This special issue, edited by a sociologist and a literary and visual culture scholar, is not just multidisciplinary but transdisciplinary. It includes essays incorporating scholarly research and methodology culled from Latin@ studies, Rabbinics, film studies, trauma studies, cultural studies, and literary studies. The creative compositions include photography, comics, the short story, poetry, and creative nonfiction writing.

By bringing together explorations of Jewish death and loss, sometimes as incontrovertible fact and sometimes as metaphor, sometimes in a communal and sometimes individual sense, from the standpoint of those who have lost and from the standpoint of those afraid of losing, through traditional and secular frameworks, and articulated in a multitude of formats and modalities, we hope this volume, whether held in your hands or scrolled on a screen, will serve as an object of contemplation and curiosity, an instrument for bonding together learning, thinking through, and feeling.

To attend to what is often unspeakable, unknowable, or simply difficult to convey is an act of faith, and it is also a way of assuming responsibility.<sup>3</sup> We hope that, in assembling a chorus of voices, concentrating, each in their own way, on what is more easily put to the side, disguised, or avoided completely, this edited volume will suggest new ways of being faithful—not just to the living, the ailing, and the grieving, but also to the dead once among us.

In her foreword to Jack Riemer's foundational 1974 edited collection, *Jewish Reflections on Death*, a book exploring Jewish death and mourning rites and practices, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross inquires: "I have always wondered why the Jews as a people have not written more on death and dying. Who, better than they, could contribute to our understanding of the need to face the reality of our own finiteness?"<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, Kübler-Ross, best recognized for making widely known the theory of the five stages of grief, seems to be recognizing a reluctance in Jewish culture and tradition to center death, the dead, and grief—a resistance that Jewish scholars have long recognized. As Avriel Bar-Levav writes, in his essay housed in *Death in Jewish Life*, a recent collection examining Jewish attitudes toward death over time: "Jewish culture's basic position regarding death and the dead is in various respects to accord them a marginal standing."<sup>5</sup>

Consider: Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, regarded as one of the holiest days of the year for Jews, is a holiday in which the presence of the dead is meant to be felt as the community, in part, memorializes both their individual and collective losses. The Ashkenazic *Yizkor*, a memorial prayer, is recited by the congregation on this day as well as at the end of three other important Jewish holidays (Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot).<sup>6</sup> Yet there are, in concert with these highly specified rituals and customs, rigorous laws and traditions restricting certain dealings with the dead and rituals of mourning on Jewish holidays and on the weekly Shabbat.<sup>7</sup> The Jewish dead are meant to be handled, in both metaphysical and material senses of the word, carefully and separately—for instance, as Allan Amanik has recently shown, in his book tracing the history of Jewish cemeteries in New York, “separation in death and burial” has long characterized Jewish practice.<sup>8</sup> There is, too, in a broader sense, trouble in mourning too much, as Hamburg-born Jewish businesswoman Glückel of Hameln reminds us in her seventeenth-century memoirs, recognizing how “no one depressed in body can worship God as he should.”<sup>9</sup> Her counsel? “Thus we must ever keep a measure in our grief.” Even at the site of burial, when the *onen* (the close mourner) has just participated in the internment of her dead, she is prompted not to linger but, instead, to plunge on ahead.<sup>10</sup> As Deborah Lipstadt explains, “One should not tarry at the cemetery for too long a period of time. The soul has been entrusted to its Maker, and all that lies in the earth is the shell that housed it during its sojourn on earth.”<sup>11</sup> Along the same lines, requesting a burial place for his wife, Sarah, from the Canaanites, Abraham said, “give me a possession of a burying-place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”<sup>12</sup>

Jewish traditions and laws are carefully structured to divide Jewish mourning, burial, and memorialization from everyday life, essentially, to keep death and mourning in their proper places.<sup>13</sup> In these ways, Kübler-Ross’s puzzlement seems apt. On the other hand, Jewish writing in particular—from traditional, religious, and classical texts to contemporary and secular compositions—has never crept around the realities of death, or deep grief. From Jacob’s plaintive cry for his children in *Bereishit* (“If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved”) to the tormented story of Job, the mystical Kabbalistic teachings on the afterlife, and the writings of Maimonides, the

idea of death is never distant.<sup>14</sup> And while Glückel of Hameln may have warned of the dangers of grieving too much, her entire autobiographical project was fueled by the death of her husband.

More recently, many distinguished Jewish literary and cultural figures have made issues related to death, dying, and grief a significant focus of their life's work, from Sigmund Freud and his death drive to contemporary cultural makers and architects, including Eleanor Antin, Paul Auster, Leonard Baskin, Walter Benjamin, Joseph Brodsky, Judith Butler, Nadine Gordimer, Harold S. Kushner, Tony Kushner, Gerda Lerner, Primo Levi, Robert Jay Lifton, Thomas Nagel, Tillie Olsen, Amos Oz, Harold Pinter, Philip Roth, Charlotte Salomon, Sarah Schulman, Susan Sontag, Art Spiegelman, and Hannah Wilke.<sup>15</sup> Viktor E. Frankl's 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, though controversial, is one of the most influential and well-known books of the twentieth century, focused as it is on what Frankl describes as "the sacrifices, the crucifixion and the deaths of the great army of unknown and unrecorded victims [of the Nazi concentration camps]."<sup>16</sup> In other words, Frankl was looking to take lessons from traumatic near-death and death experiences, and his work's popularity suggests that many people presume some of life's secrets to be contained in such proximity to death—secrets that can then be transmitted to those as yet untouched.<sup>17</sup> And in 1974, just a few months after he died, Jewish cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's bestselling work, *The Denial of Death*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The premise of Becker's book is that "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity."<sup>18</sup>

What these cultural works and figures have in common is a fixation with death, dying, and grief, and, though some of their related texts postdate Kübler-Ross's statement, together, this body of work alone contradicts what she says about a particularly Jewish denial of death, at least via the written word. Indeed, medieval French scholar Philippe Ariès's famous contention, in his 1977 tome, *L'Homme devant la mort*, translated as *The Hour of Our Death*, that death has become something of a taboo, especially in contemporary Western cultures, has by now been challenged many times over. Despite the continuing significance of his work, Ariès's overgeneralizations and omissions erased a number of cultural perspectives, not least a Jewish one.<sup>19</sup>

What's clear is that death has maintained as a topic of concern, investigation, and conversation in cultures worldwide, even as particular approaches and engagements—developed out of distinct communal histories and experiences—diverge as well as transform over time. Sociologist Lyn H. Lofland, author of *The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death*, first published in 1978, and another resister of the universalizing narrative of death-as-taboo in contemporary circles, addresses this point in her work, pointing out that attitudes and practices around death are a combination of universal and particular forces. As she explains:

It seems quite probable that at least some portion of the many differences among humans in their dealing and copings with death has to do with *which* death or combinations of deaths they routinely confront. The culture and organization of death—the complex of thinkings, believings, feelings, and doings relative to it—in any given group at any given time, then, is not so much a culture and organization of universal death (although it may contain elements of such). It is, rather, a culture and organization of *characteristic* death or deaths.<sup>20</sup>

While we want to limit generalizing too much about contemporary Jewish cultural norms and attitudes in a global context, it seems safe to say that Jewish approaches to death have been profoundly shaped by the trauma and aftermath of modern events, including of course the Holocaust and other violence driven by antisemitism in recent centuries, and also by events further back in history, like the Black Death persecutions, when Jews, blamed for pandemic-driven illnesses and deaths in mid-fourteenth-century Europe, were massacred, and whole Jewish communities were destroyed.<sup>21</sup>

Now, in the early twenty-first century, we have voices like that of the *New Yorker* cartoonist Roz Chast, telling of her parents, George and Elizabeth, in a memoir about their lives and deaths: “It was against my parents’ principles’ to talk about death. . . . Nor would they discuss religion beyond a most superficial level.”<sup>22</sup> In a two-page comics spread, Chast more directly links her parents’ silence with their Jewish heritages: she pictures

a steady stream of stories and experiences conveying gruesome antisemitic violence.<sup>23</sup> Chast's memoir, which looks directly—and closely—at the final years and moments of her parents' lives, and after, is a way of resisting this familial taboo. Yet, as Chast herself recognizes, even as her parents were unwilling to confront their own deaths ("Can't we talk about something more pleasant?" her father's cartoon figure famously asks on the cover of the book, his arms anxiously crossed), they spent their lives clearly obsessed with death and dying. Their fixations were evident in the anxious advice and admonishments they regularly directed at their daughter and each other, preoccupations that have come to characterize Chast's own beloved brand of dark humor.

"I'm obsessed with death," Alvy Singer tells Annie Hall on one of their first dates, just before he buys her copies of *Death and Western Thought* and *The Denial of Death*.<sup>24</sup> Like Chast and many others who are part of the "next" generations, Alvy cannot stop—some might say, to a neurotic degree—trying to break the silences of the horrors experienced by his ancestors.<sup>25</sup> The explorations throughout this volume point to the various ways death factors in Jewish life, whether as a topic obsessively addressed or one noticeably avoided, and the many points on which related investigations might turn. Indeed, for many Jews, it is death that draws them to the Jewish community, even if other points of contact are otherwise minimal. Allan Amanik, for instance, writes of how, historically, for Jews in New York, access to a Jewish cemetery plot was often a point of concern, even if they had limited affiliation with a Jewish community otherwise.<sup>26</sup> And writer and journalist Jordana Rosenfeld points out that it was in the wake of the Tree of Life shooting that more people than ever before joined the Pittsburgh-based "independent, nondenominational Jewish burial society, the New Community Chevra Kadisha (NCKK)."<sup>27</sup> As she explains, "this [the chevra] was the space that many of us instinctively sought out in response to white nationalist violence."<sup>28</sup>

In fact, for many Jews who consider themselves nontraditional—whether because they have spiritual, secular, or cultural understandings of and connections with their own Jewish identities—it is in facing death, often the death of a parent, that they feel compelled to turn to, or adjust, their

relationship to Jewish custom and tradition, frequently as a direct effect of that parent's last wishes. Consider E. M. Broner, declaring early on in her moving *Mornings and Mourning: A Kaddish Journal*: “[M]y father asked for a daily kaddish.”<sup>29</sup> Her work, in part, tracks the difficulty she had, as a woman, in finding a way to say Kaddish for her father in an Orthodox synagogue. “According to custom, it will be eleven months, minus one day, seven days a week, and I will be standing and uttering the kaddish for my father. . . . And I will never totally know why I’m doing this or why I chose this particular and demanding synagogue to house my grief.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, consider poet Rodger Kamenetz, in his 1985 memoir, *Terra Infirma*, describing his experience of observing the Jewish High Holidays in an unfamiliar synagogue in East Baltimore months after his mother’s death, “[b]ecause of the dream in which my mother told me that the dead wait for Kaddish prayers.”<sup>31</sup> Despite his self-declared suspicion of “organized religions,” his “unorthodox” sense of being Jewish, he nonetheless worries “that there was such a thing as the spirit and that my mother was suffering somewhere in Jewish limbo for lack of Kaddish prayer from her son.”<sup>32</sup> Hence he finds himself, to his own surprise, soaking up the effects of “a sensation of pure Judaism,” experiencing “a sense of peace,” even in a doubly alienating setting.<sup>33</sup>

Tellingly, in *The Light of the World*, her 2016 Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir, poet and writer Elizabeth Alexander, despite being “formally . . . Episcopalian on both sides,” turns to Judaism as she struggles to find a way to mourn her husband. As she writes, “*I am feeling very Jewish*, I keep hearing in my head, thinking not of my actual Jewish Jamaican great-grandfather but rather about a wish for a religious culture that reveres the word and tells you what to do: Rosh Hashanah. Days of Awe. Invite the dead to Sukkot.”<sup>34</sup> Jewish customs and laws regarding death and its aftermath include detailed prescriptions for everything from how and where the loved one’s body should be cared for, cleansed, and dressed to how the nearest of kin should dress, sit, and eat in the days leading up to and following internment. For those seeking direction in a time of chaos and uncertainty, these carefully demarcated guidelines—exclusionary as some of them might be, a focal point, for example, for Broner—potentially provide consolation to those who might otherwise feel they are grasping in the dark.



As Maurice Lamm explains, in his well-known *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, a book often gifted to Jewish individuals facing the death of a close loved one, traditional Judaism regards the laws concerning burial as *kavod hameit*, or ways of honoring the dead, and the laws concerning mourning as *nichum aveillim*, or therapy for the living.<sup>35</sup> While such demarcations between what we do for the living and what we do for the dead are more unstable than they might initially seem—just as it is difficult to distinguish between an emphasis on death and an emphasis on life, when each impression is dependent on the other—these groupings, classifications, and delineations nonetheless provide an anchor, or point of departure, from which to begin our examinations. In other words, they offer a codified backdrop, or pattern, on which we might begin to trace our digressive—and dispersive—explorations of death and grief in all of their Jewish dimensions.

It was with these configurations in mind that we structured our volume, using our own version of Jewish poetic license to house pieces according to four categories. Simcha Paull Raphael, in his practical, slim volume *The Grief Journey and the Afterlife: Jewish Pastoral Care for Bereavement*, divides Jewish mourning into six phases, roughly based on stretches of time (*aninut*, *shiva*, *shloshim*, *kaddish*, *yahrzeit*, and *yizkor*).<sup>36</sup> In our own jagged corollary, we have divided our volume into four parts: *aninut*, *avelut*, *yahrzeit*, and *yizkor*. We open with *aninut*, which is defined as “the state of mourning between death and internment.”<sup>37</sup> *Aninut* signifies a time of deep distress for the bereaved. It is at this time that the *onen* must focus on the practical elements of burying her dead, and those surrounding the *onen* are counseled not to try and comfort her at this time. Not only is it “futile,” as Lamm explains, but this is a time to focus on the one who has died, whose body “may not be left alone before burial.”<sup>38</sup>

In this first section, we open with Gail Labovitz’s essay, “‘Teach Your Daughters Wailing’: *M. Mo’ed Katan* 3:8–9 and the Gendering of Tannaitic Funeral Practice.” Labovitz narrows in on the Jewish funeral process as pieced together from her readings of tannaitic literature, which, tellingly, never directly addresses the topic. Her article reflects the ways that such ceremonial practices included careful regulations for everything from wailing and

weeping to memorializing, putting women at the center of funeral practice even as they were often left on the outskirts when they were the subjects of burials. From Labovitz, we can trace, at its roots, “the anomaly and the paradox of women’s public facing role in funerals,” a double standard that leans on women as facilitators, thereby connecting death practices with birthing ones, or death with birth and life. Labovitz’s article is followed by a selection of four photographs from artist Jeanne Heifetz’s *Pre-Occupied* series, which she started in 2016. As Heifetz explains, of the beautiful, abstract images developed out of Jewish cemetery maps, to “confront something that terrifies” is to submit to the possibility of making otherwise unforeseen connections, of finding even pleasure in one’s deepest fears. Turning the cemetery plots gifted to her by her grandfather into works of art is also a way of reframing her own inheritance. Laura Limonic’s review of *Muslim Custodians of Jewish Spaces in Morocco*, by Cory Thomas Pechan Driver, closes up the section. As Limonic details in her review, cemeteries are often the only link to a community that no longer exists. In Morocco, where Driver’s research takes place, it is the Muslim caretakers who tend not only to the physical graves, but also to the memories of a time where Jewish existence was alive in Morocco.

Section two, *avelut*, which translates as “[t]he period of mourning,” turns to pieces more directly preoccupied with bereavement.<sup>39</sup> While *avelut* could be said to encompass all of the stages of mourning, which generally take place within the first year of loss, here we present works focused on remembrance of individuals, compositions of deep and immediate grief. We start with Lise Saffran’s “Vigil,” a moving piece of nonfiction in which the author recounts the final year of her father’s life, which coincided with the year her son was preparing for his bar mitzvah. Saffran connects her own love of travel throughout her life with her father’s, and finds that, in her father’s final days, alongside the felt absence of a Jewish “prayer for those who are beyond healing,” the Wayfarer’s Prayer nonetheless helped comfort her in her time of overwhelming grief. Saffran’s essay is followed by a selection of four images, these provided by artist Judy Goldhill from part of her series *Neshama Revisited*. Here, Goldhill proffers snapshots from her deceased father’s life and death, revealing the ways that childhood bereavement carries sharply into, and throughout, adulthood. Her pairings of warm, light

objects and heavy, cold, metallic technologies expose how mourning and sadness concurrently offer up the “potentiality of looking,” refiguring an individual’s sense of scale, distance, and time.

Goldhill’s artworks are followed by Tahneer Oksman’s review of Judith Cohen Margolis’s recent book about her mother’s final illness, her death, and the time that followed. Titled *Life Support: Invitation to Prayer*, Margolis’s memoir, which is made up of illustrations, sketches, and prose entries divided into forty-one chapters, is described by Oksman as “an invitation to sit quietly and pay attention,” as Margolis bids her readers to witness her “complicated feelings” about her mother, her “profound pain.” This section closes with Shelley Salamensky’s evocative poem “Jerusalem,” a lyrical lament for the narrator’s father, whose absence haunts her through the indelible, “raw” images, phrases, and sounds that she explicitly lays out.

In the third section, *yahrzeit*, we begin to move outward, to narratives that tell of losses as they connect with other losses. *Yahrzeit* translates to “year’s time,” and it is a time of annual remembrance, usually for one’s deceased parent or parents. Often, Jews will light a candle of remembrance, recite the kaddish prayer, and give a charitable gift on this day.<sup>40</sup> But, as Raphael reminds us, *yahrzeit* is also “a time for remembering the ongoing connection between the living and the dead”<sup>41</sup> In that vein, the pieces in this section—a nonfiction essay composed in comics and a short story—remind us of the connections that bind individual and communal losses. In Emily Steinberg’s comic, “Ritual of Memory,” she presents to her readers a steady unearthing of the “existential mouldering graveyard” she carries with her as a Jew. While Steinberg’s piece prompts us to make connections, between historic and intimate, individual losses, the discrete structuring of these plots into individual pages, often including chunks of block hand-lettering, also reminds readers of the solitude of grief, how one cannot, ultimately, enter into another person’s experience. Alanna E. Cooper’s fictional short story, “The Life and Death of 840 Memorial Plaques,” tells of communal and individual death and grief, and the import of objects that commemorate the dead. Through this story, Cooper shows how *yahrzeit* plaques, imbued with sacredness, cross over into the profane as the memories of the names commemorated by those plaques are lost with the passing of those who carry the memories.

Our fourth and final section, *yizkor*, turns to the subject of generational and intergenerational inheritance, of death as a reality and then death as an idea, or a metaphor. Through the exploration of past trauma, intergenerational grief is digested and memorialized.

*Yizkor* is a memorial prayer and, as aforementioned, it is generally recited four times a year. Solomon B. Freehof's description of the complicated development of *yizkor*, commonly presumed to have debuted during the Crusades in Central Europe, shows how it developed to serve both individual and communal memorializations.<sup>42</sup> In this section, then, we open with a joint essay, written by sisters Diana Epelbaum and Emilia Bush, titled "Our Silent Inheritance: The Death and Life of Traumatic Memory." This hybrid article, which combines personal narrative with trauma theory, aims to make sense of their father's personal history of trauma, beginning with his mother reciting the Kaddish for him, her unborn son, and continuing through World War II. The fragmented memories inherited from their father are a link to an incoherent past that the authors try to reconstruct in an attempt to understand both theirs and their father's senses of self. As members of a generation of postmemory, Epelbaum and Bush grapple with the pervasive grief that marks their familial unit and the relationships that orbit around it. Next is Charlotte Gartenberg's article, "Inheriting Ghosts in Latin American Jewish Literature: Forging Stories and Selves Out of Deathly Pasts in Sergio Chejfec and Eduardo Halfon." In this piece, Gartenberg explores the use of ghosts and ghostly allusions in the autofiction of Chejfec and Halfon to confront the haunting and trauma within their family histories. Chejfec, the son of a Holocaust survivor, grapples with constructing an identity without fully knowing his father's traumatic experiences. Halfon, the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, tells the story of his grandfather's time in Auschwitz through short stories connected with a ghostly thread. Through an analysis of these two authors' works, Gartenberg shows Jewish trauma as reconstructed through an assemblage of the known and the unknown, with imaginative forces drawing the two together.

We then turn to a short comic drawn by Lilac Hadar and annotated by David Hadar. The comic, "Leon Pinsker's Ghosts," is an illustrated accompaniment to an excerpt from Leon Pinsker's famous Jewish nationalist pamphlet

*Auto-Emancipation: An Appeal to His People by a Russian Jew.* Pinsker likens the status of stateless Jews to ghosts. When Jews lost their state, their material union, he argues, they became a nation of ghosts. For Pinsker and his followers, Zionism and Israeli national identity are driven “by a wish to escape undead,” yet, as the Hadars’ clever accompaniments show, the stateless ghosts continue to haunt Israel’s past and present. Hadar’s illustrations implore us to question the motives driving Zionist principles and to closely investigate related justifications for the existence of the State of Israel.

We end, finally, with Olga Gershenson’s article, “Zombies and Zionism: The Dead and the Undead in Israeli Horror Films.” In this article, Gershenson analyzes the motives and messaging in two zombie films: *Poisoned* and *Cannon Fodder*. Both of these feature the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and, as Gershenson argues, the zombies in these films represent some of Israeli public’s disenchantment with current social and political structures. The IDF’s centrality in Israeli society mirrors the increasingly fraught role of martyrdom within Israeli social structures. We place the Hadars’ comic and Gershenson’s article—with Israel as the focal point around which death, ghosts, and rebirth are discussed and implemented—at the end of this issue with an eye toward the practical and symbolic space that Israel occupies in global Jewish life. Modern-day Israel was born in the aftermath of the Holocaust and inhabited by survivors of trauma. While postmemory slowly loosens its hold on Israeli society, Israel grapples with new deaths and trauma, from suicide bombings and violent wars with neighboring countries—new prompts for communal and individual grief and mourning. Rethinking Jewish approaches to death and grief is central if we are to pave a way forward that acknowledges, that is able to hold, traumas both past and present.

In this vein of reconsideration, if Gail Labovitz’s opening article gives us a strong sense of the ways that mourning and funeral practices were gendered in tannaitic literature—with women typically expected to act as lamenters through bodily practices like chanting and wailing, and men through eulogies and speeches—we hope this volume will serve, at least in part, as an intervention in relation to what is still a predominantly male canon of Jewish literature focused on death, dying, and mourning.

Beginning with our cover image by Israeli artist Leni Dothan, the art, literature, and essays collected in this special issue are largely invested in reclamations and reinterpretations, in seeing old traditions from new points of view. Instead of depicting the story of Abraham and Isaac, for example, as it is often told, as a scene of secrecy, faith, and sacrifice, an exchange centrally framed around God and a single patriarch, Dothan plants a young baby alongside its mother, each greedily reaching for the gleaming, yet now underwhelming, kitchen knife. Mother and child, two marginalized figures in the original story, are centered here, and moved from Mount Moriah to a plain, uneasy domestic space. This reinterpretation emphasizes struggle over sacrifice, active engagement over passive acceptance.

“The battle, namely, the right to mourn for one’s own, is large,” declares Broner toward the end of her memoir.<sup>43</sup> Broner is referring to the struggle she underwent, in trying to get herself taken seriously as a woman publicly mourning—trying to say the Kaddish for her father, as part of a community, part of a *minyan*—in a space largely vying to shut her out. But we might also consider the struggles each of us endures, as we disentangle our private grief from communal grief, the historical traces of loss and the ones that unfold in communities in and around us. Today, we might think especially of the struggles of caring for, burying, and mourning our dead, in times of fresh uncertainty and distance. In her article “Honoring the Dead From a Distance,” published in *Jewish Currents* in May 2020, Jordana Rosenfeld writes, several years after joining her local *hevra kadisha*, of her very first virtual *tabarot*, or purity ritual. In the time of Covid-19, this intimate ceremony, of carefully cleaning and purifying the deceased person’s body from head to toe, must be done over Zoom. The body in this instance is not even visible on screen, but instead “confined to this steel container,” a metal box within a wooden coffin.<sup>44</sup> “How,” Rosenfeld wonders, pouring the ritual water from one bowl to another instead of directly onto the *meitah*’s body, as she would normally do, “could this modified ritual *not* hold less spiritual value?”<sup>45</sup> In the end, she determines, “The modified taharah cannot hold all my grief, but I don’t know where else to take it. Is an inadequate container better than no container at all?”<sup>46</sup>

The pieces in this volume all, in some way or other, touch on these and related questions. What are the containers provided for us, as Jews, with which to handle and grieve our dead as well as the dead around us? Which containers have we had to invent, or reinvent? Which ones are we willing to discard? In this time of overwhelming unpredictability, longing, and grief, our best option, we propose, is to gather, thoughtfully and purposefully, together.

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## NOTES

1. Yancy, "What Judaism Teaches Us."
2. See Freehof, "Hazkarath Neshamoth"; Goldberg, *Crossing the Jabbok*; Lifshitz, "Av ha-rahamim."
3. As Jacques Derrida reminds us in *The Gift of Death*, "Responsibility and faith go together, however paradoxical that might seem to some." Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 8.
4. Kübler-Ross, "Foreword," 2.
5. Bar-Levay, "Jewish Attitudes towards Death," 6. He goes on to describe the various ways in which death is marginalized, including the following important points: "death is marginal in time," "death is also socially marginal," and "Jewish mourning practices restrict the possibility of expressing any connection with the dead," 6–7.

6. As Maurice Lamm explains, the *yizkor* service “is based on the firm belief that the living, by acts of piety, decency, and generosity, can redeem the dead.” For this reason, the prayer is accompanied by pledges for charitable donations. Lamm, *The Jewish Way*, 6–7. For more on the *yizkor* service, including its attention to individual as well as communal losses, its developments over time and in different places, and the ways that some Sephardic communities have adopted it over time, see Freehof, “Hazkarath Neshamoth.”
7. As one of many examples, “If death occurs on the Sabbath . . . [o]nly the most minimal arrangements may be made.” Lamm, *The Jewish Way*, 5.
8. Amanik, *Dust to Dust*, 6.
9. Hameln, *The Memoirs*, 89.
10. An *onen* is the person “halakhically required” to mourn for close relatives, and the term describes that person’s state from hearing the news of the loved one’s death to the end of that loved one’s internment. See Lamm, *The Jewish Way*, 24–29.
11. Lipstadt, “The Lord Was His,” 54.
12. From Genesis (*Bereishit*) 24:3, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bereishit-genesis-chapter-23>.
13. As Jack Riemer writes of Jewish law, in a sentence that encapsulates what is characteristic about many of the traditions and rituals that have been passed along with regard to death and mourning practices, “There is the halakhah, that great and complex and immensely detailed system of law that gives form and order and structure to our grief and keeps it from becoming wild or shapeless or uncontrolled.” Riemer, “Introduction,” 12.
14. From Genesis (*Bereishit*) 43:14, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bereishit-genesis-chapter-43>.
15. For collections of famous writing on death, see, as examples, Spiegel and Tristman, *The Grimm Reader*; Milstein, *Rebellious Mourning*.
16. Frankl, *Man’s Search*, 3.
17. For a related, additional example, see Edith Eger’s *The Choice*, and then consider as counterpoint, Ruth Kluger, writing in *Still Alive* of such discussions: “Auschwitz was no instructional institution. . . . Absolutely nothing good came out of the concentration camps,” 65.
18. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, xvii.



19. Of course, Ariès himself notes that his research is focused on “attitudes toward death in our Western Christian cultures.” Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, xiv. In a 1998 review of Sylvie Anne Goldberg’s *Crossing the Jabbok*, Sander Gilman called her book “the first serious attempt to deal with the Jewish concept of death within the study of mentalities.” Gilman, “Review,” 1277.
20. Loffland, *The Craft of Dying*, 2; emphases hers.
21. See note 2.
22. Chast, *Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*, 4.
23. Chast, *Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*, 6–7.
24. *Annie Hall* is a 1977 romantic comedy, directed by Woody Allen and cowritten by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman. Later in the film, *Death in Venice* is added to this roster of books.
25. Family silences is a common theme in the art and literature of children and grandchildren of survivors of trauma and genocide, though the opposite could also be said to be true. See Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust*.
26. See Amanik, *Dust to Dust*, especially 148–69.
27. Rosenfeld, “Washing the Dead.”
28. Rosenfeld, “Washing the Dead.”
29. Broner, *Mornings and Mourning*, 6. Related important works themed around the Jewish mourning prayer include Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Kaddish,” dedicated to his mother, Naomi Ginsberg, and published in his famous collection, *Kaddish and Other Poems*, in 1961, or Leon Wieseltier’s award-winning 1998 memoir, *Kaddish*.
30. Broner, 8–9.
31. Kamenetz, *Terra Infirma*, 35.
32. Kamenetz, 38.
33. Kamenetz, 37.
34. Alexander, *The Light of the World*, 118, emphasis hers.
35. Lipstadt talks about family members gathered around her father’s hospital bed carrying a variety of books, including Lamm’s. Lipstadt, “The Lord Was His,” 51. Broner also describes being gifted Lamm’s book by a rabbi during her period of mourning. See Broner, *Mornings and Mourning*, 124.
36. Raphael, *The Grief Journey*, xviii.
37. Lamm, *The Jewish Way*, 303.

38. Lamm, 36.
39. Lamm, 303.
40. Raphael, *The Grief Journey*, 84.
41. Raphael, 84.
42. Freehof, "Hazkarath Neshamoth," 179.
43. Broner, *Mornings and Mourning*, 91.
44. Rosenfeld, "Honoring the Dead."
45. Rosenfeld, "Honoring the Dead."
46. Rosenfeld, "Honoring the Dead."

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