Death, Bereavement and Traumatic Loss in Israel: A Historical and Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: In the present article, we focus on the experience of bereavement and traumatic loss in Israel and examine the main influences that continue to shape them. For the Jewish population the main features are: religious aspects stemming from Jewish tradition and its variants; the secular and contemporary traditions, the ethos of the Israeli state, and the influence of the struggle to reestablish the Jewish people in its homeland. In an increasingly multicultural society, significant changes are occurring. A series of vignettes of grief and mourning illustrate current issues and practices among religious, secular, kibbutz, Russian and Ethiopian segments of society. The remainder of the article discusses emerging patterns of response to bereavement that are socially constructed and historically situated. We follow the variations in these patterns, from shifting forms of memorialization on the collective level to changes in expressive mood on the individual level, which are mediated by the cultural mosaic of the society. Mental health professionals would benefit from an understanding of the multifaceted fabric of beliefs and cultural-specific customs that shape the mourning rituals and their meanings for the bereaved.

Introduction

A loss of a loved one is painful and profound, and grief response varies in duration and magnitude. As a result of the disruption in one’s life produced by loss, the bereaved is immersed in emotional crisis. The routine of life has been disturbed. At the most basic physiological level, somatic homeostasis has been upset. Sleep difficulties, eating disturbances, and difficulties with concentration and thinking often emerge. These responses may be so pronounced so as to lead to excessive use of medications — physician prescribed or otherwise — to allay the pain and anxiety that sweep over the bereaved. While somatic routine is so disrupted, the social network is being disrupted as well. The prism through which a bereaved views him or herself and the world, are characterized by a fundamental bias — that there is no value to a life without the deceased who was so loved.

For most bereaved, time will heal the sharp pangs of loss. The acute reactions will subside and there will be a return to a physiological, cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal homeostasis. People are adaptive organisms, with the ability to form and sever relationships. Yet despite all this, the loss will generally cause permanent changes in personality and life course of the individual. The nature of the changes will vary from person to person as will the awareness of these changes by the individual and his or her surroundings. Sometimes, the direction of
change will result in an appropriate reorganization with adaptive features, and at other times, the reverse will be true. Perhaps the most common outcome of loss is a combination of favorable and problematic features following loss. Such a result would be consistent with much of the literature on the response of parents to the loss of children (1, 2).

The lifelong effects of some losses, and the seemingly transient effects of others, have concerned clinicians and researchers. In the attempt to make sense of the experience of loss, the significance of traumatic aspects of loss is emerging in accumulated studies of bereavement (3–5).

The focus in this article will be the identification of a variety of factors which constitute the experience of traumatic loss and bereavement both on the individual and collective dimension and the interplay between them. The orientation is applied from an historical perspective and attends to the links between the clinical, theoretical, and research viewpoints. This article describes and analyzes the trends and changes that have predominantly taken place within the secular Israeli culture and identity over the years. The continued impact of loss and bereavement has been affected by the transition from a collective society to an individualistic one. These processes took place in a society assimilating successive waves of immigrants. At the same time, for significant aspects of society the meaning of what it meant to be Jewish was shifting from an identity in dialogue with — or opposition to — traditional religious society, to an identity revolving around identification with a modern state with some Jewish characteristics. What was also being shed here was the power of traditional religious society to provide a ritual and familiar approach to dealing with death and mourning. At this juncture, the emerging Israeli experience sought to create structures that would assist the bereaved families and the bereaved society deal with the loss of so many of their loved ones.

 Attempts to preserve the memory of the large numbers (about nineteen thousand) who died in the struggle to establish the State of Israel and in successive wars present a means of coping with severe trauma and loss, and support for the process of mourning and grief.

**Collective and Individual Bereavement in Israel**

The mourning process is normative, an inseparable part of our lives. It usually includes ceremonial and sometimes even ritual expressions of grief which occur shortly after the actual loss, while grief is definable as the expression of the subjective experience which follows the psychological recognition of loss (6).

Over the years with the growing numbers of fallen soldiers in wars, a "bereavement culture" has emerged reflecting the importance of the experience of the death of one’s own people. It views these deaths as a sacrifice; the sense of heroism associated with such a death confers existential meaning on the national-social level. The term "families of the bereaved" embodied this concept. Memorialization and commemoration give concrete expression to this concept on different levels through a variety of means, such as monuments and memorial ceremonies. The various frameworks give expression to the collective representations and the various, sometimes even in conflict, which forms of commemoration and memorialization play an important role in both the national and the personal mourning process.

Historically, in Israel there has always been a linkage between personal and collective bereavement. On the personal level, it seems reasonable to assume that the bereaved were moved by the anguish and distress over their painful loss. But even if expression of their emotions appear universal and innate, their articulation is bound to cultural construction and consequentially is highly variable, as ethnographic evidence shows. We would like to demonstrate how its expression has been affected by changes in the myth of heroism and the cult of dead soldiers in Israeli society (7).

Rather than depriving the bereaved of their exclusive attachment to the dead, the emphasis on the nation’s participation in death in battle was presumed, among other things, to provide them with a broader support system. As an important aspect of Israel’s civil religion, the commemorative cult of dead soldiers was expected to assure personal bereavement by changing the loss with existential significance on the socio-national level. Accepting this significance resonated with the Jewish religious diurnal of tashub ha’din (justification of the verdict). In Ben-Gurion’s (Israel’s first prime minister) words: "Death (in battle) is not an ultimate nothingness. The life of each and every person is part of the life of his mother, it’s soaked into the life of his generation and the generations to come."

The symbolic reward that the grateful society could bestow on the bereaved was a two-fold glorification. Beyond the exaltation of the fallen, the nation’s memory, the parents were viewed as heroic figures in their own right, worthy of admiration and emulation. Not only were they willing to "sacrifice" their children, but there had also been ample efforts to endure the pain with magnanimity and pride (7).

The military and political leaders most strongly affecting these changes are associated with the two most recent wars: the Yom Kippur War of 1973, which led to the shattering of myths and a sociopolitical revolution in Israel; and the 1982 war in Lebanon, in whose aftermath voices were raised, particularly by bereaved parents, questioning the necessity of the war. The sounds of personal grief were heard in full force — anger and blame that were no longer "choked" (i.e., sublimated) in the mantle of meaning. On the contrary, for the first time, protests and official statements were expressed out loud and publicly. There was, however, a certain ambivalence in the protest since the myths related to war and the death that comes with it are an important source for support in coping with personal grief, precisely because of the special significance accorded them by society.

Attempts to honor and remember those who fell in the struggle to establish the State of Israel are reflected in the evolution over the years of burial and memorial ceremonies. Five decades after the establishment of the State, there is a fixed pattern and tradition to mark the loss. Following death during military service, the deceased’s family is notified and the army steps in to organize the proceedings. The military is responsible for arranging the funeral, organizing the religious ceremony for its Jewish soldiers, and seeing to the erection of the gravestone in a uniform military style. The army has taken responsibility for organizing the rites of mourning for the individual soldiers and for attending to the annual day of remembrance for the fallen soldiers. In a variation marking the anniversary of the death of the individual, the military has instituted special annual remembrance days for the different army units to mark the death of their members (8).

The rule of uniformity of the military funeral and memorial services reflects equal regard for the fallen and is in accord with the collective ideology characterizing Israeli society in its first stage of establishment. As with many Western countries that have experienced the ravages of war, the military memorial days are reflections of the solidarity of the society and its homage to its defenders. As mentioned above, the “Family of the Bereaved” (the family who lost soldiers) has a unique status in Israeli soci-
ety, and have become less monolithic. Over the years, bereaved families have asserted their voices in support of more individualism as well as more open grieving for the loss of their children (9,10). They have sought to introduce choice and variation in the style of conducting the burial ceremony, as well as having the freedom to choose the gravestone shape and style. The following is a vignette of a military funeral.

Vignette 1: A military funeral in a secular community — Unmitigated loss

Yoram was 21-year-old soldier in a parachuting unit when he died in a military action. He was born and grew up on a moshav where the funeral and burial would take place. His father’s family was one of the founders of the moshav which had immigrated during the 1930s from Poland to Palestine, believing that Jews should come to their homeland and build new communities.

Yoram’s family truly believed, as did his friends, that they, the founders, would be the last generation of victims and their children and grandchildren would enjoy the freedom of the new world. Yoram’s family who live on the same moshav probably have chosen a non-religious burial ceremony available to them in their private community. Yet because Yoram died as a soldier a military funeral was performed. After preparation for burial Yoram was buried in a casket covered with the Israeli national flag. His comrades performed a military salute following the funeral oration and prayers were said by an army rabbi. Family members, friends and moshav members who assembled for the funeral heard a eulogy by the army representative who described Yoram as a brave soldier who gave his life while defending his homeland. In a break with traditional kinship models, his girlfriend spoke as well. She wept as she described her boyfriend, his spiritual and physical beauty and the love that will be re-tuned no more. The rabbi wept along with the others as they listened to Yoram’s girlfriend describing their love, which is unsanctioned according to the Jewish law (halacha), but a fact of modern life. The rabbi himself, however, performed the burial ceremony in accordance with the halacha. Wreaths of flowers from the army, Yoram’s school friends, relatives and family friends were placed on the grave and covered it. They stood next to the grave for a while crying, refusing to believe that one of their own died so young. They hugged and comforted each other and later they quietly walked to the grandparents’ home where they sat and talked about Yoram. The period of his childhood through his short adulthood was recalled, as those who had gathered looked through his photo album and the memorials of his life.

Yoram’s funeral was a combination of traditional military and secular elements. The shloshim (30 days after the burial ceremony) was marked by a visit to Yoram’s grave with prayers and kaddish recited. Stones as well as wreaths of flowers were laid on his grave. Some of Yoram’s close comrades and friends joined the family to plan a memorial service and the possibility of editing a memorial book to be prepared for the first anniversary of Yoram’s death. His commander was involved in the writing and came to visit Yoram’s family whenever time permitted. Yoram’s family was very appreciative of these visits during which they heard stories and anecdotes about Yoram as a soldier, and as a friend (2, 11). Yoram’s girlfriend joined the family as one who also grieved the death of her lover. Her grief and mourning, although not formally recognized by religious tradition, was now socially acceptable (12).

Twelve months later, when the first year of mourning was completed, a memorial service was held by the grave with a military rabbi performing the ceremony. Kaddish was recited by Yoram’s father. Members of the family and friends read poems and letters to Yoram, telling him how painful the first twelve months have been for each one and for all of them without him. This funeral and mourning ritual reflected a mix of traditional and innovative elements alongside the most developed of Israel’s current experience with loss — military death. While the motor vehicle accident may claim more lives, in the popular imagination it is military loss which predominates. As such, it is one of unmitigated death, mediated by the military which is responsible for the deceased, for the memorialization of him or her, and who also maintains a continuing contact with the bereaved family.

Vignette 2: The influence of religion surrounding loss

David, a 72-year-old male widower, father of four children, was admitted to the intensive coronary unit in a Jerusalem hospital. His medical condition improved after admission, but one night, five days after his arrival, he died suddenly from arrhythmia. His wife had died a year earlier. The family was shocked, no discussion of the possibility of death had occurred prior to the sudden death of the father. The children discussed how to proceed.

The two sons, who are ultra-orthodox Jews living in Jerusalem, were invited to the hospital where they were informed of the tragic news. Saddened by the news, they expressed the wish to hold the funeral immediately according to the custom in Jerusalem, but agreed to call the rabbi for guidance regarding possible delay of the funeral in order to enable the sister living in USA to attend. Their suggestion was immediately rebutted by another son and daughter-in-law from Haifa who are secular. They were upset at the suggestion to consult a rabbi, and spoke bitterly about the clergies who follow arcane and ancient rules unsuited for modern life and who force others to do so. They insisted on postponing the funeral until the sister would be able to arrive from the USA.

This family represents the complex reality of differing lifestyles and values within Israeli society. While it is not unusual for families to be monolithic in attitude to and practice of religion, it is also quite usual for them to represent a range of attitudes and practices (12-14). In this composite case both the religious and secular poles are represented. The religious and secular dimension ranges across a continuum of values, attitudes and practices. Distinctions such as modern- or ultra-orthodox, traditional or secular, capture only a portion of the complexity of individuals’ and families’ cultural identity and outlook, but do not serve to orient the observer to a relevant segment of the spectrum. Dispersal of the family in different locations (within Israel or abroad) is not unusual.

In contrast, the mourning patterns of the secular kibbutz were shaped in accordance with its members’ ideology that the formation of the new Yishuv (settlement) also called for a new code of behaviors, including those for mourning (15). The new code was characterized by minimal emotional expression, by restraint and fortitude, which was the antithesis to more traditional mourning rites associated with weakness and cowardice. Silence became the hallmark of the kibbutz funeral (16). Over the years, with the changes that have taken place in kibbutzim, which grew into larger communities, the sense of being a “closely knit social network” (17) has subsided, with voices heard seeking to break the tradition of silence and to adopt a more open way of expressing emotions accompanying grief.

In the following vignette, both “old and new” kibbutz traditions were practiced: the old way was experienced by the older generation whereas the new, more contemporary one was adopted by the younger generation.
Vignette 3: Death in a secular kibbutz: The silent grief

Yehuda was in his late sixties when he was seriously injured in a car accident in which his wife Dvora was also critically injured. They were treated in different hospitals and she died later that evening. Dvora was Yehuda’s second wife. His first wife was a member of the same kibbutz and although she hadn’t spoken with her ex-husband since their divorce years ago, the daughters from each of the marriages maintained very close relationships with both mothers. As is the custom in many kibbutzim, notification was delivered by the kibbutz secretary, who went late in the evening to the hospital where Yehuda was being treated to tell him of his wife’s death. It was suggested that the news should be delayed until the following morning due to Yehuda’s critical condition. Yehuda, one of the founders of the kibbutz, a popular and beloved member, had the reputation of being an idealist whose life was devoted to the kibbutz. The following morning Yehuda was told about his wife’s death.

Yehuda’s only wish was that no speeches or eulogies be delivered: “Not a word” was the way he expressed his request about his wife’s funeral. He told the secretary that one thing was to be heard, and that was Bach’s cello sonata. He added, “(We his wife and I) divided between us the music to be played at our funerals—one sonata for her and one for me. Other than that, there was to be ‘absolute silence.’ Yehuda himself was unable to participate in his wife’s funeral.

Six months later Yehuda died. At his request Bach’s cello sonata was played and no eulogies were said. Silence prevailed. Yehuda’s first wife and his daughters mourned his death. His ex-wife complied with Yehuda’s wish not to allow crying or eulogies. She mourned in silence, together with his friends who came to express their condolences.

The manner in which the older generation focused on the loss involved looking over his albums (he was a talented photographer) and speaking in hushed tones to each other. This manner of grief was characteristic of old kibbutz norms and tradition: relatively little free expression of emotion, and free-floating unstructured talk. As opposed to them, the young generation are more open in expressing their emotions and in talking about the deceased which is paradoxically somewhat more in keeping with the historical and religious Jewish tradition (18). At the same time, on the other side of the kibbutz, the children mourned the death of their father in their own way. With their friends they sat shiva, during which time they talked about their father, told stories about him, his life, and his loves. They talked of his peculiar way of collecting everything during his lifetime to the point that there was no room for anything else in his room. They did this very openly, laughing and crying as the stories unfolded. After the shiva, life for the ex-wife and the daughters slowly resumed, but grief remained a private matter. Yehuda’s belongings were discarded and his photos removed to the kibbutz archives.

The first anniversary of Yehuda’s death was marked by an exhibition of his photographs, which was arranged by his daughters, who invited a musician to play Bach’s cello sonata at the opening (in memory of both his and his wife’s death). Again, no eulogies were said nor were there any religiously sanctioned prayers of any kind. The predominant feature of this loss was the open-ended way in which people chose to develop their own response to the loss. No part of the funeral or mourning response was ordained by ritual or tradition, only by an attempt to define what felt right for the participants. The generations did things differently, and somewhat separately. For those who have the energy and creativity to organize what is meaningful to them, the results are tailor-made by the bereaved and for the bereaved. For those who are dazed and unable to organize their experience and response to loss, the absence of a clear ritual may be less salutary (19).

In our last vignette we describe and elaborate on the traditions and death rituals of people from a different culture who immigrated to Israel, and their distress, and disappointment at not being able to express and direct their mourning customs.

Vignette 4: Death and mourning in an immigrant community

Marina, 64 years old, emigrated from Russia to Israel ten years ago. She lost her husband two years prior to emigrating to Israel. She had four children. When two of them—a son and a daughter—decided to leave Russia and emigrated to Israel, she decided to follow them to what she regarded as the Promised Land.

After arrival all family members lived together in the same household in a town in the south of Israel. Marina helped her children with housekeeping as well as in taking care of her grandsons and granddaughters.

Two years later, she became ill and was diagnosed as suffering from lung cancer. Following a long bout with the disease she was admitted to a hospital for treatment but expressed a wish to die at home. Back at home, the children arranged a special room for her where her loving and caring family surrounded her.

Her health continued to deteriorate. One day when her son and daughter were at work and the children in kindergartens and schools, alone at home, she felt very bad and barely managed to call a neighbor. The neighbor called for an ambulance, the physician accompanying the medical team ascertained her death and she was taken to the funeral home.

The paramedic contacted Marina’s children and told them about their mother’s death. They were informed that in accordance with Jewish custom the funeral would have to be held the same evening. They were asked to come as soon as possible so that the Hevra Kadisha (funeral directors) could make arrangements.

The family, in a state of shock, was unable to understand the rush. In accordance with the custom in their homeland, they expected to take the body back home so that a proper separation from their beloved mother and grandmother could take place. Their protests and appeals were rejected and the funeral was held that evening.

The family members talked about the customs in their hometown in Russia and explained how different they were from those they had experienced with their mother’s funeral. They said that the body would have been washed, the deceased’s face would then be cleaned and embalmed, her hair combed and the body would be placed in a beautiful casket. The casket would be decorated with flowers and put in the middle of the room where all members of the family would have the opportunity to kiss and hug the deceased, crying as they parted from her. After a while, in accordance with prior planning, the funeral procession would begin leaving the deceased’s house towards the cemetery, possibly accompanied by an orchestra, depending upon the family’s financial situation.

Family members complained about the way the funeral was conducted, and felt that in their new homeland death rituals were enforced, which were uncivilized and barbaric. They felt bitter and wounded — this was a severe insult to their honor and deprived them of the possibility to properly separate from their beloved grandmother. The family refused to sit shiva, but after 30 days (shloshim) they held a small party devoted to her memory, when her family and acquaintances told stories and reminiscences about her. At that time the family set up the grave-
stone and after a year they performed a k'vurah ceremony.

In Russia burying the dead and the mourning process were considered private issues, and every bereaved family had to handle this in their own way according to the family’s tradition and custom. Usually, many who were secular did not keep all the funeral customs (like the shiva) and the service was influenced from the culture of their gentile neighbors. When the new immigrants from the former Soviet Union arrived in the Promised Land they were surprised and shocked to discover that all “last rites” business was “infamized” in favor of Jewish religious services, and they felt humiliated.

Ethiopian Mourning Customs

Another Israeli example would be the immigrants from Ethiopia who preserved their cultural integrity, observing the rituals and traditions of their faith, especially the Sabbath and the rules of ritual purity, including detailed customs of mourning and burial rituals.

According to this custom when an Ethiopian died not in his house, for example in a hospital, the message is delivered to one of the neighbor families, which serves as a middleman, first bringing the bad news to the elders who then tell the close relatives, usually in the afternoon when people returned from work or early in the morning before work. In no case is the tragic news to be delivered directly to the family, but always through the middleman who volunteers to take upon himself the difficult mission of purveying the sad news. This custom enables the beginning of the funeral ritual and lamentations immediately following the family’s reception of the message, with the participation of numerous people. Another important aspect for Ethiopian Jews is the strict rules of purity.

As the corpse is considered to be impure, those people who take care of the body by washing and purifying it become impure and must be separated from the other mourners for seven days of purification, including ritual bathing and receiving the Kase (priest) blessing before returning to the community. The process of mourning is not held in the deceased’s home because of “death impurity,” but rather in a special tent (“das”). During the first seven days of mourning, hundreds are likely to come to comfort the bereaved. They enter the “das” in groups while singing mourning dirges (“likso”). The mourners stand up, whereupon those comforting file by, one at a time, and while singing a dirge they place hands upon the mourner’s shoulders. Afterwards they all sit down and discuss the deceased, particularly positive qualities. Those coming to comfort are brought a cup of coffee (“bunu”), which is a part of the ritual. During the first seven days, it is customary for the community to pray in the mourning tent. At some point afterwards, the mourners organize a memorial service for the deceased to which they invite religious leaders, the extended family, friends and acquaintances. At this service prayers are offered for the deceased, his life story is told, and a festive meal is served. This ritual is seen as a final parting gesture towards the departed one.

In Israel problems can arise if news of the death is given directly to the family, especially at work. What is advisable is to pass news of the death to a fellow Ethiopian who is then asked to find a proper community member to convey the sad message to the family. If an Ethiopian youth is studying at a boarding school, and someone close dies at home, it is best to send the youth home with a fellow Ethiopian, without imparting any information.

Ethiopian Jews make great efforts to maintain burial and memory rituals. In Israeli involvement in these rituals is seen as extremely important, even for distant family members. At work, employers may find it difficult to understand why an Ethiopian Jew would miss work in order to take part in such a ritual or to offer condolences to a seemingly distant relative. In Israel the final memorial services is of particular significance for those who have learned that a family member died in Ethiopia. The service enables surviving family members to part from the deceased in an honorable manner, especially as they did not participate in the burial and mourning rituals.

Discussion

Loss and bereavement in Israel as described above provide an example of the continuous interplay between individuals and their socio-cultural context. The universal and particular elements of grief and mourning take place within a shifting and dynamic framework that evolves over time (21, 22).

The movement of the secular culture from emphasis on the collective to the individual in society has major implications for how people in Israel respond privately and publicly to loss. The traditional ritual of the Jewish funeral remains a shared basis for the divergence into different meaning systems that are evolving to channel the loss experience of differing subcultures within society.

Religious and secular traditions

The historic Jewish experience has generally seen community and mutual helping as an important feature of the religious faith community. The rabbinical interpretation (designed to match law with external and changing reality) and local custom evolved to inform how members of the Jewish communities scattered around the world respond to the needs of the bereaved. Jewish communities in the Eastern (Sephardic) and Western (Ashkenazic) parts of the world pay particular attention to the burial of the dead and the need to comfort and support the bereaved as among the most central of communal obligations. Consistent with Jewish observance until the modern period (19th century) an extensive body of literature grew expressing a clear code of private and public behavior (23-25). The ingathering of the Jewish people from so many scattered communities around the world has also exposed people to a multitude of varied religious and cultural practices that inevitably were influenced by the broader community around them. In effect, the reserved Jews of northern European descent differ from families of North African descent in their expression of emotion at funerals.

Crucial to the understanding of today’s Jewish culture, however, is the knowledge that the legitimacy that religiously sanctioned practices of caring for the deceased and the bereaved once enjoyed all across the Jewish communities is no longer pervasive (13). Regarding Jewish practice in Israel, the effort to create civil religion practices have left their mark on the entire range of attitudes towards death, dying and bereavement (26-28).

In cultures across the world today, the process of secularization, urbanization, and social mobility has resulted in a weakening of ritual, community, and family buffers in the experience of loss. For Jewish people in Israel and the Diaspora, the traditional Jewish burial, influenced to a lesser or greater degree by its neighbors in their country of origin, was an affair that was familial and embedded in the religious cultural experience of the deceased and the bereaved (29, 30). Today, the reality of the significance of the Jewish funeral with its supportive and soothing aspects can no longer be assumed. Thus in our second vignette, the possibility of delaying the burial so that family friends could be notified is made subservient to the religious custom of quick burial in Jerusalem in keeping with its status as the most holy city in Jewish religious tradition. The religious and secular family members, however, are not involved in a decision about this.
flect, while this one decision has far reaching implications for the family, the tension of the situation is compounded by the fact that the element of choice is not presented to the bereaved family. While the traditional Jew may have his or her options limited by traditional Jewish (halachic) law considerations, it is safe to say that the secular religious tensions have more to do with mutual bad faith than with faith run bad (31).

It seems that for many years, the religious and secular poles of society in Israel could be characterized as preoccupied with the rebuilding of the Jewish state and the Jewish national character. This was true in pre-state Israel as well as for the first decades after statehood. The focus on the Jewish collective in Israel, however, has come to be redefined over time, with its nature being a matter of contention among various groups within the society. Today the secular members of society tend to champion individual rights, while the religious, of whom the Orthodox predominately, tend to remain focused on adherence to collective and traditional interpretations. While proponents of a balanced and contemporary approach can be heard from within the religious sector, they do not yet serve as a bridge between these various sectors of Israeli Jewish society (30, 32).

As the Orthodox and Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) leadership have not undergone a fundamental shift in philosophy to conceive of a pluralistic Jewish society, the points of disagreement around the entire range of issues regarding death and dying are many. In the predominant perspective of Orthodoxy in Israel, the respect for individual rights does not take precedence over the rabbinical interpretation of Jewish law across a number of issues ranging from the substantive (marriage and divorce) to the symbolic (dietary restrictions at state functions). In ways that are hard for those raised on separation of church and state to understand, the state support of religion draws from a mix of rationales and historical features and has created a number of problems that defy easy solution. Politics and precedent are deeply involved in Israel’s current quandaries about synagogue and state, and the results leave one viewing a fragmented rather than a unified national approach to its rich religious and cultural heritage.

In contrast, on matters of response to the issues of death and dying, the secular pole of society has embraced an ethic that gives great prominence to the needs and desires of the individual in matters of life and death. The debate is fierce, and far from concluded.

The changing role of the military and the funeral
Traditionally, the military in Israel has been a force with multiple meanings for society (21). In addition to its role in protecting the populace and state, for much of the country’s history it has been a force for social integration. The fathers of the young Israeli nation, especially Ben-Gurion, believed in trying to shape the Israeli military as the great equalizer. The metaphor “melting pot” aptly characterizes the role that the founders of Israel saw for the army. The new immigrants were mixed with the veteran citizens to start a citizen army that both created and maintained the emerging Israeli identity. This was the focus of national pride, symbolizing being independent as a nation, strong and self-supporting as opposed to the Jewish role of victim, culminating in being the “lamb taken to slaughter” in the Second World War (33-35). The embodiment of a citizens’ army, the Israel Defense Forces have brought together young military conscripts with older reservists such that a broad swath of the Israeli public has been involved with concern for loved ones serving in the military. In Jewish society in Israel, with people of multiple origins and backgrounds, old timers and newcomers, natives and immigrants, across educational and socioeconomic barriers, the military has served as a meeting place for much of the society. Decades of living with the reality of the threat to national survival maintained a predominance of concern for the collective over the individual. With the weakening collectivist and communitarian nature, the army’s idealized status and role have begun to undergo change as well (36).

As a result of the changes in society, the response to military bereavement is no longer one to be borne silently with solace to be found in communal survival (37). Whereas each individual and each family have always confronted the question of whether they paid too high a price in the loss of their loved one, the current cultural atmosphere in Israel (reflected in and shaped by the mass media) has resulted in very public and vocal expression of things that had once been very private. In tandem with the changes in society, the long-established burial service of the army ritual which lasted for a few decades is now undergoing radical changes. The shift is in the parents’ attitude towards a change from the unified style of the military ritual and the established design of the grave stone to a more individualistic style of a ritual. Yet as was described in the first vignette, the consolation of traditional and Jewish elements in the military funeral can leave room for the personalized experience—only to the extent that the fabric of the past and the present is not stretched too thin (6).

The kibbutz as the alternative to religious tradition
The kibbutz movement and its funeral practice reflects an organized counterpart to religious, spiritual, and Diaspora traditions of Judaism. Rooted in a socialist perspective, the kibbutz movement became the flagships of Zionism and the resettling of the Jews in their homeland forming an agricultural community and adhering to egalitarian values. The break with tradition was also an ideological breach with religious norms, as the founding kibbutz members broke away from their own parents’ rituals and customs surrounding loss (38). It was their desire to find modern Israeli expressions for loss and grief. The problem was that after rejecting the traditional religious rituals, a vacuum was created characterized by silence. Over the years, this vacuum was gradually filled both by the reconnection to but also the modification of, traditional Jewish mourning customs. As a counterpart to the religiously dominated funeral practice, people committed to secular nondenominational values began to purchase burial plots and conduct their own services through the kibbutz framework. They did so without any other connection to the collectivist ideology or framework.

Every cultural tradition is engaged in maturation and development as well as interaction with the social forces that surround it. In many countries and cultures the tension between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and liberals, religious and secular forces is experienced as a kind of Kulturkampf, a cultural struggle, which can raise emotions and require individuals to rethink their positions. While the proponents of the extreme religious position or the extreme secular position may have a well defined position, for many, the issues of loss and bereavement confront them with choices, feelings, and thoughts that they are unfamiliar with and emotionally unable to categorize easily (39).

With regard to loss and bereavement, the current status of these alternate world views has created tension and alienation among variously defined groups, and has weakened the healing powers of culturally validated religious traditions. These are increasingly seen as an extension of political agendas rather than expressions of the Jewish people’s historically rich tradition regarding the handling of loss and bereavement. The his-
torical and exclusive dominance of the Jewish burial society as being the only sanction of burial system available to the Jewish population has generated so much discord and tension that secular and non-denominational options for funeral services and interment have gained the support of secular as well as religious Israelis seeking to find ways to defuse some of the strain in the clash of these alternative world views.

Different cultural traditions of grief and mourning

Cultural approaches to dealing with death are embedded in larger and well-articulated aspects of culture and society. Each culture has its own approach to dealing with loss.

To understand a culture's way of dealing with loss and death may require extensive knowledge of the culture's history, social structure, economic, politics and much more.

Beliefs and practices concerning death and mourning should not be thought as a matter of taste but as vitally connected to much in a person's life. In many non-Western societies, death rituals are far more elaborated and protracted than those common in Western societies. They may require actions that may seem to outsiders to be pointless, destructive or unpleasant.

Cultures vary in ways of dealing with death, who has the right or obligation to grieve, who is defined as the principal mourner and who is seen as experiencing the most loss as a result of the death. Cultures define death, what causes death, who are the bereaved, the relationship between the bereaved and others, the meaning of life and all major societal values. These understandings are filtered through rituals. Failure to enact them in full may leave people confused and distressed.

Sometimes, there are barriers to performing the appropriate rituals. Immigrants from different cultures may lack institutional support for engaging in necessary rituals, particularly from the establishment that deals with funeral ceremonies, employers, and school officials. Sometimes deliberate attempts may be made to stop practices which are seen as aberrant (41). Among our four case vignettes, the fourth one is such an example, where people who immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union described feeling that they were deprived of the possibility to separate from the dead and to perform their leave-taking rituals according to their previous custom. Similarly, there exists a potential for cultural misunderstanding of people who immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia as they seek to preserve their traditional mourning rituals and burial ceremonies.

Concluding Remarks

In the article we focused on the experience of bereavement and traumatic loss in Israel to illustrate the changes that have taken place in contemporary society with regards to mourning rituals. As the traditional ways are gradually disappearing, more secular ones are being interwoven into the practiced customs surrounding death. Each society has its own mourning customs and rituals and these are further shaped by their different cultural sources. Bereavement is a universal normal human reaction to loss through death of a loved one, and it is always a unique response which results from the interaction between the individual and the socio-cultural context within which it occurs. An understanding of the multifaceted fabric of beliefs and cultural-specific customs that shape the mourning rituals is necessary for mental health professionals working with people who experience loss.

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References


Book Reviews

Rachael Chazan, Editor

Traumatic and Non-traumatic Loss and Bereavement: Clinical Theory and Practice
Ruth Malkinson, Simon Shimshon Rubin and Eliezer Witztum, editors
Distributed by International Universities Press, Madison, Connecticut, USA.
List price $29.95, paperback.
ISBN 1-887841-30-X

This is an excellent book for anyone interested in clinical theory and practice in working with the bereaved. Each chapter is sound, interesting, and important. Although it seems almost a requirement when writing a review of an edited book to say something about the unevenness of the chapters, with this book I have a very different sense. Yes, the chapters represent diverse views of bereavement, but the diversity of the chapters gives a sound, honest sense of the diversity of views in the field of bereavement about how to conceptualize bereavement and how to work with it clinically. Thus, for me the diversity of chapters is informative in a very positive sense. There is nothing in any chapter that fails to ring true, and the chapters together give a much more complete view than would a set of chapters that were written within a single framework and narrow focus.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, on clinical theory and research, begins with a very valuable overview chapter by the book’s editors. They provide a concise, panoramic view of the field of bereavement, the potential and actual value of linking the study of bereavement to the field of trauma, and the power of using Rubin’s two track theory, which differentiates the functioning of the bereaved person from the bereaved person’s links to the deceased. A chapter by Danny Brom and Rolf Kleber focuses on coping, explores theoretical and treatment issues, makes a strong case for the connections and overlap of bereavement and trauma, and provides a number of useful integrative ways of thinking about the overlap. A chapter by Phyllis R. Silverman on childhood bereavement following the death of a parent does an outstanding job of looking at grief as a series of stressful lifecycle events that are part of a process of change in the context of family and community, rather than a deficit or psychiatric event to overcome. The final chapter in this section of the book, by Yuval Nerja, Zehava Solomon and Karni Ginburg, focuses on post-traumatic and bereavement reactions of former POWs. In the context of an interesting discussion of the aftermath of being a POW, this chapter demonstrates the linkage of trauma and bereavement.

The second section of the book, on psychotherapy following loss, provides a diversity of useful and thought-provoking perspectives. Simon Shimshon Rubin lays out psychodynamic perspectives on the treatment of the bereaved as he provides an insightful analysis of therapy focused on the relationship between bereavement and deceased. Eliezer Witztum and Ilana Roman provide a stimulating discussion of the use of metaphor and leave-taking rituals in treating complicated grief following the death of a parent. Ruth Malkinson and Albert Ellis provide a useful and stimulating account of rational-emotive behavior therapy for treating irrational thoughts following traumatic and nontraumatic loss. Robert Neimeyer, Nancy Keese and Barry Forner provide a leading edge theoretical discussion of meaning and meaning reconstruction in dealing with loss and a very useful set of ideas about carrying out therapy with bereaved individuals. Alia Alexander and Yael Lavie, who focus both on clients and on therapists, provide a theoretical and case study context for understanding the value and process of group therapy with parents whose children were killed while serving in the military.

The final section of the book deals with the cultural contexts of bereavement. Henry Abramovitch offers a stimulating discussion of cultural conceptions of “good” deaths and “bad” deaths, with useful therapeutic suggestions. Phyllis Falgi and Joshua Durban provide a fascinating analysis of how to deal therapeutically with maladaptive mourning in the Israeli context of cultural symbols of heroism, sacrifice and symbolic collectivity. Ruth Malkinson and Eliezer Witztum offer an excellent, historically rich discussion of collective bereavement and commemoration as they relate to transformations over time in individual and family grieving in Israel.

One of the most valuable things I took away from reading this book is the challenge to differentiate what is basically normal and human (given a person’s cultural context) in bereavement and what is pathological, what calls for substantial clinical intervention and what does not. And with so many chapters focusing on grief in the Israeli context, the book is instructive about the connections of bereavement and of clinical treatment approaches in Israeli to Israeli history, politics, and sociology. I think, more than any country in the world, Israel has made grief and trauma part of the public discourse and has put considerable government resources into dealing with grief and trauma. This adds an extra layer of awareness and sophistication to Israeli work on bereavement and grounds Israeli writings on bereavement in certain facts and metaphors. For those of us working outside of Israel, the links of so many chapters in the book to Israeli society provides a fresh, fascinating and stimulating look at the issues.

I consider this book an important contribution to clinical work on bereavement. It offers a variety of valuable theoretical perspectives and a substantial array of practical clinical approaches to working with the bereaved.

Paul C. Rosenblatt

Handbook of Bereavement Research
— Consequences, Coping and Care
Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, Wolfgang Stroebe and Henk Schut, editors
814 pp. List price $59.95, hardcover
ISBN 1-557987-36-X

The history of research on mourning and bereavement is relatively young, with its beginning seen in the pioneering work of Lindemann in the 1940s. However, the field has witnessed numerous developments in recent years, and a vast amount of information has been accumulated. A landmark for these changes can be seen in the publication of this encyclopedic work that presents 29 chapters with up-to-date conceptualizations of topics in mourning and bereavement by leading figures in the field. This 814-page work represents the most extensive summary of all the available knowledge and will remain a significant reference work for years to come.

The handbook is divided into six sections, each with about five chapters. The section reveals the orientation of the editors, who have preferred to highlight methodological issues and the importance of coping. Indeed, the first section, entitled “Theory, Methodology, and Ethical Issues,” raises and discusses questions such as qualitative versus quantitative measurement in the